


ARTICLE

## Encountering Others' Empathy Toward Oneself in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*

Saumya Lal 

Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA  
Email: [slal@lsu.edu](mailto:slal@lsu.edu)

### Abstract

This article examines how Milla, the Afrikaner protagonist of Marlene van Niekerk's post-apartheid novel *Agaat*, engages with others' empathy toward herself. Theorizing empathy as a multivalent engagement with others' experiences, I argue that Milla attempts to variously invite, avoid, and manipulate others' empathy as she negotiates the anxiety of being misunderstood, the sense of vulnerability in being understood, and the dependence of her self-image on others' opinions. Illustrating the fraught experience of encountering empathy toward oneself—a neglected topic in studies of empathy—the novel shows that empathy is neither always welcomed nor received passively by potential empathizees. Further, I suggest, the contrast between Milla's approaches to empathy as empathizer and empathizee ironizes her struggles by indicating her proclivity for controlling empathic interactions. Demonstrating how power relations inform empathy, *Agaat* complicates the popular notion of empathy as a straightforward gateway to reconciliation by highlighting its characters' ambivalences about receiving empathy.

**Keywords:** empathy; Marlene van Niekerk; post-apartheid; reconciliation; self-other

Marlene van Niekerk's post-apartheid novel *Agaat* offers a compelling exploration of empathy in its portrayal of the troubled relationship between Milla, the novel's Afrikaner protagonist, and her Coloured adoptee-cum-maidservant Agaat. In the novel's present, located in 1996, Milla is dying of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) and she can express herself only through eye movements; her communication with Agaat, her sole caregiver, therefore relies heavily on Agaat's empathic imagination of her thoughts and feelings. Milla and Agaat's present-day communication mirrors their initial conversations four decades earlier, when Milla coaxes five-year-old Agaat to communicate via eye signals while trying to acclimatize the child after having forcibly adopted her. The eye signal-based communication, which relies heavily on empathic interpretations, forms the beginning of a tentative bond between Milla and Agaat, which is

severed when Milla repositions Agaat as a maidservant after becoming pregnant more than a decade into her abusive marriage with Jak. Following this rupture, Milla and Agaat's relationship becomes replete with emotional tussles that are variously amplified and alleviated by the two women's empathic engagement with each other's perspectives. How Milla and Agaat understand and misunderstand each other and abuse their close understanding of each other comprises a central theme that allows the novel to illuminate the "workings of power in intimate relationships."<sup>1</sup>

In this article, I examine this theme by focusing on how Milla engages with Agaat's, as well as other family members', empathy toward her. Building on the novel's rich suggestions, I theorize empathy as a multivalent engagement with others' experiences that can produce a variety of responses, ranging from affinity to contempt for others. Highlighting the ethical and affective ambiguities of empathy, I argue that Milla attempts to variously invite, avoid, and manipulate others' empathy toward herself, as she negotiates the anxiety of being misunderstood, the sense of vulnerability in being understood, and the dependence of her self-image on others' opinions. Illustrating the emotional distress that encountering others' empathy toward oneself can cause, the novel shows that, contrary to popular belief, empathy is neither always welcomed nor received passively by potential empathizees. Further, I contend, the novel highlights the contrast between Milla's approaches to empathy as empathizer and empathizee—while Milla resents being figured as the object of empathy, she subjects Agaat to her empathic gaze regardless of Agaat's wishes; while Milla tries to steer others' empathic responses toward her in favorable directions, she begrudges Agaat for doing the same. Ironizing Milla's vexed feelings as an empathizee, this contrast reveals her proclivity for controlling empathic interactions and allows the novel to suggest how power relations inform and are informed by empathy. This article thus adds to current scholarly conversations complicating the notion of empathy as a straightforward gateway to reconciliation by highlighting *Agaat's* emphasis on its characters' ambivalences about receiving empathy.

In doing so, my reading of *Agaat* draws attention to a relatively neglected topic in the growing scholarship on empathy: empathizees' experience of empathy. Although the empathizer and empathizee can be distinguished respectively as the one who tries to understand the other's experience and the one who encounters the empathizer's inquiry into and response toward their experience, I stress that this distinction inevitably becomes blurry because, as Milla and Agaat's relationship shows, the same person can occupy the position of empathizer and empathizee across different situations as well as within a specific empathic interaction. In fact, recognizing oneself as an empathizee requires empathic imagination of the empathizer's perspective, where one finds oneself positioned as the object of their empathic gaze—so, the empathizee can simultaneously be an empathizer. Importantly, in my conception, the categories of

<sup>1</sup> Marlene van Niekerk, interview by Hans Pienaar, *LitNet*, June 2, 2005 ([https://oulinet.co.za/nosecret/van\\_niekerk\\_pienaar.asp](https://oulinet.co.za/nosecret/van_niekerk_pienaar.asp)).

empathizer and empathizee do not correspond to those of socially dominant and marginalized subject, which, as Carolyn Pedwell notes, is often the case in liberal and neoliberal discourses of empathy.<sup>2</sup> As Pedwell writes, “the repeated mapping of categories of ‘empathiser’ and ‘sufferer’ onto traditional social and geopolitical hierarchies can function to fix such hierarchies and the privileges they uphold.”<sup>3</sup> Rather than fixing these descriptors to any of the characters in the novel, my analysis foregrounds the dynamic nature of power relations as it unpacks the specific vulnerabilities that characters experience when they are positioned as empathizees in different situations. Further, I emphasize the active ways in which empathizees can respond to the empathic gaze directed at them; here I take a cue from Amit Rai’s questions: “How does the sympathetic relation enable a certain agency for the object of pity? What are the limits and possibilities of this form of agency?”<sup>4</sup> Pursuing these questions in relation to *Agaat*, I suggest that the novel demonstrates how empathizees can—to varying degrees of success—block and steer empathic responses, and in the process, both disrupt and perpetuate hierarchal relations.

Further, my reading of *Agaat* speaks to key questions about the politics of empathy that came to the fore with the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) during the transition to democracy in South Africa because, as several scholars have observed, the novel clearly situates Milla and *Agaat*’s relationship in the political landscape of apartheid.<sup>5</sup> Although the TRC has been celebrated for its arguable success in promoting harmony, critics have contended that the TRC not only put an unjust emotional burden on victims and marginalized subjects in imploring them to practice empathic forgiveness and reconciliation but also provided perpetrators and dominant subjects avenues for making self-serving appeals to empathy via confessions.<sup>6</sup> In addition to corroborating these critiques, my analysis of Milla’s

<sup>2</sup> Carolyn Pedwell, *Affective Relations: The Transnational Politics of Empathy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 34.

<sup>3</sup> Pedwell, *Affective Relations*, 34.

<sup>4</sup> Amit S. Rai, *Rule of Sympathy: Sentiment, Race, and Power 1750–1850* (New York: Springer, 2002), 79. Rai’s book deals specifically with eighteenth-century conceptions of sympathy, interrogating the works of David Hume and Adam Smith, among others. While many scholars draw a genealogical link between empathy and Hume’s and Smith’s theories of sympathy, the distinction between empathy and sympathy in contemporary discourse is much debated. For the purposes of this article, I associate sympathy with feelings of commiseration, care, and concern for others while, as I discuss in detail in the following section, I conceptualize empathy as a more neutral engagement with others’ experiences that can produce both positive and negative responses toward others.

<sup>5</sup> Several critics have noted the parallel between the key dates in the novel and the turning points in South African history. Most importantly, *Agaat* is born in 1948, the year when the National Party came to power, and Milla adopts *Agaat* on December 16, 1953, and dies on the same day in 1996. The political significance of December 16, given its celebration as the Day of Reconciliation since 1995 and its erstwhile status as the Day of the Vow (marking Afrikaners’ victory over the Zulus in the Battle of Blood River), indicates the novel’s investment in the history and aftermath of apartheid.

<sup>6</sup> The TRC has generated a huge body of scholarship, which would be impossible to survey in full here. A few important studies include Richard Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Audrey R. Chapman and Hugo van der Merwe, eds., *Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Did the*

approach to Agaat's empathy adds two important insights. As I will show, Milla's selective avoidance of Agaat's empathic gaze reflects her apprehension of the fact that Agaat sometimes utilizes her empathic comprehension of Milla's vulnerabilities to torment her. By presenting Agaat as an inventive empathizer who strategically deploys her empathic knowledge as a tool for subverting power hierarchies, the novel recuperates the Coloured subject from always being positioned as the object of empathy that overlaps with pity, while also complicating the political implications of a marginalized subject empathizing with a dominant one. In addition, Milla's fraught experience of encountering Agaat's empathy, especially when she lies immobile on her deathbed, illuminates the challenges of receiving empathy when one finds oneself powerless—a phenomenon that Afrikaner calls for empathy sometimes neglect because they emerge from relative positions of power, given the enduring effects of the socioeconomic structures of apartheid.

Addressing issues around empathizers' and empathizees' relative experiences of empathy, this article joins scholarship that troubles the extolment of empathy as the foundation for building a unified society in the post-apartheid era. As Ross Truscott discusses, in post-apartheid South Africa, empathy has been "championed as a new relation between those apartheid inscribed as different and separated from each other" as well as "an affective relation that occurred in the blind spots and shadows of the colonial state."<sup>7</sup> Some scholars have supported the proposition that empathy fosters reconciliation, albeit with qualifications about the risks of empathy. One of the most compelling works advocating empathic reconciliation is psychologist Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's *A Human Being Died that Night*, where the author reflects on her conversations with Eugene de Kock, the commanding officer of the state-sanctioned death squads during apartheid. Gobodo-Madikizela's attention to the dangers of empathic engagement becomes evident when she wonders whether de Kock was "making a voyeuristic foray into the mind of a black woman" when he watched her response closely after telling her she had touched his "trigger hand"—although she ultimately reads his gesture as a plea for compassion.<sup>8</sup> Relatedly, Jodi Halpern and Harvey M. Weinstein consider several post-conflict contexts, including South Africa, to posit empathy as a necessary step for reconciliation, but they also discuss the difficulty of "tolerating [the] intense emotional

---

TRC Deliver? (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), and Adam Sitze, *The Impossible Machine: A Genealogy of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013). For discussions of confessions and appeals to empathy, forgiveness, and reconciliation, especially in relation to literary narratives, see Susan VanZanten Gallagher, *Truth and Reconciliation: The Confessional Mode in South African Literature* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002), Michiel Heyns, "The Whole Country's Truth: Confession and Narrative in Recent White South African Writing," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 46.1 (2000): 42–66, and Deborah Posel, "History as Confession: The Case of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *Public Culture* 20.1 (2008): 119–41.

<sup>7</sup> Russ Truscott, "Empathy's Echo: Post-apartheid Fellow Feeling," *Safundi* 17.2 (2016): 249–69, esp. 249.

<sup>8</sup> Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died that Night: A South African Woman Confronts the Legacy of Apartheid* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Hartcourt, 2004), 40.

ambivalence" that can arise from empathically "recognizing [the other's] distinct, often distasteful emotions."<sup>9</sup> My argument in this article presses on these frictions inherent in empathic interactions to align more closely with scholars who contest the causal link between empathy and harmonious relations. For example, Truscott emphasizes the need to understand "empathy as a concept embedded in colonial thinking" in South Africa and elsewhere, while Anne Whitehead suggests that the "model of cross-racial empathy" promoted by the TRC "is distinctly problematic, in too readily eliding—and potentially erasing—'unspeakable harms'" and unbridgeable disparities.<sup>10</sup> Drawing on this scholarship, I show how *Agaat* extends our understanding of the possibilities and limitations of empathy in post-apartheid South Africa.

Although the literary criticism on *Agaat* has not dealt with the concept of empathy in a sustained way, my argument builds on several related lines of inquiry that have been addressed in the substantial scholarship around the novel. Most pertinently, scholars have debated whether Milla and *Agaat* achieve any degree of reconciliation while considering the novel's commentary on the post-apartheid vision of reconciliation. Some critics find guarded optimism in the novel; for example, Jean Rossmann and Cheryl Stobie contend that Milla's decision to bequeath the farm to *Agaat* "serves symbolically to reunite the divisiveness caused by the structural violence of apartheid."<sup>11</sup> Most scholars agree, however, that the novel highlights the difficulties of reconciliation amid histories of violence and injustice. For instance, Antoinette Pretorius warns against the temptation to read the novel as a celebration of "the establishment of an alternative post-transitional society"; she contends that "van Niekerk's grotesque representation of Milla's body undermines the redemptive potential of such an allegorical reading and instead ... foregrounds ideas of incompleteness."<sup>12</sup> In addition, scholars have shown, van Niekerk suggests that the ongoing process of reconciliation with others entails reconciling with a new self-image, as she participates in the post-apartheid reappraisal of Afrikaner identity by rewriting the traditional *plaasroman*. For instance, Caren van Houwelingen argues that the novel "reflects nostalgically, yet critically, on Afrikaner nationalism" by unsettling the *plaasroman* genre's "three most

<sup>9</sup> Jodi Halpern and Harvey M. Weinstein, "Rehumanizing the Other: Empathy and Reconciliation," *Human Rights Quarterly* 26.3 (2004): 561–83, esp. 575.

<sup>10</sup> Anne Whitehead, "Reading with Empathy: Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother*," *Feminist Theory* 13.2 (2012): 181–95, esp. 182.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Rossmann and Cheryl Stobie. "'Chew Me until I Bind': Sacrifice and Cultural Renewal in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*," *Journal of Literary Studies/Tydskrif Vir Literatuurwetenskap* 28.3 (2012): 17–31, esp. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Antoinette Pretorius, "Beyond the Allegory: The Grotesque Body and the Limits of Liberation in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*," *English Studies in Africa* 59.2 (2016): 64–77, esp. 65. Pretorius's focus on the body resonates with several other critics' readings that consider how bodily vulnerabilities and intimacies unsettle hierarchies in the novel. See Reinhardt Fourie and Melissa Adendorff, "An Analysis of the Bodily Spatial Power Relations in *Agaat* by Marlene van Niekerk," *Tydskrif Vir Letterkunde* 52.2 (2015): 5–20, and Lara Buxbaum, "Remembering the Self: Fragmented Bodies, Fragmented Narratives in Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf* and *Agaat*," *Journal of Literary Studies/Tydskrif Vir Literatuurwetenskap* 29.2 (2013): 82–100.

important ideological assumptions: patriarchal sovereignty, the white subject's assumed ownership of the land, and the marginalization of the non-white other."<sup>13</sup> Lily Saint discusses how the interplay between the novel's four narrative modes—diary entries, retrospective second-person narratives where Milla addresses herself as “you,” stream of consciousness, and first-person present-tense reflections—allows van Niekerk to grapple “with the problem of narrating the South African present” while undertaking the “unraveling of the apartheid fantasy and, by extension, the destabilization of Afrikaner identity.”<sup>14</sup> I build on the insights of these scholars by focusing on the novel's negotiations of identity and history in the realm of interpersonal emotional interactions.

Further, this article's investigation of Milla's engagement with Agaat's empathic responses contributes to the debate regarding the novel's putative silencing of Agaat, given its sustained focus on Milla's perspective. Although some critics accuse van Niekerk of subsuming the voice of the Coloured subject, others contend that the author stages Agaat's silences in order to prevent her assimilation into Milla's discourse.<sup>15</sup> Comparing Agaat's “impenetrable silence” to that of Friday's in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*, Nicole Devarenne suggests that van Niekerk “refuses to let [Agaat's] epistemic and emotional energies be harnessed or explored by Milla's ‘white’ imagination,” while showing that Milla becomes increasingly keen on “knowing Agaat's secrets.”<sup>16</sup> In addition, Alyssa Carvalho and Helize van Vuuren assert, Agaat “employs alternative methods of communication, or mimetic gestures” to express herself, although they are only partially intelligible to Milla.<sup>17</sup> Reading Agaat as a character who exemplifies Homi Bhabha's concept of the postcolonial mimic, Andrew van der Vlies suggests that “Agaat's eschewal of victimhood, her mastery of the tools of the dominating discourses ... marks her as an aspiring cyborg in Haraway's term, a *bricoleuse bent*

<sup>13</sup> Caren van Houwelingen, “Rewriting the *Plaasroman*: Nostalgia, Intimacy and (Un)Homeliness in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*,” *English Studies in Africa* 55.1 (2012): 93–106, esp. 94. For other commentaries on van Niekerk's reinvention of the *plaasroman*, see Nicole Devarenne, “Nationalism and the Farm Novel in South Africa, 1883–2004,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 35.3 (2009): 627–42, and Gail Fincham, “Reterritorialising the Land: *Agaat* and Cartography,” *Tydskrif vir letterkunde* 51.2 (2014): 130–43; both of these readings draw on J. M. Coetzee's seminal study of the *plaasroman* in *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

<sup>14</sup> Lily Saint, “History and the Genres of Modernity: Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*,” *South African Writing in Transition*, eds. Rita Barnard and Andrew van der Vlies (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 217–37, esp. 224.

<sup>15</sup> For discussions on voice and representation in the novel, see Meg Vandermerwe, “Imagining the ‘Forbidden’ Racial Other: Attitudes and Approaches in the Works of Antjie Krog, Marlene van Niekerk, Meg Vandermerwe and Zukiswa Wanner,” *English in Africa* 45.2 (2018): 83–106, and Maria Olausen, “A Voice Speaking for Me a Riddle: Postcolonial Voice and Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*,” *Concurrent Imaginaries, Postcolonial Worlds: Toward Revised Histories*, eds. Diana Brydon, Peter Forsgren, and Gonlög Fur. (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 245–63.

<sup>16</sup> Devarenne, “Nationalism and the Farm Novel in South Africa, 1883–2004,” 640–41.

<sup>17</sup> Alyssa Carvalho and Helize van Vuuren, “Examining the Servant's Subversive Verbal and Non-Verbal Expression in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*,” *Journal of Literary Studies/Tydskrif Vir Literatuurwetenskap* 25.3 (2009): 39–56.

on subversion and displacement.”<sup>18</sup> Agreeing with scholars who trace *Agaat*'s agency in the novel, my argument demonstrates not only how *Agaat* instrumentalizes her empathic knowledge of Milla's weaknesses but also how she strategically averts and manipulates others' empathic responses toward herself.

I develop my argument in this article through the course of three sections. The first section theorizes empathy as a multivalent engagement with others' experiences, drawing on the novel's suggestions about the nature of empathy. The second section investigates how Milla simultaneously invites and avoids others' empathy toward herself, and the third section analyzes Milla's attempts to guide others' empathic responses in positive directions.

### The Ambiguities of Empathy

In this section, I read *Agaat* in conversation with theoretical studies of empathy to show how the novel nudges us to think of empathy as a multivalent engagement with others' experiences that involves varying combinations of several affective and cognitive processes. Further, I suggest, the novel demonstrates that empathy can produce a variety of responses ranging from resentment to compassion toward others. This section's theorization of empathy serves as the foundation for my argument about Milla's multifaceted approach to others' empathy toward her.

Consider the following descriptions of Milla's empathic engagement with *Agaat*, which underline the multiple entanglements between various affective and cognitive processes that facilitate empathy: “I could feel what she was thinking”;<sup>19</sup> “Once I looked up at her and saw we were thinking the same thought”;<sup>20</sup> “I read it in her eyes”;<sup>21</sup> “I can guess what she's feeling”;<sup>22</sup> “Our telepathy isn't operating today”;<sup>23</sup> “When you have to communicate through the eyes, live by inferences, misunderstandings are easy.”<sup>24</sup> The counterintuitive description of feeling what someone else is thinking unsettles the thinking-feeling binary and indicates the potential intensity of the “transmission of affect,” to use Teresa Brennan's evocative phrase.<sup>25</sup> The mentions of inference, guessing, and reading someone's eyes invoke a variety of cognitive functions as well as indicate the uncertainties of empathy, while the descriptor “telepathy” points toward the extra-sensory, inexplicable aspects of empathic exchanges. The implication of the specific process mentioned in each instance thus varies, but all of them describe ways in which Milla understands *Agaat*'s thoughts and feelings or how they understand each other. As the following analysis will show,

<sup>18</sup> Andrew van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect: Contemporary South African Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 87.

<sup>19</sup> Marlene van Niekerk, *Agaat*, trans. Michiel Heyns. (New York: TinHouse Books, 2010), 446.

<sup>20</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 444.

<sup>21</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 443.

<sup>22</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 368.

<sup>23</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 33.

<sup>24</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 431.

<sup>25</sup> Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).



Milla's claims about her grasp of Agaath's interiority should be read with a degree of skepticism, but her varied descriptions allow the novel to stress the variety of processes that enable empathic engagement.

Taking a cue from Agaath's manifold descriptions of empathic processes, I contend that it is important to conceptualize empathy broadly as a multivalent engagement with others' experiences in order to include the various modalities—of imagining, perceiving, feeling, and thinking—through which the self becomes involved with others' experiences. In doing so, I address an ongoing scholarly debate about whether empathy should be defined in a focused or expansive way. As Amy Coplan notes, contemporary definitions of empathy include formulations such as “feeling what someone else feels,” “being emotionally affected by someone else's emotions and experiences,” “caring about someone else,” “imagining oneself in another's situation,” “imagining being another in that other's situation,” and “making inferences about another's mental states.”<sup>26</sup> Although I join scholars who advocate for including all these processes in our conception of empathy, some scholars have called for a focused definition of *empathy*. Most prominently, Coplan suggests that “transforming empathy into a catch-all term ... leads us to ignore the differences among the processes and to conflate them.”<sup>27</sup> I appreciate Coplan's call for “greater precision in our conceptualizations,” but dissociating the multiple processes of empathy from what she calls “real empathy” does not serve this purpose.<sup>28</sup> In fact, as Mark Fagiano remarks in his response to Coplan, isolating different aspects of empathy “involves what William James ... called a *supposition of arrest* drawn from the flow, stream, and process of both consciousness and experience.”<sup>29</sup> Moreover, as Susan Lanzoni suggests, the “shifts in empathy's definition and its complex genealogy” should “encourage us to see empathy's many facets” and how they interact with one another rather than to focus on a particular empathic process as the definitive meaning of empathy.<sup>30</sup>

Agaath's attention to various combinations of empathic processes allows it to show that empathy can lead to various responses, ranging from affection to animosity toward others, depending on the contexts in which the empathic interaction is situated. Although Milla routinely imagines and comprehends others' perspectives—that is, successfully undertakes “other-oriented perspective-taking,” which many theorists identify as a key component of

<sup>26</sup> Amy Coplan, “Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects,” *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, eds. Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.

<sup>27</sup> Amy Coplan, “Will the Real Empathy Please Stand Up? A Case for a Narrow Conceptualization,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 49.1 (2011): 40–65, 43.

<sup>28</sup> Coplan, “Will the Real Empathy Please Stand Up?” 43. Coplan defines “real empathy” as “a complex imaginative process through which an observer simulates another person's situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation... . Empathy has three essential features: affective matching, other-oriented perspective taking, and clear self-other differentiation” (44). I would argue that Coplan offers a definition of ideal rather than real empathy given real empathic interactions rarely meet these criteria.

<sup>29</sup> Mark Fagiano, “Pluralistic Conceptualizations of Empathy,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 30.1 (2016): 27–44, esp. 34.

<sup>30</sup> Susan Lanzoni, *Empathy: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 17–18.



empathy—her empathic comprehension does not always lead her to feel concern or care for others.<sup>31</sup> In fact, she often uses her empathic comprehension of others' motivations and intentions to serve her own interests. The novel establishes this tendency in the early scenes where Milla tries to placate Jak and her mother in the days leading up to her wedding. Milla recalls “watching [Jak] closely all the time” during those days so that she could keep a tab on his thoughts and feelings. She remembers giving him a strategically partial picture of the conditions of the farm—“You counted your words, you fed him a few trivial facts that wouldn't alarm him”—while empathically apprehending Jak's wariness about their future married life.<sup>32</sup> Significantly, Milla's empathic comprehension of Jak's anxieties does not motivate her to assuage them for the sake of his well-being; instead, she mollifies him by feeding him misleading impressions rather than by addressing the roots of his worries, so that he agrees to marry her. In addition to emotionally manipulating Jak, during this period Milla manages her mother's moods in order to secure her assent to Milla's inheritance of the farm after the wedding. Milla recalls that she “could read her [mother's] mind” and grasp her disapproval of Jak's actions.<sup>33</sup> Milla's empathic comprehension of her mother's unfavorable opinions about Jak evokes resentment rather than positive feelings toward her mother. Further, Milla feels moved to appease her mother strategically rather than to resolve her concerns. The novel thus establishes early on that the empathic comprehension of others' perspectives does not always orient the empathizer favorably toward the empathizee.

The novel's portrayal of the variable possibilities of empathy resonates with the growing emphasis in recent scholarship on challenging the prevailing notion that empathy necessarily produces positive, compassionate responses toward the empathizee. In *The Dark Sides of Empathy*, Fritz Breithaupt writes that “empathy can be used to enjoy the pain of others” as he argues that empathy can facilitate various coercive acts such as torture, bullying, and emotional manipulation that rely on accurate empathic comprehension of others' experiences.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, even scholars who generally agree with C. Daniel Batson's influential “empathy-altruism hypothesis”—where Batson posits that “empathic concern produces altruistic motivation”—recognize the ambivalences of empathic responses.<sup>35</sup> For instance, Martin L. Hoffman, who contends that “empathy is the spark of human concern for others,”<sup>36</sup> shows how “attri-

<sup>31</sup> Perspective-taking is usually understood as the act of imagining and simulating another person's perspective in a given situation. Scholars distinguish between self-oriented perspective-taking as the act of imagining oneself in another person's situation and other-oriented perspective-taking as the act of imagining the other in that other's situation.

<sup>32</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 22.

<sup>33</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 20.

<sup>34</sup> Fritz Breithaupt, *The Dark Sides of Empathy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), 17.

<sup>35</sup> C. Daniel Batson, “The Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis: Issues and Implications,” *Empathy: From Bench to Bedside*, ed. Jean Decety (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 41–54, esp. 41.

<sup>36</sup> Martin L. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3.

butions about the cause of another's distress can shape empathic distress into four empathy-based moral affects," including empathic anger and empathic guilt, which are sometimes assuaged by "blaming the victim for his or her own distress."<sup>37</sup> These studies thus suggest that empathy can lead to negative stances toward the empathizee.

Further, *Agaat* adds to the conversation about the "dark sides" of empathy by showing that even the positive responses popularly associated with empathy—namely, compassion and altruism—hold inherent ethical risks, which makes empathy doubly ambiguous. Milla believes that her decision to adopt *Agaat* after rescuing her from the child's negligent, abusive family exemplifies a benevolent act that arises from her empathy for *Agaat*. However, Milla's interpretation of the adoption, which Rita Barnard aptly describes as a "compassionate, but egocentric" act, turns a blind eye to not only the self-serving desire to defy *Jak* and her mother that partially motivates her decision but also its colonial-racist underpinnings, which manifests itself, among other things, in her language of "taming" *Agaat*.<sup>38</sup> In the scene where Milla first sees *Agaat* and feels moved by an instantaneous empathic connection, her second-person narrative voice points to the power differential undergirding their interaction. Remembering her response to the guttural sound *Agaat* made, Milla tells herself, "You felt empty and full at the same time from it, felt sorrow and pity surging in your throat. Ggggg at the back of the throat, as if it were a sound that belonged to yourself."<sup>39</sup> Although this description emphasizes Milla's strong feelings for the child, the clause "as if it were a sound that belonged to yourself" suggests that in sensing and sharing *Agaat*'s pain Milla claims ownership over it and collapses the distance between them. Importantly, the proprietary and appropriative impulses appear simultaneously with, and cannot easily be disentangled from, the empathic "sorrow and pity" that prompts Milla to echo the sounds *Agaat* makes. Through this pivotal scene, the novel thus indicates that benevolent empathic responses are embedded within hierarchal power relations and can simultaneously unsettle and uphold them.

The novel's dramatization of the ethical dangers of empathic benevolence speaks to the ample scholarly discussion of the ways in which empathy has been utilized to serve self-congratulatory narratives about the dominant subject's humane responses to the marginalized subject's suffering while keeping intact the sociopolitical structures that cause the suffering. Discussing the connotations of sympathy in the early twenty-first century, Amit Rai writes, sympathy "has become something of a 'bad' word in political and cultural discourse, bearing connotations of a patronizing, even colonizing benevolence."<sup>40</sup> Although empathy is sometimes distinguished from sympathy and pity in this regard as a less hierarchal engagement with others' experiences, scholars have shown that

<sup>37</sup> Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development*, 7–8.

<sup>38</sup> Rita Barnard, "Reopening *Agaat*: Afrikaans, Encyclopedic Narrative, World Literature," *Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 62.4 (2021): 386–403, esp. 398.

<sup>39</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 547.

<sup>40</sup> Rai, *Rule of Sympathy*, xii.

empathy can also function “as tawdry feel-good sentimental armor and a guilt-absolving palliative” that acts as a substitute for action and perpetuates oppressive sociopolitical structures.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, several scholars including Rai and Jane Lydon have shown that empathy has been instrumentalized to serve colonial discourses that selectively exaggerate and erase differences between the colonizer and colonized in order to legitimize colonial rule.<sup>42</sup>

As the foregoing discussion shows, *Agaat* prompts us to consider empathy as a range of complex traversals in a space of ongoing negotiation between self and other—a space of the boundary, which, as Stephen Clingman suggests, has both horizontal and vertical dimensions, differences in height as well as position.<sup>43</sup> Building on this conception of empathy, the following sections examine the novel's exploration of Milla's experiences as an empathizee. The novel shows that Milla's desire for empathy—the desire to be seen and understood—remains riddled with anxieties about the unpredictable, variable effects that empathy can produce. Anticipating and negotiating the multiple ways in which empathy can affect the empathizer, Milla variously invites, avoids, and manipulates empathy toward herself.

### Inviting and Avoiding Empathy

In this section, I explore the tensions between Milla's desire for and recoil from *Agaat's*, and other family members', empathic engagement with her. Although some scholars have addressed the idea that “empathy is not always welcome,” given some individuals “experience others' attempts to empathize with them as intrusive,” it has remained undertheorized.<sup>44</sup> Adding to scholarship on this neglected topic, this section discusses the multiple reasons fueling Milla's avoidance of *Agaat's* empathy. I suggest that in addition to indicating Milla's anxiety of being misunderstood, the novel highlights her emotional unease about the possibility of being understood, which arises from the sense of exposure in having her weaknesses and faults seen by *Agaat* and from the fear that *Agaat* may abuse the power she gains through empathic comprehension of Milla's vulnerabilities. Moreover, the novel indicates Milla's apprehensions of reducing the singularity of her experience in making herself understandable to

<sup>41</sup> Rajini Srikanth, *Constructing the Enemy: Empathy/Antipathy in U.S. Literature and Law* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press), 4.

<sup>42</sup> See Rai, *Rule of Sympathy*, and Jane Lydon, *Imperial Emotions: The Politics of Empathy Across the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>43</sup> Stephen Clingman, “Introduction: The Grammar of Identity,” *The Grammar of Identity: Transnational Fiction and the Nature of the Boundary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>44</sup> Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, eds., *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), xxvi. In addition to empathy scholars, trauma theorists have discussed trauma survivors' recoil from empathic engagement because the act of sharing their experience may be retraumatizing. See Dori Laub, “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening,” *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature*, eds. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 57–74.

others.<sup>45</sup> Further, my analysis shows that Milla's aversion to Agaat's empathy is most heightened in the present, when she feels utterly dependent on Agaat, and is relatively mild in the past, when Milla wields more power. Critics have noted that the change in the power dynamics between the two women, which serves as an "allegory of the power reversal in South Africa,"<sup>46</sup> allows Agaat to "exercise the same absolute power of maternalist domestic intimacy over [Milla] that [Milla] once held over her."<sup>47</sup> Tellingly, in staging this power reversal, the novel highlights Milla's vexation when she finds herself positioned primarily as the object of empathy, and in doing so, it underscores the distress of being subjected to others' empathic gaze when one feels powerless. Although Milla's emotional struggles as an empathizee may invite readers' commiseration, especially given her ALS-induced immobility, I show in the concluding parts of this section that the novel ironizes her concerns by juxtaposing them with her conduct as an empathizer, where she imposes her empathic gaze at Agaat.

As mentioned previously, Milla is most acutely aware of and expressive about her ambivalence regarding Agaat's empathy toward her in the present, when she feels helpless because of her incapacitation. In this period, Milla wants Agaat to empathically comprehend her unspoken thoughts and feelings so that she can fulfill Milla's needs, but she simultaneously resents Agaat's empathic grasp because it limits her sense of privacy and imperils the irreducibility of her existence. When Agaat tries to interpret Milla's eye signals by going through a list of possible wishes, Milla asserts, "I have a life beyond your lists ... I have needs that you cannot imagine."<sup>48</sup> Given Milla's painstaking efforts at this moment to communicate to Agaat her wish to see the maps of the farm, this comment serves as an exhortation for Agaat to expand her empathic imagination as well as an assertion that Milla's experiences cannot be reduced to the limits of Agaat's empathic perception. The latter import of her comment resonates with her reflection on seeing the array of household items that Agaat brings for Milla to identify the object she needs: "She wants to see what I think ... Straight into me she wants to peer, direct, as if ... that could provide her with a truer, more intimate version of my reaction. As if I could contain any secrets that she doesn't know."<sup>49</sup> Even though Milla wants Agaat to accurately comprehend her needs, she paradoxically derides Agaat's attempts to read her thoughts, resenting her inability to restrict Agaat's empathic access to her mind.

The duality of Milla's stance toward Agaat's empathic gaze is also driven by the lingering anxiety that Agaat may deploy her empathic comprehension of Milla's needs to torment her. This anxiety becomes doubly troubling when Milla

<sup>45</sup> See Judith Butler's discussion of this idea in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), where they write, "If I try to give an account of myself, if I try to make myself recognizable and understandable, ... I will, to some degree, have to make myself substitutable" (37).

<sup>46</sup> Sue Kossew, "Trauma, Memory, and History in Marlene van Niekerk's *The Way of the Women*," *Trauma, Memory, and Narrative in the Contemporary South African Novel*, eds. Ewald Mengel and Michela Borzaga. (New York: Rodopi, 2012), 365–78, esp. 368.

<sup>47</sup> Olausson, "A Voice Speaking for Me a Riddle," 255.

<sup>48</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 48.

<sup>49</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 276.

cannot verify her suspicions that Agaat purposefully misreads her eye signals or defers fulfilling her needs after having comprehended them. Although Milla often feels confident in her assessment of Agaat's intentions, at one instance she wonders, "Perhaps I'm imagining too much into everything she does and says. Perhaps I'm imagining her evil. Or her goodness."<sup>50</sup> This moment of self-doubt reminds readers that Milla's estimation of Agaat's supposed machinations may not be reliable. At the same time, the novel provides several instances where Agaat's actions (albeit described from Milla's point of view) strongly indicate that Agaat utilizes her empathic comprehension to distress Milla. Consider the scene where Milla needs Agaat to relieve an overpowering itch and Agaat delays scratching, taunting her by miming a scratching action and silently mouthing the word *itch*. Or the scene where Agaat delays providing the bedpan that she knows Milla desperately needs after having eaten laxative foods. That Agaat brings out the farm maps Milla wants to see while withholding the bedpan shows how Agaat uses her empathic comprehension to simultaneously care for and torment Milla, in turn suggesting why Milla resents Agaat's empathy as much as she wants it.

The two women's empathic negotiations become particularly vexed when Agaat opens a new channel of communication via an alphabet board. This layered scene, where Milla initiates conversations about the enduring grievances of their relationship, suggests that the vital role of empathic exchange in storytelling and meaning-making makes empathy a source of emotional fulfillment as well as unsettlement for the empathizee. As Agaat speaks aloud Milla's sentences, stringing them together by combining letters and words from the board, Milla worries about the connotations that Agaat's inflections suggest: "[Agaat] charges my sentences with her own resonances. Disbelief, emphasis, mockery. She adds on and improvises. To my own ears I sound like running commentary than original intention."<sup>51</sup> In this scene, where, Mark Sanders suggests, "Agaat emerges as a focaliser ... with her mimetic citation of Milla's words," Milla's remark draws attention to the role of empathy in Agaat's enunciation.<sup>52</sup> The connotation of a sentence can change depending on which words are stressed in the enunciation, but because the alphabet board allows Milla to indicate only the words she wants to utter, and not the relative stress she intends, Agaat must empathically imagine Milla's desired intonation and, therefore, the meaning of her thoughts. Although Milla suspects that Agaat deliberately misrepresents her thoughts, she realizes she has to rely on Agaat's enunciation to make sense of her own words; when Agaat neglects to repeat the whole sentence after the individual words, Milla realizes, "I lose my thread among stray words."<sup>53</sup> Moreover, despite Milla's anxiety that her "original intention" gets lost in these conversations, she pleads with Agaat, "Please, talk to me, I want to talk, I want to explain things," underlining her desire for Agaat's empathic understanding of her

<sup>50</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 330.

<sup>51</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 365.

<sup>52</sup> Mark Sanders, "Miscegenations: Race, Culture, Phantasy," *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, special issue: *The Colonial Present* (2008): 10–36, esp. 25.

<sup>53</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 365.

perspective.<sup>54</sup> The novel thus suggests that Milla cannot help but depend on Agaat's empathic facilitation for making sense of her narratives, even if Agaat's interpretation selectively accentuates, muffles, and distorts aspects of her story.

In addition to triggering Milla's worries about being misconstrued by Agaat, the communication supported by the alphabet board inflames her anxiety about the depth of Agaat's empathic grasp of her mind. This anxiety manifests itself dramatically when Milla finds Agaat mimicking and voicing her thoughts—although, significantly, Milla remains unsure whether she hallucinates this entire episode. Milla feels bewildered at hearing Agaat perform “a perfect imitation” of her, where she repeats some of Milla's oft-repeated grievances and self-justifications about their relationship.<sup>55</sup> Becoming agitated, Milla gestures to Agaat: “... come to your senses, perhaps it will help if you can hear yourself say out loud what you think I think! What you think I ought to think! Mind rape, that's what it is!”<sup>56</sup> In using the phrase “mind rape,” Milla magnifies the sense of violation and subjugation that, she now realizes, being positioned as the object of someone's empathic imagination can bring about. The novel emphasizes the irony of Milla's statement, which is apparent given the history of the two women's relationship, by showing that earlier in the scene Milla takes pleasure in noting that “[Agaat] knows she's transparent to me, she knows I can read her thoughts.”<sup>57</sup> When Milla realizes how transparent she may be to Agaat, she asserts the opacity of her mind by claiming that Agaat's self-projections and presumptions cloud her perception of Milla's thoughts. Milla thus tries to mitigate her vulnerability by undermining Agaat's empathic comprehension of her thoughts.

Although Milla expresses her aversion to Agaat's empathy quite explicitly in the present, she does so rarely and in more subdued ways in the past. This difference shows that one's approach to others' empathy is shaped by the power relations informing the empathic interaction. Agaat's empathic gaze does not perturb Milla as forcefully in the past, when she is in a position of authority over Agaat, although even then it holds the capacity to unsettle Milla.

In the years following her son Jakkie's birth, Milla's diary entries suggest that she evades Agaat's and Jak's empathic comprehension of her anxieties about Agaat's growing intimacy with Jakkie because she anticipates that their empathic comprehension will not be accompanied by favorable feelings toward her. After observing Agaat and Jakkie's games secretly, Milla writes in her diary: “Now I must feign blissful ignorance ... otherwise A. will smell a rat but I can hardly contain myself.”<sup>58</sup> Although Milla “can hardly contain” her frustration about Agaat and Jakkie's relationship, she wants to hide it from Agaat, presumably because she expects Agaat to take pleasure in her misery. Milla also wants to keep her worries secret from Jak. In her diary she mentions a nightmare, where she sees Agaat suffocating Jakkie and beating his head to pulp, and ruefully notes that

<sup>54</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 368.

<sup>55</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 374.

<sup>56</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 375.

<sup>57</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 368.

<sup>58</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 247.

she cannot share this horrific image with Jak, suggesting that she anticipates he will use his knowledge of her feelings to taunt her about the error of her ways with Agaat. Milla's diary entries thus show that she averts others' empathic gaze from her insecurities when she apprehends the possibility of negative responses.

Although Milla's diary entries indicate her desire to keep her worries about Agaat and Jakkie's relationship secret, they are less explicit about her "ugly feelings"<sup>59</sup> about this matter than her second-person narratives, which stage a more honest self-reckoning.<sup>60</sup> The difference between the two narratives suggests that in the past Milla's attempt to block others' empathic comprehension of her feelings is often reflected in her inability to admit those feelings to herself and record them in her diary. For instance, Milla's diary entries suggest, but refrain from confirming, her envy about Agaat's emotional intimacy with Jakkie: "What can it all mean? ... Don't know exactly what it is. Not sadness ... Envy perhaps? but why? & of what?"<sup>61</sup> Milla's uncertainty and vagueness, highlighted in the multiple unanswered questions, underscore her reluctance to admit her envy of Agaat. The novel attunes readers to these undercurrents through more direct expression of such feelings in her second-person narrative, where Milla asks herself, "What could you ask this child about whom you felt your knowledge was of the second order ... after Agaat on whose bosom he'd grown up?"<sup>62</sup> The sense of resignation, enabled by the temporal distance of the second-person narrative, allows her to confront her sense of humiliation about being sidelined in her son's life. Similarly, it is significant that the description of the lone episode where she explicitly rebukes Agaat for "enticing" Jakkie away from her appears in the second-person narrative.<sup>63</sup> Recounting Milla's angry outburst where she ends up slapping Agaat and revealing her intense resentment, the second-person narrative voice notes "[Agaat] had you exactly where she wanted you"—indicating her regretful realization that she had exposed to Agaat the vulnerabilities that she had tried to hide for years.<sup>64</sup> In this way, the juxtaposition of the diaries and the second-person narratives enables the novel to demonstrate instances where Milla deflects others' empathic gaze but does not in the moment register doing so.

Although the novel demonstrates Milla's fraught experience of being figured as an empathizee at different stages of her life, it ironizes her struggles by highlighting her inclinations as an empathizer, especially in relation to Agaat. Several critics have commented on Milla's "voyeuristic inquisitiveness"<sup>65</sup> about Agaat's inner world, noting that Milla remains "frustrated by her lack of insight

<sup>59</sup> See Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>60</sup> For detailed commentaries of the novel's multiple narrative modes, see Kossew, "Trauma, Memory, and History in Marlene van Niekerk's *The Way of the Women*," and Saint, "History and the Genres of Modernity."

<sup>61</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 250.

<sup>62</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 378.

<sup>63</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 459.

<sup>64</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 460.

<sup>65</sup> Devarenne, "Nationalism and the Farm Novel in South Africa, 1883–2004," 641.



into Agaat's being."<sup>66</sup> The novel repeatedly stresses Milla's unease with Agaat's opacity through several instances, ranging from the moment when Milla secretly observes Agaat's indecipherable dance movements during her excursions near the sea to Milla's continuous speculation on her deathbed about Agaat's thoughts despite her insistence that she "know[s] how Agaat's mind operates."<sup>67</sup> Considering Milla's insistent empathic inquiries into Agaat's mind not only tempers readers' sympathy for Milla's distress at encountering Agaat's empathic gaze but also demonstrates Milla's proclivity for utilizing empathy as a tool to strengthen her power over Agaat.

Milla's early attempts to empathize with Agaat demonstrate the blurry line between inviting and forcing potential empathizees to share their experiences, as Milla often neglects, willfully and otherwise, Agaat's ambivalence toward her empathy. A few months after Agaat's arrival at the farm, Milla laments that "Agaat is a closed book" because she does not speak to her, and her concern grows when she discovers that the child whispers to herself when lying alone in bed.<sup>68</sup> Unwilling to accept that Agaat seeks to maintain a private inner world, Milla coaxes Agaat to speak, requesting gently at some instances and threatening her with punishment at other times. Agaat's experience of Milla's persuasion remains hidden from readers, but Milla's description of the child's expression—"as if she's scared that I'm going to take something from her if she opens her mouth"—points to not only Agaat's sense of vulnerability, which likely drives her aversion to speaking, but also to the fact that Milla perceives but chooses to ignore Agaat's fears.<sup>69</sup> Agaat eventually takes to speaking with Milla, but this initial instance indicates Milla's readiness to employ coercive methods to overcome Agaat's reluctance to open up to her.

In later phases of their relationship, Milla grows increasingly wary of Agaat's unfathomability, as Agaat actively deflects Milla's empathic gaze to subvert Milla's authority over her. A striking instance of this dynamic appears when Milla remarks that Agaat does not allow her to look at her ornately embroidered cap: "Over the years ever more forbidden, that zone above Agaat's forehead. When she caught me out staring, she made me feel as if I were peeking through a transparent blouse."<sup>70</sup> As Carvalho and van Vuuren demonstrate, Agaat uses her embroidered cap as "an important means of expression" that, along with other verbal and nonverbal avenues such as songs, fairy tales, dance, and embroidery, allows her to give voice to her perspective, although often in purposefully enigmatic ways that make it impossible for Milla to fully understand her.<sup>71</sup> Milla's remarks about the "transparent blouse" indicate her frustration at the recognition that Agaat's cap simultaneously solicits and forbids her gaze. In

<sup>66</sup> Carvalho and van Vuuren, "Examining the Servant's Subversive Verbal and Non-Verbal Expression in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*," 42.

<sup>67</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 330.

<sup>68</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 431.

<sup>69</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 432.

<sup>70</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 311.

<sup>71</sup> Carvalho and van Vuuren, "Examining the Servant's Subversive Verbal and Non-Verbal Expression," 50.

other words, Milla's comments reveal that she resents Agaat's desire to selectively invite and avoid others' empathic understanding of her expressions—a desire that, as the discussion in this section has shown, Milla nurtures in her own responses to others' empathy toward her.

### Maneuvering Empathic Responses

Having discussed how and why Milla avoids Agaat's empathic gaze at her, in this section I analyze how Milla tries to control Agaat's empathic responses toward her and guide them in favorable directions. The novel stresses Milla's keen attunement to others' opinions about her, which fuels her desire for their approval and sympathy. As I will demonstrate, Milla realizes that others' empathic engagement with her perspective does not necessarily give rise to positive responses toward her. At the same time, she thinks—revealing her proclivities as “a vainglorious and self-justifying memory machine”—that she can steer others' empathic responses in desired directions by justifying her perspectives and manipulating the empathizer's emotions.<sup>72</sup> However, the novel shows that she often fails to achieve her ends, given the contingent, unpredictable nature of empathic responses. Further, I suggest that though Milla tries to actively maneuver others' empathic responses, she deeply resents Agaat's attempts to do the same, again revealing the entanglement between empathy and power.

The novel's illustration of Milla's desire to secure favorable empathic responses from Agaat also reflects the prevalent phenomenon in apartheid-era South Africa of white employers viewing their relationships with their Black and Coloured domestic servants as friendly ones. Mark Libin shows that despite the latent friction in these relationships owing to the stark power imbalance, “sentiments of reciprocal sympathy [were] consistently projected by ‘madams’ who also saw themselves as benevolently liberal”—a tendency that is clearly evidenced in the interviews chronicled in Jacklyn Cock's 1980 book *Maids and Madams*.<sup>73</sup> In response to Cock's question “What do you think [the maid's] feelings are toward you?” the white employers largely characterized their servants' disposition toward them as positive ones: “She thinks I'm her mother”; “She adores us”; “Respect and affection.”<sup>74</sup> As Cock shows, the white women were invested in believing that their servants regarded them positively because it helped uphold their liberal identities and assuage their guilt about their complicity in apartheid. In Milla's case, the stakes are even higher because her relationship with Agaat begins as a quasi-maternal one.

So, when Milla decides to reposition Agaat as a maidservant, she tries several tactics to ensure that Agaat remains favorably aligned toward her.

<sup>72</sup> van Niekerk, interview by Hans Pienaar.

<sup>73</sup> Mark Libin, *Reading Affect in Post-apartheid Literature: South Africa's Wounded Feelings* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 39.

<sup>74</sup> Jacklyn Cock, *Maids and Madams: A Study in the Politics of Exploitation* (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1980), 135.

Indicating how empathy can be instrumentalized to uphold hierarchies, the novel shows that Milla attempts to control Agaat's feelings and elicit agreeable responses that will help maintain the new order of things. Milla's initial explanation to Agaat about the new arrangement—"It's as it should be. You'll be my special help here on Grootmoedersdrift"<sup>75</sup>—echoes her diary entry about the appropriateness of her decision: "everything is as it should be suppose it's the right thing to do for everyone's sake."<sup>76</sup> Sanders notes that this instance illustrates "a pattern of imperatives noted down as facts" in Milla's diaries: "things must be right and good, good and right, so, in the journal, they *are* good and right."<sup>77</sup> The repetition of the sentiment in Milla's diary in her explanation to Agaat suggests that she needs Agaat's approval to convince herself that the imperative is indeed a fact. When Agaat continues to sulk, however, Milla thinks, "I lose my temper completely because I'm made to feel I must justify myself."<sup>78</sup> This comment indicates Milla's empathic attunement to Agaat's disapproval of her explanations, which prompts her to devise alternative ways to elicit favorable responses. Realizing that Agaat's response emerges from her consideration of Milla's perspective as well as her own experience of the situation, Milla tries to conciliate her by demonstrating her recognition of Agaat's pain: "let me reward her ... to show I understand it's not all such plain sailing for hr [sic]."<sup>79</sup> Milla's emphasis on "showing" Agaat her concern indicates that her primary interest lies in presenting herself as a benevolent, caring figure rather than in alleviating Agaat's pain. When this move also fails to elicit a positive response, Milla reminds Agaat of her goodwill in adopting her, hoping to evoke gratitude that will overshadow Agaat's indignation. The novel demonstrates that Milla makes manifold, albeit failed, efforts to mold Agaat's empathic responses in ways that would lead Agaat to accept the new arrangement.

In the present when Milla faces impending death, her attempts to maneuver Agaat's empathic responses about the past grievances of their relationship intensify. As van Niekerk remarks, "Milla ... is busy negotiating for herself the psychologically most comfortable position from which to cross the threshold to death... . She needs to be reassured that she has not been all that bad. She again only has Agaat, a creature of her own making, to help facilitate this position for her."<sup>80</sup> Seeking redemption, Milla acknowledges her wrongdoings more honestly, realizing that papering over them will not win her the sympathy she wants, but she also provides justifications and emphasizes her present-day suffering to elicit favorable responses from Agaat. In one of their talking sessions with the alphabet board, Milla admits that she did not foresee all the consequences of her decision to adopt Agaat, but she asserts that she was driven by a desire to "do

<sup>75</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 104.

<sup>76</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 30.

<sup>77</sup> Sanders, "Miscegenations," 22.

<sup>78</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 141.

<sup>79</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 141.

<sup>80</sup> van Niekerk, interview by Hans Pienaar.

something for [her] fellow humans.”<sup>81</sup> Milla realizes, however, that her attempt to emphasize her benevolence fails to invite a positive response from Agaat because she apprehends a dismissive tone in Agaat’s enunciation, which suggests that Agaat thinks Milla turned a charitable hand toward her because she deemed Agaat “half human” or “less human than [herself].”<sup>82</sup> Milla’s comments reveals her anxiety that it is precisely Agaat’s empathic grasp of the invisible undercurrents of Milla’s explanations that preempts Agaat from accepting them as justifications that merit sympathy or approbation. Faced with Agaat’s rejection of her justifications, Milla flounders: “Sorry. Powerless. Guilty. I am. I shall be. But. How am I to. Die. Question mark.”<sup>83</sup> Here, Milla follows her hasty apology with a reminder of her proximity to death and need for redemption, which she hopes will tug at Agaat’s heartstrings and make her more amenable to accepting Milla’s justifications.

In addition to justifying her actions, Milla tries to elicit favorable responses by airing her grievances against Agaat, as she accuses Agaat of “stealing” Jakkie and orchestrating disasters on the farm. Milla’s allegations serve not only to position herself as an aggrieved party in their relationship, nudging Agaat to soften her accusatory stance toward Milla, but also to provoke Agaat out of her calm refusal to engage Milla’s emotional ploys. Reflecting on her angry outbursts attacking Agaat, Milla thinks, “If I can’t mollify her, that’s the only alternative. I can anger her. And if I can anger her, I can get angry myself. That would be better than nothing.”<sup>84</sup> Apart from suggesting Milla’s dependence on empathic interactions with Agaat to animate her emotional life, these remarks indicate Milla’s hope that a shared heated moment may eventually lead to a reconciliatory reckoning with their past. So, Milla provokes Agaat by repeatedly referring to her as satanic and witchlike, and recounts various instances—such as when Agaat breastfed Jakkie as an infant—where Agaat’s actions pained Milla. Like Milla’s self-justifications, however, her accusations fail to move Agaat to sympathetic responses.

Although Milla makes multiple attempts to elicit positive empathic responses toward herself, she resents it when Agaat does the same because, I suggest, it would allow Agaat to control the narrative of their relationship and disrupt Milla’s endeavors to secure sympathy for herself. On one occasion when Agaat responds to Milla’s provocations during their present-day talking sessions, she briefly recounts the pain Milla’s callousness caused her during her childhood. Milla replies, “D.O.N.T M.A.K.E T.H.O.S.E S.O.P.P.Y E.Y.E.S A.T M.E, exclamation mark, H.O.W M.A.N.Y T.I.M.E.S M.O.R.E A.R.E Y.O.U G.O.I.N.G T.O C.O.N.F.R.O.N.T M.E W.I.T.H I.T.”<sup>85</sup> Milla’s comment about Agaat making “soppy eyes” dismisses Agaat’s mention of her suffering at Milla’s hands as an overly sentimental and self-indulgent act. Undermining Agaat’s pain, Milla suggests that Agaat exaggerates and repeats old grievances against Milla in order to elicit undue

<sup>81</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 365.

<sup>82</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 365.

<sup>83</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 365.

<sup>84</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 369.

<sup>85</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 373.

sympathy for herself. Moreover, although Milla expects Agaat to let go of past grievances, she follows this comment with a barrage of her old accusations about Agaat's machinations against her; this contrast suggests that Milla views Agaat's calls for commiseration as a threat to her own desire to be seen as a sympathetic figure in their relationship.

In addition to resenting Agaat's rare appeals to sympathy from her, Milla remains vexed about Agaat's successful maneuvering of Jakkie's empathic responses toward herself, which reminds Milla of her own inability to elicit sympathetic responses from Agaat. For instance, when Milla spies on Agaat and Jakkie reconciling after Agaat coaxes him to slaughter his favorite hanslam on his birthday, Milla observes the moves Agaat makes to win Jakkie over. Agaat defies Jak's order to make Jakkie go hungry and, after feeding him, shows him the bite marks from when he bit her while trying to escape killing the hanslam. Agaat thus actively manipulates his response toward her by positing herself as a benevolent figure who cares for him despite his violence, glossing over the fact that she forced him to kill the hanslam to avenge herself against Milla for a similar incident in her childhood. Noting how Agaat can maneuver Jakkie's empathic responses even in a most strained moment in their relationship, Milla wonders at Agaat and Jakkie's relatively easy reconciliation: "The confidence. The ease. The forgiveness, asked, given, sealed."<sup>86</sup> Although Milla does not explicitly compare this moment to her attempts to conciliate Agaat, the parallel incidents suggest that it is the stark contrast with her failure to win Agaat's forgiveness that agitates her. In other words, Milla's distress follows from Agaat's ability to elicit favorable responses from Jakkie, and by extension, exercise power over him.

## Conclusion

As this article shows, *Agaat* illustrates the multiple, variable implications that empathy can hold for empathizers and empathizees. Demonstrating that empathy can produce a variety of responses, the novel encourages a sustained consideration of the fraught emotional experience of encountering empathy toward oneself. The novel highlights Milla's multidimensional approach to Agaat's, and other family members', empathy toward her, showing that she does not always welcome others' empathic gaze or receive it passively. As my analysis demonstrates, Milla tries to invite, avoid, and manipulate others' empathic responses, depending on the anticipated effects of specific empathic interactions, which are contingent on several contextual factors. Moreover, I suggest that Milla's approach as an empathizer prompts readers to consider her struggles as an empathizee with a critical eye as it asks us to imagine Agaat's experience of empathy that is directed toward her. The contrast between Milla's approaches to empathy as empathizer and empathizee thus enables the novel to stress how power relations affect and are

---

<sup>86</sup> van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 273.

affected by empathy. In sum, *Afaat* troubles straightforward connections between empathy and reconciliation by highlighting the challenges of receiving empathy.

**Competing interest.** None.

**Author biography.** Saumya Lal is Assistant Professor of English at the Louisiana State University. Her current book project examines the workings of empathy in literary portrayals of political conflicts in postcolonial Africa and South Asia. Her work has appeared in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, and *Textual Practice*.

---

**Cite this article:** Lal, Saumya. 2023. "Encountering Others' Empathy Toward Oneself in Marlene van Niekerk's *Afaat*." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 10, 311–331. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2023.23>