

Feminist themes in Afrikaans fiction for women. *Kantelpunt* (Tipping Point, 2018) as a feminist text?

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Since about 2016 authors of popular romantic fiction in Afrikaans have shown a tendency to engage more explicitly with feminism. Authors such as Marilé Cloete, Sophia Kapp, Kristel Loots, Didi Potgieter and Elsa Winckler authored books with characters, plots and themes diverging from the standard of popular romance. One of the products of this shift is the novel *Kantelpunt* (Tipping point, October 2018) by the bestselling romance author Sophia Kapp published with the subtitle “Hipomnemata of a conventional, middle-aged, white, Afrikaner woman”. The novel was marketed by the publisher as a “feminist novel for conventional women”, came with a red trigger warning on the back cover stating that it is “Not for sensitive readers” and even opens with the disclaimer “*Kantelpunt* is nie romantiese fiksie nie (...)” (“*Kantelpunt* is not romantic fiction”). Based on the reviews and reactions of readers (which I will address later on) the novel however still reaches Kapp’s large loyal readership and therefore introduces feminist thinking to popular romance readers.

Only a year after feminist media were flooded with images of Harmonia Rosales’ artwork, this novel – with feminist aspirations – activates the artwork on its cover, but that clashes with the central drive of Rosales’ work. Rosales explores black female empowerment in western culture through art “that challenges ideological hegemony in contemporary society” (Ebert, 2020). One of the central and most reproduced paintings of the B.I.T.C.H. project (Black Imaginary to Counter Hegemony, 2017), in which Rosales replaces white figures in iconic paintings, is *The Birth of Oshun*, depicting a black woman arising from the sea in a shell, in a clear reference to Botticelli’s *The birth of Venus*. The cover of *Kantelpunt* similarly depicts a white middle-aged woman with a blond bob, dressed in smart clothes – a blouse,



knee-length skirt and (not too high) heeled shoes, all in light cream colours – in a Venus-like pose. Considering the underlying narrative of re-birth and self-discovery, together with the character’s name – Petronella van Aarde (Petronella of the Earth) – the cover makes sense, but in the context of international intersectional feminism it is quite problematic that the publisher, while marketing the novel as a feminist text, should have considered the incongruent tone and resonances.

Kantelpunt is the story of Nellie van der Merwe who, after undergoing a hysterectomy, has to build her life up again, questioning life-long assumptions about femininity and acquiring a voice of her own in the process. While searching for a metaphorical voice, and rethinking her position within the new South Africa, Nellie is forced to name traumatic incidents from her (family’s) past. With this text Kapp confirms the trend, already visible in earlier work (most notably *Oorlewingsgids vir ’n bedonnerde diva*, 2016), of inserting feminist issues into her writing in tokenistic fashion – and leaving linear narrativity, as well as the thematic restrictions of genre fiction, behind. From a celebration of exclusively white procreative heterosexual marriage at the beginning of her writing career, her work has evolved into a more inclusive representational model – complete with Black and queer characters – where the empowerment of the female protagonist stands central (and not marriage).

She also explicitly addresses racism, sexism, misogyny, homophobia and classism in the Afrikaner community. In *Kantelpunt*, these qualities are embodied in the character of Nellie’s (ex-)husband Hendrik who has abused Nellie physically, verbally and emotionally for years, and in the character of the headmaster of the school where Nellie works. However, Kapp makes it clear in the novel that women are equally complicit in keeping Afrikaner patriarchy (and misogyny) alive, as characters like Nellie’s mother- and sister-in-law display throughout the novel. She also implies that a change is possible, and slowly happening, as the development of the character of Nellie shows.

Central to the narrative is the question of what it means *to be a woman*, and what characteristics and traits qualify one for womanhood – biologically as well as socially. That is, indeed, nothing new for a feminism that has been fighting essentialist notions of “the Woman” for decades, but is interesting waters for a popular fiction author to brave. In didactic fashion, Kapp quotes a number of feminists, including de Beauvoir (e.g. 385), throughout the text to illustrate and support points made. Nellie sums up her own version of feminism as follows: “I don’t want to have to look and talk like a man to be able to prove I’m his equal. I want to be able to look and speak and think like a woman, and be his equal. I am, with my red polished nails and make-up and jewellery and all a full-fledged member of this society, and I don’t have to give up a single feminine attribute in order to be allowed to participate in the gender debate” (382). This representation of feminism as not allowing femininity (and heterosexuality)

seems outdated, since the gains made by the third feminist wave, but is clearly still an image alive and kicking in popular Afrikaans discourse.

In the novel, Kapp claims a voice for *all* of middle-aged white Afrikaner women in South Africa. By this strategic essentialism (Spivak, 1988) – using a shared gendered cultural identity as a means of advocating an agency – she claims a voice for a particular group of women in South Africa. In the novel this voice is the strongest in the conversations with her son's black partner Thando. "For years I had to shut up and 'know my place' because I was a white, Afrikaans woman born in the sixties. Now you come along and tell me I have to shut up and 'know my place' because I'm a white Afrikaans woman born in the sixties. You tell me: What has changed for me, except the race of my oppressor?" (404). Nellie is voicing here the frustration of, seemingly, the subject of double oppression (Crenshaw, 1991), feeling that she as a white woman always had to 'make place' for someone else, while her own voice stays unheard.

Reactions of the public to the novel were generally positive. Comments on LitNet, Goodreads, Amazon and Lekkerleesboekrak (a Facebook page dedicated to popular fiction in Afrikaans) all applaud Kapp for addressing a number of important issues (for women) in the Afrikaner community and South Africa in general, and appreciate the relatability of the issues Nellie is struggling with. In the year since publication the novel still averages a 4,34 star rating (based on 92 ratings on Goodreads). "Amelia", for example, thanks the author for making many women realize that their voice also needs to be heard in the world full of injustice, "dat ons ook 'n stem het wat gehoor móét word in 'n wêreld vol ongeregtheid." "Amanda" is amazed by the width and depth of issues Kapp dares to write about, subjects that are generally taboo in the average woman's (and man's) reference frame, "wat grootliks taboe is in die deursnee vrou (en man) se verwysingsraamwerk".

While in her first novel, feminism, represented by the heroine's friend Adele (Kapp 2007), is synonymous with hatred of all men and mutually exclusive of the romantic plot, Kapp's writing has developed into a much more complex and nuanced view of feminism that makes it possible for the main character to be a self-proclaimed feminist and share (some) feminist values. Kapp's use of the term "feminazi" and a type of feminism that she associates with it is, however, striking. Apart from Nellie's striving for the equality of women, Kapp depicts in *Kantelpunt* also a "dangerous" form of feminists who are not to be reasoned with and can easily become aggressive towards those who do not agree with their proclamations, as the character of Maureen personifies (376). The main protagonist is even advised to "lay low" and not say anything that would trigger her (374). Such imaginary is potentially harmful for feminism and the causes feminists fight for. Nevertheless, *Kantelpunt* can still be seen as initiating important, broader discussions of feminism in the Afrikaner community.