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Poor whitism: The fictional *volksmoeder* in South African novels, 1920s–1940s

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Abstract

The phenomenon of the "poor white" social class dominated much of the academic, media and entertainment spheres for the first half of the twentieth century. This article examines poor white women as depicted in both fiction and non-fiction in South African literature and demonstrates that there is a certain overlap in their depiction. By combining the two types of literature it shows that selected novels, specifically those written during the first half of the twentieth century by authors from the Realist genre, may be considered cultural historical sources in their own right – in terms of portraying the daily lives and struggles of poor white women trying to fit into a male-constructed ideology. As a rather marginalised sector, poor-white women, are examined in terms of the *volksmoeder* concept and attention is given to how the novels redefined this term.

Key words: Poor whites; poverty; women; *volksmoeder*; literary texts; cultural history; novels; fiction and non-fiction; Afrikaans literature; Carnegie Commission.

Opsomming

Die verskynsel van die "armblanke" onderwerp het die akademiese-, vermaaklikheids- en mediasfere, veral gedurende die eerste deel van die twintigste eeu, gedomineer het. In hierdie artikel word die uitbeelding van armblanke vroue in Suid-Afrikaanse fiksie en nie-fiksie ondersoek om vas te stel hoe hierdie twee skryfvorme oorvleuel het. Deur hierdie twee tipes literatuurstyle te kombineer, word daar gepoog word om te wys dat realistiese romans van die eerste helfte van die twintigste eeu as kultuurhistoriese bronne in hulle eie reg beskou kan word. In hierdie artikel word die gemarginaliseerde armblanke vrou ondersoek in terme van die "volksmoeder"-konsep deur te bespreek hoe die betrokke romans hierdie nie-akademiese literatuur vorm herdefinieer.

Sleutelwoorde: armblankes; armoede; vroue; volksmoeder; literêre teks; kultuurgeskiedenis; romans; fiksie en nie-fiksie; Afrikaanse letterkunde; Carnegie Kommissie.

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Novel introduction

"Women and fiction remain, so far as I am concerned,
unsolved problems." **Virginia Woolf**.[1]

Until the latter part of the twentieth century, women, let alone poor-white women, were for the most part rarely the focus of academic study.[2] It was only after the 1970s that an interest in poor-white women as a separate entity emerged and revealed how women were used in the *volksmoeder* paradigm to create a national Afrikaner identity.[3] This article aims to consider how poor-white women feature in Afrikaans novels written at the beginning of the twentieth century and how these augment and endorse their portrayal in both primary and secondary sources.[4] To this end the report of the Carnegie Commission (1929–1932) as well as key literature on women, will be considered in tandem with an analysis of the novels.

A juxtapositioning of fictional and non-fictional sources portrays the different types of poor-white women; what their daily lives comprised; and how they conformed or rebelled against the *volksmoeder* concept upheld by the government.[5] It is interesting to note that very few of the novels selected for this article portray poor-

1. V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Harcourt, London, 1929), p 4.
2. "For most of history, 'anonymous' was a woman", in Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p 51.
3. L. Vincent, "The Power behind the Scenes: The Afrikaner Nationalist Women's Parties 1915 to 1931", *South African Historical Journal*, 40 (1999), p 53; C. Saunders, *Writing History: South Africa's Urban Past and Other Essays* (HSRC, Pretoria, 1992), pp 14, 73; W. Visser, "Trends in South African Historiography and the Present State of Historical Research", Unpublished paper presented at the Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, 2004, pp 11–13.
4. This article will focus mainly on the social and cultural constructs of the time period. For a more political view regarding the time and poor whites see L. Koorts, *DF Malan and the Rise of Afrikaner Nationalism* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2014); S. Dubow, "Afrikaner Nationalism, Apartheid and the Conceptualization of 'Race'", *Journal of African History*, 33(1992), p 209–237; H. van Zyl Slabbert, "Afrikaner Nationalism, White Politics and Political Change in South Africa", Seminar paper presented at the African Studies Institute, University of Witwatersrand, 1974, pp 1–25; H. Giliomee, "Constructing Afrikaner Nationalism", *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 18, 1/2 (1983), pp 83–98; J. Hyslop, "The Representation of White Working Class Women in the Construction of Reactionary Populist Movement: 'Purified' Afrikaner Nationalist Agitation for Legislation against 'mixed' marriages, 1934–1939", Seminar paper presented at the African Studies Institute, University of Witwatersrand, 1993, pp 1–29; W. Beinart and S. Dubow (eds), *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth Century South Africa* (Routledge, London, 1995); H. Giliomee, "The Non-racial Franchise and Afrikaner and Coloured Identities, 1910–1994", *African Affairs*, 94, 375 (1995), pp 199–225, to name but a few.
5. In the timeframe of this article, the first half of the 20th century, various political parties and alliances formed the government. While the National Party only came into power in 1948, it played an important and often dominant role in government in terms of racial ideology from its inception in 1914 through to its ultimate victory in 1948.

white women who were resident in the urban areas; the focus appears to be on women in the rural areas. A better understanding of what it was like to be a poor-white woman during the first half of the twentieth century emerges, or at least how these poor-white women were perceived and represented.

The term "poor white" is not a new or an uncommon term. Poor whites are not solely a South African phenomenon and nor is poverty in general. Evidence of poverty and poor whites exists throughout the world. The term "poor white" first began appearing in South African newspapers[6] and official records, after about the 1860s.[7] It became a widely used term from the 1890s onwards.[8] It is important to note that although the poor-white problem existed before the beginning of the twentieth century, it officially reached its height of politicisation in the 1930s. Different authors have different definitions when it comes to the term poor white.[9] Whiteness itself is an elusive and contentious term. A definition of the term poor white is widely debated and there is a range of definitions from across the social sciences.[10] The South African Carnegie Commission,[11] established to investigate the poor-white problem also sought to define the concept (here focusing on indigent men) and this is the definition that will be used in this article. According to the report, a poor white is

> … a person who had become dependent to such an extent, whether from mental, moral, economic, or physical causes, that he is unfit, without the help of others to find proper means of livelihood … or to procure it directly or indirectly for his children.[12]

Another key term to consider is that of the *volksmoeder*, an idealised image of white Afrikaner women at large. The term first appeared in South African

6. The *Alice Times* was one of the first newspapers to cover events regarding poor whites in society, but such matters soon became a more common occurrence in other small local newspapers.
7. C. Bundy, "Vagabond Hollanders and Runaway Englishmen: White Poverty in the Cape before Poor Whiteism", in W. Beinart, P. Delius and S. Trapido, *Putting a Plough to the Ground: Accumulation and Dispossession in Rural South Africa 1850–1930* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1986), p 116.
8. D. Oakes (ed.), *Reader's Digest Illustrated History of South Africa: The Real Story* (Reader's Digest Association, Cape Town, 1992), p 328.
9. For more information on the definition of poor white, see S.E. Pretorius, "Non-Fiction in Fiction: Poor Whites in Selected South African Literary Texts, 1900–1950", MA dissertation, University of Pretoria, 2015.
10. A. Grundlingh, "'Gone to the dog'. The Cultural Politics of Gambling: The Rise and Fall of British Greyhound Racing on the Witwatersrand, 1932–1949", *South African Historical Journal*, 48 (2003), p 185; R. Morrell (ed.), *White but Poor: Essays on the History of Poor Whites in Southern Africa, 1880–1940* (Unisa Press, Pretoria,1992), pp 1–28.
11. This commission was funded by the Carnegie Corporation, the Union government and the Dutch Reformed Church.
12. Carnegie Commission Report, *The Poor White Problem in South Africa, Volume 1, Rural Impoverishment and Rural Exodus* (Pro Ecclesia, Stellenbosch, 1932), p 18.

historiography during the late nineteenth century. These women were featured as symbols of courage, virtue, moral sensibility and political independence.[13] The image was also used by men to support missionary and philanthropic efforts; in the defence of the Boer republics before the Anglo-Boer War;[14] and to inspire Afrikaner men during battle. After the war the suffering, heroism, patriotism and defiance shown towards the British, augmented this image.[15]

The *volksmoeder* concept developed into a distinctive role in the early decades of the twentieth century and was magnified by the results of the Anglo-Boer War and the emergence of Afrikaner nationalism. However, the concept first originated in the nineteenth century with the portrayal of the women who participated in the Great Trek.[16] There is no precise definition of this term, but it incorporated a clear role model for Afrikaner women.[17] The *volksmoeder* was essentially the notion of ideal womanhood.[18] Women were depicted as the "mothers of the nation", a myth in Afrikaner nationalism which called upon women to perform their duty to prevent the decline of the nation and the deterioration of the *volk*. This call was issued to awaken women to their obligations towards their families and the nation.[19] These carefully constructed images of the *volksmoeder*, which in turn fulfilled the role of a master-symbol, remained imprinted in the minds of the Afrikaner people.[20]

The *volksmoeder* figure is paradoxical and inconsistent. The "power" of motherhood is acknowledged, but so too is the justification for limiting this power and prescribing that the *volksmoeder* "belonged in the home" rather than seeking work outside her domestic setting.[21] The *volksmoeder* image was a construction by Afrikaans men to fulfil a role – a role constructed by men.[22]

The authors of the novels are all male and include Jacob Lub, Jochem van Bruggen, Christiaan Maurits van den Heever and Abraham Hendrik Jonker. Their novels are set in the first half of the twentieth century.[23] The authors belong mainly to

13. E. Brink, "Man-Made Women: Gender, Class and the Ideology of the Volksmoeder", in C. Walker (ed.), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (David Philip, Cape Town 1990), p 276.
14. Also known as the South African War (1899–1902).
15. M. du Toit, "The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism: *Volksmoeders* and the ACVV, 1904–1929", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29, 1(2003), p 155; Brink, "Man-Made Women", p 274; Vincent, "The Power behind the Scenes, p 64.
16. Brink, "Man-Made Women", pp 274–275.
17. Brink, "Man-Made Women", p 290.
18. Brink, "Man-Made Women", pp 274, 290.
19. Vincent, "The Power behind the Scenes, p 65.
20. E. Cloete, "Afrikaner Identity: Culture, Tradition and Gender", *Agenda*, 13(1992), p 43.
21. Vincent, "The Power behind the Scenes", p 72.
22. Du Toit, "The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism", pp 156, 158.
23. See publication dates of their novels.

the middle class, but the majority also experienced the hardships of poverty.[24] Their representation of women may be viewed as patriarchal perceptions of the time. A number of academics, the large majority of whom were women, have also written about the history of women and their role in society. The different periods in which they write also reflects the different thoughts, ideas and prejudices of the time regarding women. However, the representation from contemporary novels and more recent research appears to correlate and support one another.

Even the government records, in the form of the Carnegie Commission Report, endorses the male stereotype and conforms to the male paradigm of the time, and in this case, the *volksmoeder* image. The second part of the fifth volume of the Carnegie Commission Report is entitled "The Mother and Daughter of the Poor Family". However, true to form, the title promises more than it delivers, focusing primarily on a number of cases representing different types of poor-white families and the various duties in the household. It also includes a description of the experiences that the author had while conducting the interviews; it does not explain how it distinguished between the different types of poor whites.

The commission report does not refer to the *volksmoeder* specifically, although much of what is expected of the poor-white woman complies with the concept. Furthermore, it gives very little detail on the daily life and struggles faced by these poor-white women, focusing instead on the family and the different levels of poverty. Most of the interviews were conducted in the rural areas and do not deal with the hardships of women living in the urban areas.[25] Importantly, the commissioners involved in the Carnegie Commission, who were mostly Afrikaans speakers, felt that these poor-white women no longer had the capacity to fulfil their role as mothers. They argued strongly for education and social welfare in order that women might play their "rightful" role as part of a new modern Afrikaner nation.[26]

It was at the end of the nineteenth century that the new historiography gave marginalised groups, including Afrikaner women, greater and more favourable attention.[27] Their actions and deeds, during the Great Trek period (1830s) and the

24. J. Lötter, *Tienertake: Jochem van Bruggen* (Daan Retief, Pretoria, 1960), p 6.; Kleinjan, "Jochem van Bruggen", *Die Huisgenoot*, 18(610), 1 December 1933, pp 43, 89.
25. Carnegie Commission Report, *The Poor White Problem in South Africa, Volume 5, The Poor White in Society & Mother and Daughter of the Poor Family* (Pro Ecclesia, Stellenbosch, 1932).
26. Carnegie Commission Report, *The Poor White Problem in South Africa, Volume 1*; Carnegie Commission Report, *The Poor White Problem in South Africa, Volume 2, The Poor White* (Pro Ecclesia, Stellenbosch, 1932); Carnegie Commission Report, *The Poor White Problem in South Africa, Volume 3, Education and the Poor White* (Pro Ecclesia, Stellenbosch, 1932); Carnegie Commission Report, *The Poor White Problem in South Africa, Volume 4, Health Factors in the Poor White Problem* (Pro Ecclesia, Stellenbosch, 1932); Carnegie Commission Report, *The Poor White Problem in South Africa, Volume 5.*
27. Brink, "Man-Made Women", pp 276–277.

Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) were recorded and published by others such as Emily Hobhouse and this broadened the range of personality traits ascribed to the *volksmoeder*.[28] Her personal characteristics included a sense of religion, bravery, love of freedom, the spirit of sacrifice, self-reliance, housewifeliness, nurturance of talents, integrity, virtue and setting an example to others. Thus the role of the *volksmoeder* became a "role model" for young girls.[29]

Towards the 1970s major political changes began taking place in South African history and this had an impact on the historiography. Historians began focusing on the neglected history of people of colour and marginalised groups as well as minorities such as the poor whites. Academics were no longer as concerned with researching the history from the top down, focusing on elites or political history. Instead they began to write history from the "bottom up".[30] The focus shifted towards the ordinary people – the workers, the unemployed, criminals, policemen, home owners, renters, squatters, those living in comfort and those living in poverty and the women. Indeed, such studies included everyone else who had previously slipped through the cracks of the historical narrative. Many of the academics who wrote about the *volksmoeder* during this time were themselves women.[31]

It is important to note that by the 1930s, some 90 percent of those described as poor whites were Afrikaners.[32] This percentage includes women and children. In her chapter "Man-made Women" (1990), Elsabe Brink relates how in the first half of the twentieth century Afrikaner women were placed into categories in the male-dominated society. It was a means to control Afrikaner women by giving them some so-called "status", "honour" and "respectability", but at the same time it was an opportunity for men to use women to achieve their own ends. As soon as women failed to conform to what was expected of them, or began to question the designated roles prescribed to them,[33] these "privileges" could be withdrawn.[34] One such given role was that of the *volksmoeder,*[35] which every Afrikaner woman (including poor-white women) had to aspire to be.[36]

28. Brink, "Man-Made Women", pp 277–279.
29. W. Postma, *Die Boervrou, Moeder van haar Volk* (Nasionale Pers, Bloemfontein, 1922); E. Stockenström, *Die Vrou in die Geskiedenis van die Hollands-Afrikaanse Volk: 'n Beknopte Oorsig van die Rol wat die Vrou in die Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika Gespeel het in die 350 Jaar tussen 1568 en 1918* (Pro Ecclesia, Stellenbosch, 1921).
30. Saunders, *Writing History: South Africa's Urban Past and Other Essays*, pp 14, 73.
31. Brink, "Man-Made Women"; Vincent, "The Power behind the Scenes", pp 51–73; Du Toit, "The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism", pp 155–176; Cloete, "Afrikaner Identity: Culture, Tradition and Gender", pp 43–56.
32. J. van Wyk, "Nationalist Ideology and Social Concerns in Afrikaans Drama in the Period 1930-1940", History Workshop, University of the Witwatersrand, 1990, pp 5–6.
33. In this case the *volksmoeder* role of being a certain type of woman in Afrikaner society.
34. Brink, "Man-Made Women", p 273.
35. Translated as "mother of the nation". See Brink, "Man-Made Women", p 273.
36. Vincent, "The Power behind the Scenes", p 64.

The *volksmoeder* concept was open to a central unifying force within Afrikanerdom and took on a political role as well.[37] This was a time of poverty among most Afrikaners and a time when the Afrikaners had to rebuild themselves and their image. Later, when poverty was "conquered" and Afrikaner nationalism was achieved, the *volksmoeder* became redundant and she, the *volksmoeder,* no longer had such a significant role to play.[38] By active involvement in all aspects of Afrikaner life, such as language, culture and religion, Afrikaner nationalism was sold as a device that placed the good of the nation above politics. The nationalist goal was not political power, but rather the "birth of a nation".[39] The idea also extended to school textbooks, which explained, through the history of these women, what it was to be a *volksmoeder* and the importance of her role in the advancement of the *volk*.[40]

Women featured prominently in Afrikaans literature during the Second Afrikaans Language Movement. In publications woven around the Great Trek, the Battle of Blood River and the Anglo-Boer War, women were depicted as tough and self-sufficient and it was these legendary women who were used as the embodiment of the *volksmoeder* traits.[41] These women feature as characters in a number of the selected Realist novels about poor whites during the first half of the twentieth century. It was this image that was portrayed in the novels and was emphasised in Afrikaans magazines and popular works that working-class women were exposed to. Thus an Afrikaner identity permeated the works read by the Afrikaner working-class women, pointing them to the ideal *volksmoeder,* the image of womanhood to which they should aspire.[42]

Novel novelists

When considering the nature of sources deemed viable for historical research, there has been a marked change over recent years. T. Cook remarks that sources now range from the tangible to the intangible and from the visual to the oral,[43] while T. Rowat argues that the archives themselves are becoming less concerned with distinctions of legitimacy and authenticity and are more focused on a broader range of formats that reach the realm of popular culture. This entails "blurring the distinctions between non-fiction and fiction in the documentary record and analysing it as a cultural

37. Brink, "Man-Made Women", p 273.
38. Cloete, "Afrikaner Identity: Culture, Tradition and Gender", p 48.
39. Vincent, "The Power behind the Scenes", pp 64–67.
40. Cloete, "Afrikaner Identity: Culture, Tradition and Gender", p 47.
41. L. Vincent, "Bread and Honour: White Working Class Women and Afrikaner Nationalism in the 1930s", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 26, 1(2000), p 64.
42. Du Toit, "The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism", p 156.
43. T. Cook, "Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts", *Archival Science,* 1(2001), p 24; and T. Cook, "Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives", *Archivaria,* 51(2001), pp 21–27.

construct".[44] However, it is the fictional novels that are often forgotten in academic analyses and these have begun to gain increasing credibility.

Fictional sources can be seen as forming part of what is referred to as a community or counter-archive.[45] Many of the events and characters featured in such stories are based on what the authors experienced, witnessed, or were told. They are contemporary and thus have a realistic nature and give voice to recollections of what occurred or what has gained acceptance in popular memory. According to John Tosh novels must to some extent be considered as a source.[46] Although not historical statements, they do offer insights into the social and intellectual milieu in which the writer lived and provide vivid descriptions of the setting as well.[47] P.C. Schoonees makes a similar point by stating that the character Ampie in Jochem van Bruggen's novels *Ampie: Die Trilogie*[48] was considered the first "real Afrikaans person" in Afrikaner literature and that this novel can be used as a document for further study about welfare conditions of that time.[49]

As mentioned above, the novels that have been selected for examination were written by Afrikaans authors during the first half of the twentieth century.[50] It is very difficult to determine the political affiliation of the novelists and one cannot simply place a label on them. They remain a nuance of the time.[51] The authors include J. Lub (1868–1926) a teacher, writer and in later life a politician. Lub was one of the first authors to use the Realism genre with regard to the portrayal of the lives and conditions of the poor whites.[52] His work is of importance because it is one of the few novels or sketches of poor whites in the urban areas and it includes realistic accounts of what he experienced.[53] These accounts and short stories are seen as human documents and form part of the archives of history.[54] One of the best examples of Lub's work is *Dark Johannesburg* (1912).[55]

44. T. Rowat, "The Record and Repository as a Cultural Form of Expression", *Archivaria*, 36 (1993), p 203.
45. Cook, "Archival Science and Postmodernism", p 24; and Cook, "Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth", pp 16–21.
46. J. Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (Longman, London, 2000), p 64.
47. Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, pp 64, 93.
48. J. van Bruggen, *Ampie: Die Trilogie* (Afrikaanse Pers, Johannesburg, 1965).
49. P.C. Schoonees, *Die Prosa van die Tweede Afrikaanse Beweging* (Bussy, Cape Town, 1939), p 30.
50. For more information on these authors see chapter 3 in Pretorius, "Non-Fiction in Fiction: Poor Whites in Selected South African Literary Texts".
51. Note that very little is mentioned in the novels on the political situation. Some of the characters may refer to the government, but no real distinction is made.
52. J.C. Kannemeyer, *Die Afrikaanse Literatuur, 1652–1987* (Academica, Pretoria, 1978), p 80.
53. Schoonees, *Die Prosa van die Tweede Afrikaanse Beweging*, p 164.
54. R. Coetzee, "Die Armblanke in Afrikaans Letterkunde", MA dissertation, Unisa, 1937, pp 34–35.
55. J. Lub, *Dark Johannesburg* (Het Westen Printing Works, Potchefstroom, 1912).

Another author in this genre is J. van Bruggen (1881–1957) who was a teacher, businessman, farmer, as well as a poet and writer. Van Bruggen's work was heavily influenced by the Afrikaans language and culture struggle, the Anglo-Boer War and the poor-white problem – each with its own underlying implications.[56] His novels and stories have a historical element and can thus be described as historical fiction, although he is considered a Realist.[57] He was regarded as one of the best writers on the poor whites and their lives, not only making people aware of the problem, but also giving his readers insight into their hardships.[58] Some of his works include *Bywoners* (1919), *Die Burgemeester van Slaplaagte* (1936), *Die Springkaanbeampte van Sluis* (1938) and *Ampie: Die Trilogie,* published in 1965 by Afrikaanse Pers after the author's death.[59]

Another notable example of Afrikaans literature in this category is the work of C.M. van den Heever (1902–1957). He was a teacher, journalist, Afrikaans professor, poet and writer. Van den Heever's works are usually categorised as falling under either the Romanticism or Realist genre, but can perhaps most accurately be referred to as rural farm novels.[60] His own experiences and artistic flair, from which his work developed, were governed by the historical circumstances and the religious and political views of his time.[61] One of his best known works is *Droogte* (1930).[62]

A.H. Jonker (1905–1966) was a journalist, editor, politician, poet and writer. He is well known for his tragic farm novels dealing with the hardships suffered by the poor white families whom he describes with the same type of Realism that is associated with Van Bruggen. Jonker's work is blunt, shocking, truthful (also known as "raw" Realism). Rather than subtly playing on the emotions of the reader, he makes the reader face the harsh reality and creates sympathy for the characters.[63] His novels *Die Plaasverdeling* (1932) and *Die Trekboer* (1934)[64] fall into the period of the Second

56. C.J.M. Nienaber, "Jochem van Bruggen, 1881–1957", in P.J. Nienaber (ed.), *Perspektief en Profiel* (Afrikaanse Persboekhandel, Johannesburg, 1951), p 285.
57. Nienaber, "Jochem van Bruggen 1881–1957", p 286.
58. Coetzee, "Die Armblanke in Afrikaans Letterkunde", p 46.
59. J. van Bruggen, "Bywoners", in A.P. Grové and S. Strydom, *Drie Prosastukke van Jochem van Bruggen* (Van Schaik, Pretoria, 1973); J. van Bruggen, *Die Burgemeester van Slaplaagte* (Nasionale Pers, Pretoria, 1936); J. van Bruggen, *Die Springkaanbeampte van Sluis* (Van Schaik, Pretoria, 1938); and J. van Bruggen, *Ampie: Die Trilogie* (Afrikaanse Pers, Johannesburg, 1965).
60. H. du Plooy, "C.M. van den Heever: 1902–1957", in H.P. van Coller (ed.), *Perspektief en Profiel: 'n Afrikaanse Literatuurgeskiedenis, Volume 2* (Van Schaik, Pretoria, 1999), p 654.
61. Du Plooy, "C.M. van den Heever", pp 654–655.
62. C.M. van den Heever, *Droogte* (Van Schaik, Pretoria, 1930).
63. J.C. Kannemeyer, *Geskiedenis van Afrikaanse Literatuur, Volume 1* (Academica, Pretoria, 1978), p 442; G. Dekker, *Afrikaanse Literatuurgeskiedenis* (Nasionale Boekhandel, Cape Town, 1935), p 275.
64. A.H. Jonker, *Die Plaasverdeling* (Van Schaik, Pretoria, 1932); and A. H. Jonker, *Die Trekboer* (Nasionale Pers, Cape Town, 1934).

Afrikaans Language Movement (after 1902) and the 1930s, a time when the *volk* and the Afrikaans language were pushed to the forefront of popular literature.[65] This period was chosen for scrutiny because it best represents the height of the poor-white question. One of the motivations for such works was in fact the plight of the poor whites – to express what was happening around them or what they were experiencing.[66] These writings reflect on social and economic issues, often in graphic detail.[67] Each of these novels also portrays women. Although not all of them are featured as main characters of the story, the situation and portrayal of the women provides the reader with a clearer understanding of the situation.

J.C. Kannemeyer explains that in the early 1900s there were four main genres in Afrikaans novels: Romanticism, Realism, Historical and the Folk-socialism.[68] Realism is defined as a concrete representation of reality in contrast to idealisation, stylisation and fantasy and this is the overarching genre of the literary works used in this article.[69] A.P. Grové and S. Strydom state that Realism is defined as having a close resemblance to what is real; fidelity of representation, rendering the precise detail of the real thing or scene. With reference to art and literature there is often the implication that the details provided are of an unpleasant or sordid character. Although authors who are Realists have a great respect for the truth, they do not let it define them because they do not concentrate merely on the facts. The Realists have their own way of looking at the world and putting what they see on paper.[70] Literature therefore becomes a reflection of social conditions and evolution of the mind, almost like holding a mirror up to society and reflecting what was happening onto the pages.

Charles van Onselen states that story tellers may well become what he labels the best social historians.[71] In a review on *Die Burgemeester van Slaplaagte,* in *Die Huisgenoot,* Lynette van Niekerk claims that the writers of that time were beginning to write longer and more realistic stories portraying the circumstances, experiences and views around them.[72] Nearly all literature has some degree of Realism. It is important for readers to be able to recognise and identify with the characters and the world they inhabit when reading the novel.[73]

65. Coetzee, "Die Armblanke in Afrikaans Letterkunde", p 3.
66. For example, Van Bruggen was a farmer at the time and had bywoners working for him. He too suffered due to the climatic conditions and animal diseases.
67. Coetzee, "Die Armblanke in Afrikaans Letterkunde", p 238.
68. Kannemeyer, *Geskiedenis van Afrikaanse Literatuur, Volume 1*, p 59.
69. Realism: Myfundi your Online Encyclopaedia, 'Realism', undated, at <http://myfundi.co.za/e/Realism> Accessed 9 May 2012.
70. Van Bruggen, "Bywoners", in Grové and Strydom, *Drie Prosastukke*, p 10.
71. C. van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper 1894-1985* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1996), p ix.
72. L. van Niekerk, "Oor Boeke: *Die Burgemeester van Slaplaagte*", *Die Huisgenoot*, 8(85), May 1923, p 43.
73. D. Campbell, Review, "Realism (late 1800s/early 1900s)" in The New Book of Knowledge, undated <http://www.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=3753924>, Accessed 12 April 2014.

Novel *volksmoeders*

The novel *volksmoeder* can be categorised into three (in)distinct types, namely the rural, urban and working *volksmoeder*. At times these lines were blurred and the reader finds that the *volksmoeders* fall into one or more of the set categories. Usually it was the abject poverty in the rural areas which drove the young women to the towns and cities in search of employment to improve the lot of their families. This is underlined in the novels that were studied.

The rural *volksmoeder*

Research shows that fiction by Afrikaans authors of the time usually reflect on the image of the *volksmoeder* as living in the countryside. These women are struggling to survive and are thus the embodiment of the *volksmoeder*. Generally speaking, the poor-white women are juxtapositioned to this so-called "ideal" female-role status. In the novel *Die Springkaanbeampte van Sluis*[74] by Van Bruggen, Lambertus Bredenhand is a widower who has four children. He is looking for a new wife to be a mother for his children. Bredenhand has his eye on a much younger woman – Dirkie.[75] He makes his feelings known to her, but she puts him off by telling him she wants a family of her own and that she is tired of raising other people's children (here she refers to her sister's children) and does not want to enter into a marriage and struggle in poverty from the outset.[76] However, after the death of one of Bredenhand's sons she feels compelled to marry him and takes on the role of mother to his children. She feels partly responsible for the neglect of the children, which had actually led to the little boy's death.[77] In this novel the author presents the reader with the dire consequences of what may happen if one ignores or denies the so-called "mothering instincts" inherent to the *volksmoeder* image. However, Van Bruggen "saves" Dirkie when she agrees to marry Bredenhand literally at the deathbed of his son. The author comments: "Selfverwyt praat heftig in haar gewete ..." (Self-reproach weighs heavily on her conscience ....).[78] This represents a type of spirit of sacrifice (she sacrifices having children of her own and gives up on her own dream) and thus she is redeemed and can be seen as a true *volksmoeder* – putting the needs of the children and family – and the *volk* – before herself.

In a novel by A.H. Jonker, *Die Plaasverdeling,*[79] Antonie's wife, Bekka, is represented as the ultimate *volksmoeder*. She is described as putting her family before herself and is a very good housewife who takes care of her home and children.

74. Van Bruggen, *Die Springkaanbeampte van Sluis*.
75. Van Bruggen, *Die Springkaanbeampte van Sluis,* pp 3–4.
76. Van Bruggen, *Die Springkaanbeampte van Sluis,* pp 8–10, 84.
77. Van Bruggen, *Die Springkaanbeampte van Sluis,* pp 103, 111–113.
78. Van Bruggen, *Die Springkaanbeampte van Sluis,* p 112.
79. Jonker, *Die Plaasverdeling*.

Antonie respects her greatly as a mother and feels she has a very praiseworthy and positive influence over their children.[80] The following excerpts mirror this claim:

> Bekka moet maar net vir hom en die kinders aangee en het byna nie tyd om in haar eie behoefte te voorsien nie.[81] (Bekka must provide for him [Antonie] and the children and barely has time to see to her own needs.)

> Uit Bekka se wese straal daar so 'n geheimsinnige invloed wat kwaad afweer en ongehoorsaamheid uit hulle verban. Saam met haar sal hy hulle in die groot see vertrou, en dit sê baie, want Antonie het nog nooit die see gesien nie.[82] (A mysterious aura emanates from Bekka's innate being and this has a positive influence over the children, preventing disobedience and curbing misbehaviour. Antonie has every trust in Bekka to care for the children in the big sea [of life] and that is saying something, because Antonie has never even seen the sea.)

Similar to academics in this field, not all novelists wrote about the "wonders" of the *volksmoeder* and what she stood for. Although all the authors selected for this study are male, there are some who tend to reveal other facets of the lives of poor-white women. In some cases, the message the authors convey in their novels is in line with the ambient nationalist ideas, while others are not. For example, some declare that the urban areas were not a safe place for unmarried women, while others admit that bad things could just as easily happen in the rural areas – and that the urban areas were not always so evil. For example, in Van den Heever's novel *Droogte,* the author enlightens his readers about the dangers that might occur in the isolated rural life: the main character's daughter has a physical relationship with her uncle. Van den Heever reveals another side to the life of poor-white women in his novel *Droogte,* a stricter, more realistic account of what was happening rather than the idealised version of the *volksmoeder*. He indicates not what perfect womanhood should be, but rather the other types of poor-white women.[83] He does this by remaining true to the genre of Realism and conveys a realistic representation of what was happening.

The urban *volksmoeder*

In Jonker's novel *Die Plaasverdeling,*[84] although the family is not well-off, Bekka does not resent her husband and the poverty in which they live, but tries her best to make do.[85] It is only later in the second novel, *Die Trekboer,*[86] that her attitude changes. Although she continues to be devoted to her home and children, she shows herself as an independent-minded woman. She begins to take control of the family in a patriarchal role because Antonie is becoming an increasingly pathetic character. The

80. Jonker, *Die Plaasverdeling*, pp 26–35.
81. Jonker, *Die Plaasverdeling*, p 26.
82. Jonker, *Die Plaasverdeling*, p. 30.
83. Van den Heever, *Droogte*, pp 56, 71, 97.
84. Jonker, *Die Plaasverdeling.*
85. Jonker, *Die Plaasverdeling*, p 40.
86. Jonker, *Die Trekboer*.

role of the mother was traditionally that of homemaker, carer and supporter of moral and religious values; she was the binding factor in the family, while the father was the patriarchal breadwinner. However, with poverty and urbanisation the mother's role tended to shift towards that of breadwinner and in some cases the poor-white woman was forced into unskilled labour, in addition to coping with her household duties, in order to support the family.[87]

Writing at the time, Postma and Stockenström extend the notion of "ideal womanhood" further to expand on the woman's role in the home and family to include the advancement of the *volk*. According to them, these women were the mothers of the future Afrikaner nation.[88] Thus, their highest calling and greatest fulfilment was to be found in their own homes – physically and morally reproducing the nation.[89] Organisations such as the Ossewabrandwag (1938)[90] also argued that a woman's place was in her home, caring for her large family; for her, political involvement and employment was of secondary importance.[91] Likewise, members of the Ossewabrandwag argued that the *volksmoeder*s were duty-bound to eschew narrow personal ambitions such as accepting employment. They should instead play a role in the home, thereby ensuring the wellbeing of the *volk*.[92] White working-class women who were playing an economic role outside of the home were regarded as inherently a *bedreiging* (threat) to Afrikaner patriarchism.[93] Many of the novels of the time underlined that the place of women was essentially and preferably in the home. Afrikaner intellectuals maintained that "good motherhood" was the solution to the poor-white problem.[94]

As shown earlier, in the novels, *Die Plaasverdeling* and *Die Trekboer,* Bekka represents this independent-minded woman.[95] In contrast, in Van den Heever's novel *Droogte,*[96] the teacher's wife, has a friend, Joey Schoeman, who goes to visit the family in the rural area. She is from the urban area and appears very different and even scandalous to the people in the rural environment.[97] She is described as:

87. E. Pretorius, "Die Briels: Smartlappe en Tranetrekkers van Weleer", *De Kat*, 4, 2(1988), pp 18–22.
88. Brink, "Man-Made Women", p 280.
89. Vincent, "Bread and Honour", p 64.
90. The Ossewabrandwag (translated loosely as Oxwagon Sentinal) was an ultra-right-wing movement. It was evidence of the surging increase of Afrikaner nationalism, especially with regard to political matters.
91. Vincent, "Bread and Honour", p 70.
92. Vincent, "Bread and Honour", p 70.
93. Hyslop, "The Representation of White Working Class Women in the Construction of Reactionary Populist Movement, p 9.
94. Vincent, "The Power behind the Scenes", p 73.
95. Jonker, *Die Trekboer*, pp 2, 148, 156, 186.
96. Van den Heever, *Droogte*.
97. Van den Heever, *Droogte*, pp 114–116.

> ...'n vroumens wat soos n 'man sigarets rook en gedurig aan haar ou rokkie onder en bo moet pluk om tog 'n stukkie van haar lyf toe te kry. En die onbeskaamheid wat die mens het ... sy ry wydsbeen op mnr. Hendriks se perd alleen in die veld rond ...[98] (… [she is] a woman who smokes cigarettes like a man and has to tug at the top and bottom of her dress to cover up various parts of her body. And she has no shame ... she sits astride Mr Hendrick's horse and rides it alone in the veld ...)

Furthermore, Joey is described as being very opinionated; she believes in women's rights and feels that the people in the rural area are slow and backward, especially if they believe a woman's place is at home.[99] When Mr Hendricks, the teacher, asks her whether as an urbanised, educated, cosmopolitan and open-minded women she thinks she is better off than, for example, her mother's generation, her reply is unequivocal:

> Ja ek sal jolly well so dink. Ons moeders het swaar genoeg gekry ... die boeremense hier behandel hulle vrouens soos meide…[100] (Yes I jolly well think so. Our mothers suffered enough ... the Afrikaners here treat their women like maids ...)

He goes on to ask whether she thinks her generation will do more for the country. Her reply is: "Ek sou so dink, hulle het nooit 'n chance gehad nie."[101] (I would think so, they [the women of the previous generation] never ever had a chance.)

It is interesting to note that in Van den Heever's portrayal of Joey she uses English parochial slang ("enjoy", "jolly well" and "chance") which is another indication of her urbanisation and estrangement from the rural *volksmoeder* image.[102] When questioned about her mixed language, Joey Schoeman, in Van den Heever's *Droogte,* states: "Afrikaans, … is no [real] language. You should rather read English, then you will know what is happening in other countries. Afrikaans does not even have a literature."[103] This is the type of woman the government of the day either wanted to change or shame – such women did not conform to the *volksmoeder* criteria.

As noted in the novels studied, not all the female characters were portrayed as the *volksmoeder* type. The *volksmoeder* ideal applied mostly to middle-class Afrikaner women and with so many poor whites at the time, this middle-class *volksmoeder* group was probably a far smaller group, with the larger, impoverished group trying to aspire to their better-off counterparts.[104]

98. Van den Heever, *Droogte*, p 117.
99. Van den Heever, *Droogte*, p 119.
100. Van den Heever, p 119. "Meide" is a derogatory term used at the time to refer to domestic workers of colour.
101. Van den Heever, *Droogte*, p 120.
102. Van den Heever, *Droogte*, p 119.
103. Van den Heever, *Droogte*, p 120.
104. Brink, "Man-Made Women", p 274.

Importantly, there were major differences between the people from the rural areas and the urban areas. These differences were largely of a cultural nature. Many of the people who lived in the urban areas were exposed to a more cosmopolitan outlook and were influenced by the foreign immigrants who came to South Africa as far as dress, language and mannerisms were concerned.[105] The people who lived in the rural areas were very steadfast in their traditions and in many areas very isolated, which left very little room for change.[106] Their isolation cut them off from the modern world and caused them to become imprisoned by cultural habits.[107]

The novels also reflect on the growing number of white men and women from the rural areas who were driven to the towns and cities by a combination of rural distress on the one hand and urban opportunities on the other.[108] It was not only the lack of opportunities for employment that pushed young people to the urban areas, but certain pull factors were also evident as can be seen in the novel *Die Burgemeester van Slaplaagte*. These included:

> Die vryheid om orals te kan rondgaan met 'n galant jonkêrel – bioskope en teaters, danspartye so amper al om die ander dag ... en ek sal jou guarantee, my niggie, dat jy binne drie dae 'n flukse jongkêrel het, wat vir jou treat met alles wat jy begeer.[109] ([The young woman in urban areas] has the freedom to go around with a gallant young man – bioscopes, theatres, dance parties every other day and I guarantee you, my cousin, you would have a handsome young man within three days, one who would treat you to everything your heart desires.)

The same character in the novel also mentioned the commodities that were simply unavailable in the isolated countryside and how the country girl would have access to such goods if she was able to find work in the urban areas.

At this time there were many prominent ideologues, such as Dr J.D. Kestell,[110] who argued that it was wrong of these women to leave the rural districts because the

105. C. van Onselen, *New Babylon, New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand 1886–1914* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 2001), p 2; L. Callinicos, *A People's History of South Africa, Volume 1, Gold and Workers, 1886–1924* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1980), p 28.
106. Carnegie Commission Report, *The Poor White Problem in South Africa, Volume 5*, p 11; Carnegie Commission Report, *The Poor White Problem in South Africa, Volume 1*, p 12.
107. G. Davie, *Poverty Knowledge in South Africa: A Social History of Human Science, 1855–2005* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2015), p 42.
108. E.L.P. Stals (ed.), *Afrikaners in die Goudstad, Volume 1, 1886–1924* (HAUM, Cape Town, 1978), pp 33–38.
109. Van Bruggen, *Die Burgemeester van Slaplaagte,* p 11.
110. Eminent Dutch Reformed churchman, J.D. Kestell, was a leading figure in the formation of the Afrikaner nationalist cultural mythology. In 1916, he was appointed chairman of the Dutch Reformed Church's Bible translation project. In 1920, he become rector of Grey College, Bloemfontein, where he did all he could to make this institution Afrikaner in character. He was one of the keynote speakers at the Great Trek centenary festivities in 1938.

rural lifestyle was intrinsic to Afrikanerdom. They argued that life in the cities held many moral threats and there was also the danger that Afrikaners would be anglicised.[111] Besides, as seen in the description of Joey Schoeman above, we also find that the Johannesburg in the years immediately after the discovery of gold, was painted as a new type of biblical Babylon and Nineveh – as is seen in the title of Van Onselen's renowned book.[112] In the first decades of the twentieth century which were the years of poverty and misery in the urban areas and particularly in Johannesburg, it was feared that conservative Afrikaners would be exposed to social evils. Johannesburg was labelled "Judasburg", "Rampokkerstad", or even "Sodom and Gomorrah".[113] In *Die Burgemeester van Slaplaagte* neither "tant" Levina nor uncle Lood want to allow their daughter to go to work in the urban area – Johannesburg. They view it as a "*gevaarlike plek*" (dangerous place) and "*vol bose*" (full of evil). Later in the novel he maintains: "Johannesburg maak ons boere skelm." (Johanneburg makes us Boers devious.)[114]

In *Die Bugermeester van Slaplaagte,* Levina's parents finally give in and allow her to go and live in the city, knowing she will be boarding with her aunt.[115] Levina's uncle warns them of the "*sondige*" (sinful) urban area and the dangers of allowing her leave the farm.[116] However, the reader is soon made aware that Levina does not keep to her promises and her outlook on life changes. Ultimately, her uncle feels he should have warned her earlier.[117] Urban life impacts on her negatively; her letters home become less frequent and she does not send money home due to her own relatively high expenses in the city.[118] Her parents receive a letter from her informing them that she has moved from her aunt's home and has married a man called Harry Peach.[119] They go to the big city to see their daughter and leave satisfied that she is well taken care of.[120] However, later the reader discovers that this marriage with a "special licence" was nothing but a fraud. Harry did not marry her, although he promised to do so and then he proved footloose and lost everything. The couple had to move to a small room and Levina worked doing washing and ironing for strangers to help them survive. She also fell pregnant. Harry left to join the First World War and earn a living for himself. Levina had to return to her parents on the farm and she confesses everything. Her spirit is broken and tragically she does not live long after childbirth.[121] Thus the novel serves as a grim warning of what might well happen when sending a young, naive girl from the rural areas to the "evil" city.

111. Vincent, "Bread and Honour", p 66.
112. Van Onselen, *New Babylon, New Nineveh*.
113. Pretorius, "Die Briels: Smartlappe en Tranetrekkers van Weleer", p 19.
114. Van Bruggen, *Die Burgemeester van Slaplaagte,* p 98.
115. Van Bruggen, *Die Burgemeester van Slaplaagte,* pp 18, 72–73.
116. Van Bruggen, *Die Burgemeester van Slaplaagte,* pp 49–52.
117. Van Bruggen, *Die Burgemeester van Slaplaagte,* p 63.
118. Van Bruggen, *Die Burgemeester van Slaplaagte,* pp 23, 25–26.
119. Van Bruggen, *Die Burgemeester van Slaplaagte,* pp 61–63.
120. Van Bruggen, *Die Burgemeester van Slaplaagte,* pp 73–80.
121. Van Bruggen, *Die Burgemeester van Slaplaagte,* pp 95–106.

The working *volksmoeder*

Poverty was an ever escalating problem in the rural districts. Many young women had no choice but to leave the farms and move to the towns and cities.[122] Here they engaged in wage labour. Indeed, a whole generation of women were employed in the urban areas before many of the male members of their families did so.[123] These women could earn a living and try to send something back home to help matters there.[124] A good example can be found in Van Bruggen's *Die Burgemeester van Slaplaagte.* "Tant" Levina and uncle Lood's daughter, young Levina, desperately wants to leave behind the difficulties and boredom of her life on the family farm and go to live and work in the city. She tried to convince her parents, who were struggling to eke out a living, to allow her to leave and she promised to send money home to help them.[125]

> Gedurig het sy toe vir haar ouers gesoebat om na tant Annie hulle te gaan om daar 'n verdienste te soek; dan sou sy tog ook elke maand so 'n kleinigheidjie kan opstuur.[126] (She constantly begged her parents to allow her go to live with aunt Annie and then look for work. This would mean she would be able to send a small something home every month.)

This was the case with many young women who came from poor families. The 1916 drought uprooted thousands of *bywoners* from the rural areas and in 1917 the largest concentration of these poor whites were found on the Witwatersrand. The industrial expansion and growth in employment opportunities there created some hope of relief.[127] However, many of these *bywoners* were ill-equipped and lacked the necessary skills to find employment and industrialisation did not make matters easier. According to Vincent, they struggled to find employment and by 1933 about 190 000 of them were in search of work. It thus fell to the women to find employment to ensure the survival of their families.[128] A good example is provided in Van Bruggen's novel *Die Burgemeester van Slaplaagte,* where Levina is able to find work whereas Harry is not.[129] After the Great Depression, white unemployment in the cities soared but industries that employed white women continued to expand even during

122. L. Callinicos, *A People's History of South Africa, Volume 2, Working Life: Factories, Townships, and Popular Culture on the Rand, 1886–1940* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1987), pp 220–221.
123. Hyslop, "The Representation of White Working Class Women in the Construction of Reactionary Populist Movement", p 9.
124. Carnegie Commission Report, *The Poor White Problem in South Africa, Volume 1*, p 219.
125. Van Bruggen, *Die Burgemeester van Slaplaagte,* pp 15, 17.
126. Van Bruggen, *Die Burgemeester van Slaplaagte,* p 15.
127. R. Ross, A. Kelk Mager and B. Nasson, *The Cambridge History of South Africa, Volume 2, 1885–1994* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012), p 291.
128. Vincent, "Bread and Honour", p 62.
129. Van Bruggen, *Die Burgemeester van Slaplaagte,* pp 103–105.

the worst periods of the depression.[130] In the urban areas women's wages made an important contribution, often keeping their families from starving.[131] After marriage, women tended to return to the factories and in many families the woman became the principal wage earner.[132] However, in some cases it was not only society at large that looked down on the working woman, but as with Ampie, the husbands refused to allow their wives to work. Annekie tells Ampie that she will go to find work and earn a living to help feed the family; she tells Ampie that he will have to look after their child. Ampie's reply is curt:

> Ek sal dit mos nooit toelaat nie ... Dan meen jy te sê dat ek te sleg is om vir julle te sorg?[133] (I shall never allow it … Do you mean to say that I am not good enough to care for you both?)

This chauvinistic trend was fairly prevalent, but there were white working class women who took matters in their own hands.[134] According to Van Onselen many of them entered domestic services, while others worked in factories, dressmaking concerns, bottling plants and hand laundries. These menial jobs, he argues, did not offer much of a solution because the women were paid very little. According to Van Onselen this pushed many young, poor-white women into the company of older and more experienced male labourers, which encouraged promiscuous behaviour and casual prostitution. He further maintains that in the depression years many poor-white women, some of them mere teenagers, made a career of prostitution.[135] According to Robert Ross, white working-class women were viewed as promiscuous and according to staunch white male authority their prostitution, promiscuity and racial mixing had to be "dealt with". By the 1920s there was a level of moral panic.[136] Low wages were also viewed as a source of danger.[137] This "sexually-out-of-control" behaviour was often the butt of criticism at the hands of the middle class. Working women were regarded as being of lower class and lacking in the necessary respectability.[138] By helping these poor-white women and preventing them from

130. Hyslop, "The Representation of White Working Class Women in the Construction of Reactionary Populist Movement, p 10.
131. Callinicos, *A People's History of South Africa, Volume 2,* pp 220–221.
132. Hyslop, "The Representation of White Working Class Women in the Construction of Reactionary Populist Movement, p 10.
133. Van Bruggen, *Ampie: Die Trilogie*, p 253.
134. Hyslop, "The Representation of White Working Class Women in the Construction of Reactionary Populist Movement", p 9.
135. Van Onselen, *New Babylon, New Nineveh,* p 159.
136. Ross, Kelk Mager and Nasson, *The Cambridge History of South Africa: Volume 2*, p 292.
137. Carnegie Commission Report, *The Poor White Problem in South Africa, Volume 2*, pp 83, 222.
138. Hyslop, "The Representation of White Working Class Women in the Construction of Reactionary Populist Movement", pp 10–11.

falling into this line of "unseemly" work, the Afrikaner nationalists aimed to draw these "independent" women into the *volk*.[139]

In some of the novels the authors try to warn their young women readers of the dangers they may experience in the urban areas and what might happen if they decide to go there without guidance. For example, in his novel *Dark Johannesburg,* Lub recounts his personal experience of life in Johannesburg when he worked there as a school inspector. He tells of the many cases of loose women who had resorted to prostitution.[140] He gives a brief warning at the end of his short story "Such as there Are" that people need to start coming out of their poverty by doing honest work – "literally, people have to put their hands to the plough" – to save themselves from the "devil's pillow" (prostitution).[141] In the story "Annie", Lub gives an account of a girl who had been one of his students a few years previously and who tries desperately not to resort to prostitution. He comes across her in the veld where she lives with some of her family. Her mother is a "scarlet woman" without repentance and has tried to lead her daughter into similar "evil ways". However, the girl resists and is doing washing and ironing for better-off people. She explains how easy it would be for her, but says she has chosen instead to live a difficult, but "decent life":[142]

> D'you know I could lead an easy life of it if I just wished to do as my mother and some of your old schoolgirls do?'... I understood the poor woman, and sympathised with her struggle to lead a decent life.[143]

Vincent states that regardless of the hardships these young women and their families were facing in the rural areas due to factors such as drought, failed crops and debt, they had little choice other than to cope with present circumstances and find work to support themselves and their families.[144] The first half of the twentieth century was a time of dramatic social transformation and this transition to industrial capitalism saw many changes in the economic role of women.[145] The First World War was a key impetus for secondary industries, many of which used cheap female labour coming from the rural areas.[146] For these women this was an important means of income which was necessitated by the loss of a subsistence way of life; many continued to work for low wages throughout the depression period from 1925 to 1933.[147] However, women also found employment in other sectors such as teaching, the civil service, nursing and becoming religious workers. They also worked as clerks, typists in the service industry, in business and even in agriculture. By 1926 about

139. Hyslop, "The Representation of White Working Class Women in the Construction of Reactionary Populist Movement", pp 11–13.
140. Lub, "Dark Johannesburg", in *Dark Johannesburg*, p 45.
141. J. Lub, "Such as there Are", in *Dark Johannesburg*, p 119.
142. J. Lub, "Annie", in *Dark Johannesburg*, pp, 120–131.
143. Lub, "Annie" in *Dark Johannesburg*, p 130.
144. Vincent, "Bread and Honour", p 67.
145. Brink, "Man-Made Women", p 291.; Vincent, "Bread and Honour", p 61.
146. Brink, "Man-Made Women", p 280.
147. Vincent, "Bread and Honour", pp 61–62.

15% of the white women in South Africa worked outside of their homes.[148] There were many different types of work that were available for women in the urban areas.

In the novels studied there are examples of women working in a variety of different occupations. In Lub's *Dark Johannesburg,* the reader is introduced to a woman warden who used to be a nurse.[149] In the story entitled "Simple Folk", the washerwoman's daughter is a shorthand typist,[150] and another short story, entitled "Trapped", features women who sell fruit to make a living.[151] The conditions in which many of these working women lived were very rudimentary. The meagre wages often meant that they could not send any money home and had barely enough to live on themselves. The conditions in the urban areas were far worse than many anticipated.[152] According to research undertaken by Luli Callinicos on the period after the depression in 1932, young women working as garment workers were often paid very poorly. They came from the rural areas and it was not unusual for four women to share a room with one bed, which meant taking turns to sleep on the bed. There was very little money for food and clothing and they often had to go hungry to afford other necessities. This in turn caused malnutrition and sickness. Many had to subsidise their accommodation expenses by taking on additional work in their spare time.[153]

As mentioned above there was an ever-increasing number of poor whites and thus it became more difficult for poor-white women to live up to the Afrikaner ideal and aspire to be a *volksmoeder*. There were, however, organisations such as the Garment Workers' Union (GWU) that represented women and their interests in the workplace. These Afrikaans working class women were of the view that the term *volksmoeder* was not necessarily narrow and rigid. They believed the idea of the *volksmoeder* could also be used to describe themselves, despite the fact that they were employed in the cities.[154] They did not automatically accept their prescribed role.[155] They linked the struggles of the doughty Voortrekker women with their own struggle in the industrial environment.[156] They drew on the sub-themes of the concept of the *volksmoeder* such as "resistance" and "courage".[157] In this way they reinterpreted and adjusted the concept to align it with working-class women; and they still viewed themselves as being part of the Afrikaner nation.[158]

148. Vincent, "Bread and Honour", p 62.
149. Lub, "Dark Johannesburg", in *Dark Johannesburg*, pp 43–44.
150. J. Lub, "Simple Folk", in *Dark Johannesburg*, pp 72–73.
151. J. Lub, "Trapped", in *Dark Johannesburg*, p 163.
152. Vincent, "Bread and Honour", p 66; Carnegie Commission Report, *The Poor White Problem in South Africa, Volume 1*, p 218.; Callinicos, *A People's History of South Africa, Volume 2,* pp 146, 183–184.
153. Callinicos, *A People's History of South Africa, Volume 2,* p 205.
154. Brink, "Man-Made Women", p 287.
155. S. Swart, '"Motherhood and Otherhood': Gendered Citizenship and Afrikaner Women in the South African 1914 Rebellion", *African Historical Review*, 39, 2(2007), p 48.
156. Brink, "Man-Made Women", pp 289–290.
157. Brink, "Man-Made Women", p 273.
158. Vincent, "Bread and Honour", p 67.

Women with the best intentions also saw hard times and no other solution than to go work to provide for their families. This is evident in *Die Trekboer* when Bekka decides to work so as to contribute money for the running of the humble home beside the mine diggings. She sold meat to the diggers and their families and when they were on the move she and the children went to help Antonie, her husband, with the harvesting of a farmer's field to bring in more money than if Antonie had worked alone.[159]

> 'Toe dan Antonie', sê Bekka, so in die sny. 'Dis net verniet dat ek van eergister af al Herklaas se plek by die sny ingeneem het ... Ons moet roer ...' Maar Bekka kyk nie eens om nie. Sy druk aanmekaar vorentoe. [160] ('So then, Antonie', says Bekka while she is helping with the harvesting. 'It is a good thing I came the day before yesterday to take Herklaas's place with the cutting ... We must hurry along...' Bekka does not even look around as she speaks. She keeps pushing forward).

Many of these working-class women considered themselves "better Afrikaners" than their counterparts who did not lift a finger to help themselves or prevent their children from starving. Indeed, the working women often resisted organisational intervention. A case in point is Bekka in *Die Trekboer* who literally chases the secretary of the town's school council from her home by threatening him with a broomstick, rather than allowing social workers to take her children away to attend the school in the town in accordance with the law. She tries desperately to look after her children and to support them; she refuses any suggestion that they be taken away.[161] Here, the maternal *volksmoeder* is made apparent.

In many cases it was very difficult to support a large family. This is evident in the novel *Bywoners* by Van Bruggen.[162] Here the Sitman couple have many children and due to their poverty, laziness and unwillingness to work to support themselves, they are unable to care for their children properly.[163] The children cry because their stomachs literally "pyn" (ache) due to hunger.[164] Regardless of these desperate conditions, the Sitmans refuse to have their children placed in foster care, although it would have been better for the children to do so.[165] This in itself reflects subtly on a resistance to government involvement with the poor-white problem.

Although the highest calling and greatest fulfilment of the *volksmoeder* was to be found in their own homes – physically and morally reproducing the nation – many women who were poor and who had to go out to work were disenchanted with the

159. Jonker, *Die Trekboer*, pp. 147, 182.
160. Jonker, *Die Trekboer*, pp 182–183.
161. Jonker, *Die Trekboer*, pp 173–176.
162. Van Bruggen, "Bywoners", in Grové and Strydom, *Drie Prosastukke*.
163. For more information, see Chapter 4 of Pretorius, "Non-Fiction in Fiction: Poor Whites in Selected South African Literary Texts".
164. Van Bruggen, "Bywoners", in Grové and Strydom, *Drie Prosastukke*, p 64.
165. Van Bruggen, "Bywoners", in Grové and Strydom, *Drie Prosastukke*, pp 69–71.

idea of a life devoted to childbirth and large families.[166] They knew of the sufferings that often went hand-in-hand with large families, as did the middle-class women who helped the poor. They recognised the need for women to work and to reduce the size of their families.[167] A large family meant many mouths to feed. This is evident in the novel *Bywoners*[168] by Van Bruggen, with regard to the Sitman family.[169] The novels provide a social commentary on the poor-white issue.

During the 1930s and 1940s the idea of the *volksmoeder* became a contested concept but nevertheless it remained one that appealed to most Afrikaner women. Brink explains that the appeal was so widespread that even those such as the working women who needed to be "saved" and incorporated back to the ranks of the *volk*, used the concept to rally women to the greater cause.[170] However, organisations such as the GWU tried to make the women feel part of the nation and tried to prove that nationalism and the class struggle need not work against one another.[171]

Du Toit argues that it was the working-class wives who first internalised Afrikaner identity. They did so by reading Afrikaans books and magazines and because these women worked outside the home the concept of the *volksmoeder* and urban dangers was strongly emphasised in the material they were most likely to read.[172] Such material dwelt on women's roles as bearers of cultural tradition and language. Afrikaner women were newly empowered by more extensive literacy. According to Beinart, the Burger Boekhandel publishers produced 1 100 Afrikaans books, which sold 3.25 million copies in the period 1917 to 1940.[173] This study falls into that timeframe. The articulation of the *volksmoeder* discourse moved in the beginning of the twentieth century from history to popular literature.[174] Many women read *Die Huisgenoot*.[175] This magazine spoke across the divide of town and countryside. It was richly illustrated and became the most popular publication in the 1920s.[176]

As indicated, many of the authors selected for this study, as well as others from the Realism genre, had short stories and reviews of their novels featured in this popular periodical.[177] The novels revealed the daily lives of the poor whites and the

166. Vincent, "Bread and Honour", p 65.
167. Vincent, "Bread and Honour", p 70.
168. Van Bruggen, "Bywoners", in Grové and Strydom, *Drie Prosastukke*.
169. Van Bruggen, "Bywoners", in Grové and Strydom, *Drie Prosastukke*, p 64.
170. Brink, "Man-Made Women", p 290.
171. Callinicos, *A People's History of South Africa, Volume 2,* p 223.
172. Du Toit, "The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism", p 156.
173. W. Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994), p 120.
174. Vincent, "Bread and Honour", p 64.
175. *The Home Companion* magazine became very popular for its short stories.
176. Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa,* p 120.
177. J.A. Pretorius, "Die Ontwikkeling van die Kortverhaal in Afrikaans soos Weerspieël in *Die Huisgenoot* van 1916–1966", D. Phil thesis, University of Pretoria, 1973, p 18.

struggles they had to endure in order to survive. Not only were some of the novels, such as *Ampie*, prescribed as school literature, they enjoyed a wide readership as well, and some like *Die Plaasverdeling*[178] and *Die Trekboer*[179] appeared serialised in magazines such as *Die Huisgenoot* over a number of weeks. In the 1922 August edition of *Die Huisgenoot* under the title "Boeke Ontvang" (Books Received) Van Bruggen's book *Die Burgemeester van Slaplaagte* is mentioned and its details are provided. *Die Huisgenoot* states proudly that it was voted number three of Almal se Boeke (Everyone's books) and that it was well put together. It was strongly recommended to its readership.[180] It may be argued that these novels had a profound influence on the public and on the support for the government's decision to help eradicate the poor-white problem.

Conclusion

White women played a role in the Afrikaner nationalist movement's scheme to create a particular identity. The *volksmoeder* concept later incorporated all white women, even the poor who had to work hard to aspire to that position. Instead of rebelling against the notion, poor-white women tried desperately to fit in and become part of the *volk*. The ideal woman was represented in the popular literature of the time, but some authors of the Realist genre revealed the other side of how things were. True, there were many poor women aspiring to be *volksmoeders*, but there were others who were trying to survive by taking on work outside the home. Some of them were ahead of their time and wanted to be empowered; they took the role as the head of the home in order to survive. The popular literature supported the government's concept to an extent and in turn the National Party made efforts to help the poor. The Realist authors had an influence on the larger public too. Some of the authors did not shy away from bringing political circumstances and relevant issues which the characters had to deal with, into their novels. The majority of the poor-white women who took on employment outside the home wanted the ideologues to see that they too possessed the strengths so revered in the *volksmoeder* concept. Times had changed for the poor-white women, socially, economically and politically, and they felt it was time that they too could change culturally and be recognised as *volksmoeders*.

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179. A.H. Jonker, "Die Trekboer", in *Die Huisgenoot*, 18(627), 20 April 1934; 18(630), 11 May 1934; and 18(631), 29 June 1934.
180. Anonymous, "Boeke Ontvang: *Die Burgemeester van Slaplaagte*", *Die Huisgenoot*, 7(76), August 1922, p 172.

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