

Myth, language and identity in *The Seal Woman*¹

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The concept of cultural identity/identities is one of the paths down which we can go to examine and illustrate the theme of maintaining the national. National identities are irrevocably intertwined with cultural identities as these are frequently, though not always, nation specific. This paper will analyse some aspects of Beverley Farmer's *The Seal Woman* to show how Farmer has used literary discourse to express the cultural identity of an individual character whose experiences are in more than one country.

In a recent edition of the journal *Southerly* (1998) several critical essays presented a re-reading of Beverley Farmer's work, but only to a small extent with what is to me one of the most fascinating aspects of her work - her play with language, use of myth, and the importance of these in the formation of cultural identity. This is a highly complex text where intertextual reference flows through every chapter, the discussion of which is unfortunately impossible within the frame of this paper. I have therefore chosen to concentrate on language and Nordic myths concluding by drawing a parallel between Ibsen and Farmer's protagonist.

The back cover of the 1992 UQP edition of *The Seal Woman* describes the book as "charting the interplay of myth and language between the hemispheres". With reference to theories of postcolonialism and identity this paper will try and show how Farmer's text illustrates the alienation which often ensues upon the move from one culture to another and forces the reader to see him/herself no

¹ This is a version of a paper given at the conference of the European Association for Studies of Australia, Klagenfurt, 1997.

longer as someone who belongs to the hegemonic culture - but as the "other" - a salutary experience.

Farmer's use of foreign words in *The Seal Woman* is a narrative strategy common in postcolonial and multicultural literatures to express the search for identity. To the best of my knowledge, Farmer is not of Danish descent, but has consciously used the discussion of what is the meaning of words as a tool in understanding the culturally different context in which Dagmar finds herself. Whereas earlier Farmer has dealt with the experience of dual identity and bilingualism in a Southern European context, here she moves to Scandinavia. The story is set in Australia but Farmer uses a Nordic language and mythological tales from the northern hemisphere to form the centre around which the protagonist investigates her own cultural belonging.

Returning to the place where she and her husband, Finn who was then working on a ship in the Antarctic, spent their early married life Dagmar hopes to come to terms with her present situation, to re-establish her belief in herself, and regain her own sense of cultural belonging. The text is thus also a "moving out to move in", a narratological device used among others by Christina Stead in several of her books, and a reversal of the pattern in much traditional Australian literature where the protagonist frequently moves *from* Australia rather than *to* it. In dealing with widowhood Farmer adds a further dimension to the novel since this is a topic relatively seldom dealt with within the framework of cultural identities. The text is thus a journey through grief by a process of defamiliarization of identity—a dual coming to terms.

Identities have been the source of much social anthropological and postcolonial criticism (Barthes, Gates, Hall, During). Here I use the term to refer to the complex mix of language, music, rituals which ground what we know as our own cultural identity and the "bits and pieces" of different cultures all "altered by their history and experience of cultural contact" (During 1990: 67). What During has called "misrecognitions" (1990: 71), that is, the rhetorical strategies which define things culturally from a point of view which is false, is a central motif in the investigation of Dagmar's self in relation to her surroundings. Early in the text Dagmar meets two little boys on

the shore and tells them that she comes from Denmark and Norway. This is the cause of unexpected laughter and derision:

‘Norway!’ the little one hooted, and looked up for the other’s approval.

‘What do you mean,’ he scoffed, ‘no where? You got to live *some* where.’

(TSW 3, emphasis in the original)

Throughout the book *Dagmar*, a Danish widow, her Norwegian husband having been drowned in the Kattegat, uses language as the source of coming to terms with whom she is, and to establish her own cultural identity as rooted in Scandinavia. Farmer’s use of Danish words without translation underlines the “otherness” of the protagonist *Dagmar*. Here Farmer is touching on one of the key concepts in postcolonial theory as well as a major issue within our ever increasingly global world. Who am I? Where do I belong? To a person with a knowledge of a Scandinavian language this text has an added dimension as it takes up aspects of discourse, which deal with the questions of equivalence. The words referred to are often untranslatable, as any simple word for word translation robs them of their cultural connotation.

Dagmar’s very name is even a source of confusion and non-comprehension for the Australians. She asks her friend and lover Martin to repeat her name, since he seems unable to pronounce it correctly. To her the way he says it, "... sounds ugly in English. So hard", whereas to *Dagmar* it should sound softer, (Danish is a language with soft consonants). Martin’s new attempt to pronounce it correctly ends in another fault of pronunciation as he says

‘Dowgmor.’

‘Not Dowgmor! Mor is mother. Moder, mor.’

‘More? Mower? And what’s dag? Day? *Day mother?*’

‘I think it is really *day maiden*. So my father-in-law said.’

(100, emphasis in the original)

In fact the name Dagmar was a name often given to Danish queens. One of the fascinating aspects of language is that it implies the need for competence not only in pronunciation but equally in the cultural and linguistic connotations, which need to be understood for fruitful dialogue. An incident in the text which might support this is the occasion when Dagmar is making cherry jam from an English recipe from 1861, which states that it has to be stirred with a spaddle. Martin thinks this must be a Danish word, but she replies, "Nej English". He then looks up in the dictionary and cannot find it "but he said it was a good word all the same and worthy of preserving" (274). In fact it is a little spade! The subtext is that Martin's lack of interest in the linguistic differences between Dagmar and himself can be interpreted as male patriarchal dominance over the "other" as both female and linguistically inferior, as hers is not the dominant language of the country in which he lives. However, this could also be seen as Farmer addressing the increasingly multicultural society in Australia where questions of linguistic superiority or inferiority are topical.

The text is peppered with examples of Dagmar's search for linguistic and cultural equivalence as a source of understanding of her own situation, so I will merely mention a few. Often they are related to food – as when she thinks of making "rødgrød" (*TSW* 273) which she first calls plum soup, then red porridge. In fact it is a desert dish, stewed plums or red berries, thickened to resemble a porridge – hence the name, but it has to be seen and tasted to be appreciated. It is an untranslatable. Martin fails to understand either the name or the cultural connotations of the "phenomenon" which is so classically Scandinavian.

Fauna and flora are another source of linguistic investigation. Dagmar sees cormorants on the shore and immediately starts searching mentally for the linguistic equivalent in Danish—"ålekrage" – as if only then can she come to terms with what that bird represents (210). At the same time they remind her of her own country and can be seen as symbolic of the migration process, which Dagmar is undergoing. Other examples are the discussion about the "skovæble" – is it wood apple or crab-apple and what would these different translations imply culturally? (41) Farmer uses this device to show the Austra-

lian Martin's inability to understand the nuances of language. In a discussion about seals – sometimes called "sælhund" in Danish—he can only pronounce it as "sjæl" which means "soul". Any conversation between them with such a basis inevitably and frequently becomes confused. We might ask whether Farmer is here trying to indicate a situation which often occurs in multicultural Australia.

Martin is portrayed as stereotypical male Australian, who fails to see the need to understand and meet Dagmar on her own level. By the end of the book Martin is not much further in understanding their cultural differences, as is evident in the scene where Dagmar gives Martin's daughter the story of the seal woman which she has written down. She has dedicated it to Martin's daughter, "Lyn, min lille pige fra havet" to his annoyance as he thinks she is calling his daughter a pig. The phrase is actually a term of endearment, (My little girl from the sea), not as Plunkett says "To my girl from the sea" (Plunkett 1998: 124). Thus Dagmar adds an emotional element to the dedication.

On a more mythological note the sight of jellyfish evokes fear in Dagmar. She calls them "vandmænd", referring to a belief that they are "watermen, drowned sailors of my childhood fear, blue-spooling ghosts of the water" (132). To her Australian friends it is incomprehensible that she can be afraid of them. This association of fish and other life in the sea with drowned sailors is common in many parts of Scandinavia. Dagmar relates how in the fjords jellyfish were sometimes known as "draugspy" and explains it thus: "a sea ghost. A living dead—undead? ... He can come as a merman with eyes of rock crystal. Or he is a stranger suddenly there among the crew—he is drawn to boats, he might not even know that he is dead" (133). The link between the "draug" and the seals is posited.

Northern myths

Myth and symbolism are central elements of the structure Framer uses in intertwining the personal and the cultural aspects of the story, and the relevance of the title of the book. A central myth in the story is that of the seal woman or the Selkies. Early on in the story when Dagmar meets the two boys on the beach in Australia

and they discuss typically what it is like in Norway and Denmark, where “you got Macdonald’s?”. Farmer relates stereotypical views of what Scandinavia is like as an introduction to the topic of seals. Her friend, Tess, of Greek immigrant parents, gives Dagmar a newspaper cutting describing the influx of dead seals on the Swedish coast and in the Baltic Sea (15). Seals were in actual fact at the time the book was published invading the Scandinavian coasts due to an ecological imbalance of fish in the sea, indicative of a lack of harmony in the environment. Here Farmer is using a real event and a real problem to show how superficial it seems to the Australian, Tess, as opposed to Dagmar who knows the areas where the dead seals were found. Thinking of the Scandinavian coast is particularly poignant for Dagmar as it brings back other memories; not least searching the shores for some trace of Finn after the polar research ship he worked on was hit by an oil tanker. The seals are thus symbolic of her own situation. By introducing this theme at the beginning of the text as well as making frequent references to seals and seal legends throughout, and closing the same text with the story of the seal woman, Farmer highlights the importance of the seal as a creature which belongs neither in one environment nor another. Seals after all can survive on land as well as in water, unlike fish. As a symbol of cultural identity they might be said to symbolize cultural ambiguity as Stier calls it (Stier 1998).

The intertextuality of the seal legends makes for complex reading, as it varies from factual details to listening to a record where Joan Baez is singing “The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry”, but she omits the fourth verse which reads:

‘It was na weel’ quo the maiden fair
‘It was na weel, indeed,’ quo she,
‘that the Great Silkie of Sule Skerrie
Suld hae come and aught a bairn to me’. (111)

The omission of the verse which tells why the Silkie wants the child, which is his own, adds significance to the story as one of the legends was that Silkie came ashore and got young girls pregnant. The seal woman myth as told in the Appendix, on the other hand, is sym-

bolic and expressive of the search for a true self, which is bilingual and bicultural, and parallels Dagmar's search.

There are several versions of the seal legend, so that like much mythology it typifies the storied nature of myth – the adaptability of legend to different climes and tribes. Farmer draws on and refers to Eskimo and Scottish versions (the Silkie) as well as *Edda*, but in my opinion especially Sedna, the Eskimo goddess of marine animals, who hostile to the human race has power only over things in the sea (112). It is, however, impossible to say whether Farmer has used any one version, as her presentation seems an analysis of several versions of the myth at different stages in the book. In the Eskimo tradition the seal was originally a young girl, the only child of a widowed father, courted by many men refusing all of them until she is carried away by what turns out to be in reality a bird, a Bird-spirit. When her father tried to rescue her he ended up having to sacrifice her, each axe blow to her fingers clinging to the boat turning into seals of different kinds.² It is interesting to note that at the time of publication two children's books were also published about the Selkies, one by Susan Cooper, *The Selkie Girl* which tells of fairy people who live under the sea and wore sealskins to move through the water.

They, the Selkies, Silkies had a magical power to change shape into humans (110-111). Likened to Sirens in classical mythology they could lure men to their death. If courted and brought ashore they could never return to the sea unless they find their sealskin. In several of the legends it is the children who help their mother to regain her sealskin and return to her original home. Central to all these myths, whether the figures are male or female, is the sense of prime belonging in one place and one element to which they will always long to return. Symbolically this could be seen as representing the multiculturalism of contemporary society – just as the seal woman belongs wholly neither on land nor on sea, her identity is dual/multiple. When ashore she can be a human being as long as her skin is hidden, but all the time she has a yearning for her "people" in the sea. It is thus to her roots that she will return, as does Dagmar.

² New Larousse. Encyclopedia of Mythology. (London: Hamlyn, 1972), 424-46.

At the same time, parallel to the legend of the seal wo/man, Farmer in my opinion, draws on other literary Nordic ideas of attachment to the sea, such as we find expressed in Ibsen's *Fruen fra Havet*.³ Coming from Denmark where one is never far from the coast, Dagmar is portrayed as having a close affinity with the sea. She seems continuously drawn to the sea like the female silkies. To what extent Farmer is consciously drawing on Ibsen is impossible to say, but I should like to conclude by drawing some parallels between the two texts.

Ibsen's play is primarily about Ellida, Wangel's wife, who comes from a coastal area. She has been called the lady from the sea by the local population when she worked as a teacher on an island with a lighthouse and spent much of her time by the sea. She longs to go back to the sea because she feels claustrophobic when enclosed and surrounded by mountains. In other words the mountains become symbolic of the pressure she feels from her marriage and the rift between her and her husband. Repeatedly throughout the play we find phrases such as "you are part of the sea", "you are in communion with the sea". In Ibsen's own words:

I believe, that if people had become accustomed from an early age to living a life on the sea - maybe *in* it - they would be much more perfect and happier. (Act 3)⁴

and again

.. haven't you noticed that people living by the open sea are completely different? It is almost as if their lives are like the sea with the ebb and flow of the tide in their thoughts and suppositions. (Act 4)

The symbolism in Farmer's novel about the draw of the sea for Dagmar parallels that in Ibsen's play. The symbolic act of Friman throwing their engagement rings into the sea, thus wedding him and Ellida to the sea is paralleled in the seal legend. Is Farmer indicating

³ The traditional translation of the title of this play *The Lady from the Sea*.

⁴ The translations are my own.

that Dagmar is like Ellida (*Fruen fra Havet*) someone who belongs to and is possessed by the sea?—We may ask whether there is a rewriting of Ellida and Wangel in Dagmar and Martin.

Another parallel is the figure of the mermaid. Ellida has requested Ballestad, a visiting painter, to include in his portrait of the town a half-dead mermaid rather than a Viking, a mermaid who has lost her way in from the sea and cannot return or find her way back, and to call it "the fate of the mermaid" — the parallel to the seal story is obvious. On several occasions, and especially when she is reflecting on her own situation, Dagmar is depicted as sitting on a rock, almost like a mermaid, looking out to sea and musing. Dagmar and Ellida, I suggest, are like the mermaid and the seal woman. If they do not return to the coast they will never regain peace of mind. Dagmar is continuously fascinated by and drawn to the sea which in the final issue drags her back to her native Denmark where the sea is never far away from any house. The flow of language in the text can be compared to the flow and ebb of the tide, which is a dominant symbol in the book. Further parallels to Ibsen's text are obvious when Ellida talks to Friman about the sea and especially whales and seals.

The frequent change of narrative perspective in Farmer's text underscores the insecurity of the protagonist and her continual search, as does the linguistic emphasis on difference and intelligibility. This is, in my opinion, exemplified in Dagmar's trip to the Nullarbor plain and the Nullarbor caves, a trip which forms a turning point in her path to coming to terms with her grief, and to understanding her own identity. Whilst her Australian friends see this as a way for her to see something mythologically interesting in Australia, and a contrast to all the Eskimo, and Antarctic mythology discussed in the text. It is also supposed to function as part of a healing process, but to Dagmar it is yet another conviction that she does not belong in the hot southern climate, either linguistically or culturally. Having found herself she then returns to the colder climes of the north and the sea to which she belongs, just like the seal woman in the legend who is finally restored to her own people in the sea.

Is the use of a female protagonist and one from the European continent a deliberate ploy on Farmer's part to contrast the macho, all-

knowing male figure typified in much Australian literature with Dagmar, the uncertain, foreign woman who yet because she comes from the European centre is a source of attraction, not just sexually, but far more as an intellectual challenge? The play with language that goes on throughout the text can be interpreted as symbolic of the interplay of cultures, which Australians struggle with in their search for a national and cultural identity. We can ask whether this is a kind of post-modern examination of the "cultural cringe". Dagmar distinguishes clearly between her two voices, her own Danish, and the person she is in Australia, a marginalized woman in a male context, as well as a foreigner.

As we all know, the intersubjective social and cultural context in which a text is produced may be different from that in which it is read. The reader's reactions to a text will also differ according to the prior knowledge the reader has of matters related to or referred to in a text, or their own life experience. In Australia I gather this text is thought of, rightly from one point of view, as primarily a feminist text dealing with the protagonist's search for her identity as an independent woman. To me the text is also open to a cultural identity reading from an anthropological standpoint dependent on shared contexts.

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