

## The Metamorphosis of the Female Character in Andre Brink's *Philida*

Malak Khaled Hantoosh<sup>[a],\*</sup>; Rohimmi Noor<sup>[b]</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup> MA candidate at Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia.

<sup>[b]</sup> Instructor at Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur-Malaysia.

\*Corresponding author.

Received 23 April 2023; accepted 7 May 2023

Published online 26 June 2023

### Abstract

This study examines Andre Brink's *Philida* in the light of feminism. At the end freedom arrives, and although *Philida* cannot call herself truly the mistress of her own life, she is unquestionably in control of her mind, clear in the belief that the Cape of her birth is where she belongs, notwithstanding all the wrongs she has suffered there. *Philida* is an unforgettable story of one woman's determination to survive and be free. Therefore, the purpose of this study has been to highlight the basic information about the concepts and their critical significance. Illustrative examples have been cited in order to explain the fundamental notions of feminism and its illegibility to be applied to analyze the selected novel's female characters. For this reason, the study has focused on different thematic axes regarding females and their harsh living conditions.

**Key words:** Brink; Female; Identity; *Philida*; Suffering

Hantoosh, M. K., & Noor, R. (2023). The Metamorphosis of the Female Character in Andre Brink's *Philida*. *Higher Education of Social Science*, 24(2), 29-32. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/hess/article/view/12987>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/12987>

### 1. INTRODUCTION

André Brink was a South African novelist. He wrote in both Afrikaans and English and was a Professor of English

at the University of Cape Town. In the 1960s he, Ingrid Jonker, Etienne Leroux and Breyten Breytenbach were key figures in the significant Afrikaans literary movement known as *Die Sestigters* ("The Sixty-ers"). These writers sought to use Afrikaans as a language to speak against the apartheid government, and also to bring into Afrikaans literature the influence of contemporary English and French trends. While Brink's early novels were especially concerned with apartheid, his later work engaged the new range of issues posed by life in a democratic South Africa.

Brink was born in Vrede, in the Free State. Brink moved to Lydenburg, where he matriculated at Hoërskool Lydenburg in 1952 with seven distinctions, the second student from the then Transvaal to achieve this feat and studied Afrikaans literature in the Potchefstroom University of South Africa. His immense attachment with literature carried him to France from 1959 to 1961, where he got his degree from Sorbonne University at Paris in comparative literature.

During his stay, he came across an undeniable fact that changed his mind forever: black students were treated on an equal social basis with other students. Back in South Africa, he became one of the most prominent of young Afrikaans writers, along with the novelist Etienne Leroux and the poet Breyten Breytenbach, to challenge the apartheid policy of the National party through his writings. During a second sojourn in France between 1967 and 1968, he hardened his political position against Apartheid, and began writing both in Afrikaans and English to enlarge his audience and outplay the censure he was facing in his native country at the time.

Indeed, his novel *Kennis van die aand* (1973) was the first Afrikaans book to be banned by the South African government. André Brink translated *Kennis van die aand* into English and published it abroad as *Looking on Darkness*. This was his first self-translation. After that, André Brink wrote his works simultaneously in English and Afrikaans. In 1975, he obtained his PhD in Literature

at Rhodes University. In 2008, in an echo of a scene from his novel *A Chain of Voices*, his family was beset by tragedy, when his nephew Andre Brink was murdered in front of his wife and children in their Gauteng home.

His book, *A Dry White Season* (1979), was made into a film starring Marlon Brando while *An Instant in the Wind* (1976), the story of a relationship between a white woman and a black man, and *Rumours of Rain* (1978) were both shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction. *Devil's Valley* (1998) explores the life of a community locked away from the rest of the world, and *The Other Side of Silence* (2002), set in colonial Africa in the early twentieth century, and won a Commonwealth Writers regional award for Best Book in 2003. He has also written a collection of essays on literature and politics, *Reinventing a Continent* (1996), prefaced by Nelson Mandela.

André Brink was made a Commander of the Order of Arts and Letters and awarded the Legion of Honour by the French government. In 1992 he was awarded the Monismanien Human Rights Award from the University of Uppsala, for making known the injustice of apartheid to the wider world. He was Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Cape Town. His novels include *The Blue Door* (2007) and *Philida* (2012). In 2008, his trilogy of novellas, *Other Lives*, was published, comprising the previously published *The Blue Door* along with *Appassionata* and *Mirror*. 2009 saw the publication of a memoir, *A Fork in the Road*. He died on a flight from Amsterdam to South Africa from Belgium, where he had received an honorary doctorate from the Belgian Francophone University Catholique de Louvain. He was married six times. Brink's son, Anton Brink, is an artist.

## 2. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

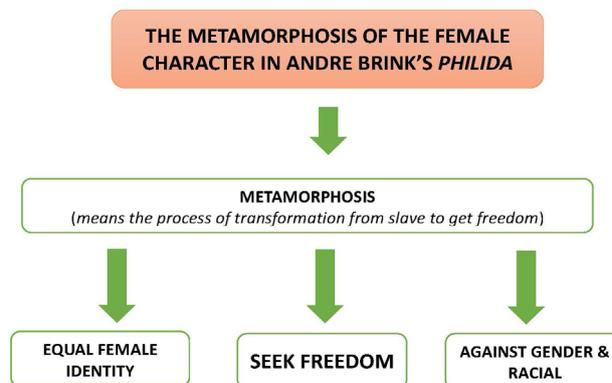
*Philida* is the latest offering from the South African author André Brink, whose anti-apartheid novels — along with those of such contemporaries as Nadine Gordimer and J. M. Coetzee — have challenged readers to reflect on the intimate brutalities of a society founded on a dehumanizing ideology. Like several of Brink's historical novels, "*Philida*" probes South Africa's more distant sordid past, animating real figures from the Cape Colony's days of white settlement, when the enslavement and indentured servitude of local black and indigenous populations, as well as people brought over from the Dutch East Indies, were entirely routine. Brink wrote this book after discovering that a collateral ancestor of his owned a slave named Philida in the early 1800s. As he recounts in the acknowledgments, the real Philida lodged a brave complaint to the Slave Protector in 1832 about her treatment by Francois Brink, who was the son of her owner, Cornelis. She claimed that she had four children by Francois, and André Brink uses this historical record as a launching pad for his imagined version of Philida's life.

In the novel, she tells the Slave Protector that Francois reneged on his promise of freedom and was planning to sell her, in order to follow his father's orders to marry a white woman. The first half of the novel is told in the alternating voices of Philida, her owner Cornelis Brink, a wine farmer, her owner's son, Frans, and Petronella, a freed slave who is also, secretly, Cornelis's mother. Philida and Frans themselves have had four children together (two survive), and despite the gross inequality of their positions, each appears to love the other, however ambiguously.

But when Frans fails to win Philida the freedom he has promised her, she goes to Stellenbosch to level a charge against him at the Drostdy, the seat of justice, setting in motion a series of upheavals that will profoundly change her own life, as well as the lives of her owners. Although her contact with Frans has ostensibly been consensual, rape and other forms of violation lie at the heart of Philida's experience. It seems unlikely that she could have rebuffed Frans's advances, just as she was powerless to prevent Cornelis from forcing two slave boys from a neighbouring farm to rape her before a crowd, and equally unable to escape Cornelis himself from raping her in secret in the very bamboo copse where she and Frans held their own assignations.

When she becomes too great a liability in the gossip-ridden Cape, and Frans cavils at an arranged marriage with the daughter of a wealthy Cape Town family, Cornelis decides to auction Philida over the mountains in Worcester, effectively banishing his slave and her children — who are also, of course, his grandchildren — to the interior. At this point the narrative shifts to an objective third-person voice recounting Philida's new life under the ownership of a dour but mostly fair-minded lawyer whose primary concern is the maintenance of order and calm. To this end he takes Philida to see the head of the leader of a slave rebellion, mounted on a stake, as a reminder and warning that the law is on the side of the masters. The following diagram illustrates the study's thematic analysis of the novel:

### THE FRAMEWORK



### 3. EQUAL FEMALE IDENTITY

The voice of females needs the ever-resonating lexicon “equality” with male-stream utters the ebullient interrogation regarding “what is absent rather than what is present, reflecting concern with the silencing and marginalization of women” (Moi 222). In *Philida*, female characters transform after releasing them from slavery. Petronella, for example, gains her identity after slavery. She becomes an independent female: “My kind of people, says Old Petronella. Khope people. Busahm people. lots of them. More than you can even count” (88). Moreover, Petronella is now free and she talks about other people: “It is not just a matter of mothers and fathers. It starts with us, with those who don’t want to know where they come from and where they fit in and who they are” (90).

Its acknowledging of female circumstances leads inevitably to the most vital search for an equal female identity by “turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity” (Moi 3). In *Philida*, the novel’s protagonist’s voice, Philida, dominates the narrative scenes, this is a form of empowerment of female voice. At this point, Philida’s character transforms because she became more powerful than before. Other characters, like the narrator, wish to be like Philida “All I’m asking is how I could be expected to keep my eyes and hands off a desirable young *meid* like Philida when I became smitten with dry desire?” (94).

Philida becomes even more problematic when she describes her first rape by Francois: And after some time I no longer cry, and I just let him do whatever he want, now I can feel him pushing into me, into the deepest deepness of myself, and then he begin to shake like a sheep that got its throat cut, and then I know that this is it . . . and I cannot and will not stop him anymore, I just go on crying in his ears, no, no, no, crying no, no, yes, yes, yes, and then I no longer know or care what is happening. . . . I just do whatever you wish, you are the Baas, just push into me, I no longer want or wish anything, just stay inside me, just keep on, don’t stop.”

Moreover, near the end of book Philida says “If you ask me, It will be harder for the white people than for us. We can still manage, one way or other. But what will be become of them? We are like foundation of their house. Their lives and everything is built on us. The whole land is built on our sweat and blood”. It shows Philida resistance to white patriarchal society and her power to bring equality in society.

One women’s struggle against hierarchies of race and gender that seek her absolute subjugation. Philida is courageous she spoke against corrupt law. Philida is bawdy and brave the is pragmatic and sure in her faith that how new day is coming. This novel is about female sensibility. As I referred above in 1832, slaves at the cape town work the vineyards, build their master’s coffines, raise children and sometimes, when their wives can’t or

won’t, they bear them children slaves are barefooted, shoes are for free me. She is Ideal women, she said as a transitioned woman with pride, direction and confidence: “I don’t want to be whiter than show as the ouman use to say. Brown is what I am and brown is what I want to be like stone, like soil, like earth. Broun I will wash myself a new person I will be brown”.

So here Philida transform from weak and hopeless to bravery & determination. Early on in the story, Philida’s voice is weak and hopeless – especially in regards to her uncertain future. She says, “I belong nowhere. What happen to me will always be what others want to happen. I am a piece of knitting that is knitted by somebody else” (p. 60). But as the story progresses, Philida slowly begins to take control of her life and her destiny, and by the end of the novel she proclaims: “I am free because I am free. Because I myself take my freedom. I take it and I choose it” (p. 236).

Philida, a slave in South Africa in the mid-1830s. Philida’s story begins with a journey to the slave protector’s office, where she files a formal complaint against her master’s son, Frans. Over the years, Frans has promised Philida freedom in the heat of lovemaking, but has yet to deliver on his word. In the meantime, Philida has given birth to several of Frans’s children, and she is impatient and frustrated.

But when Philida files her complaint, she is informed that, because Frans was never her master, he does not have the power to grant her freedom. Only Frans’s father, Cornelis Brink, has such power, but he is an angry, cruel man and does not care about the well-being of Philida or his enslaved grandchildren: “If I can write his name, I can send him to hell. Otherwise he will keep on haunting me” (p.189). Philida is mentally and cosmically free she said as a transitioned woman. They say that next year to December I will be free. But here inside me, I am already free. (p.229)” This shows she is now free from white society.

Near the end of book Philida says “If you ask me, it will be harder for the white people than for us. We can still manage, one way or other. But what will be become of them? We are like foundation of their house. Their lives and everything is built on us. The whole land is built on our sweat and blood”. It shows Philida resistance to white patriarchal society and her power to bring equality in society.

### 4. CONCLUSION

This paper has studied Brink’s *Philida* from a feminist perspective. The novel depicts the plights of slaves during colonial confrontations between the blacks and whites. In the novel, some slave women are oppressed. Therefore, women try to obtain female intersubjectivity and independence of the white colonialism. And they

seek their identity in the course of the colonial encounter between them and their colonizers. Petronella, for instance, obtains her feminist identity after the period of slavery. She clearly gains self-autonomy as a female: "My kind of people, says Old Petronella. Khope people. Busahm people. Lots of them. More than you can even count" (p.88). Philida, similarly expresses the same experience at the end of the novel, when she says that "If you ask me, it will be harder for the white people than for us. We can still manage, one way or other. But what will be become of them? We are like foundation of their house. Their lives and everything is built on us. The whole land is built on our sweat and blood" (p.89).

---

## REFERENCES

---

- Brink, A. (2012). *Philida*. London, England: Vintage.
- Philida, A. B. (2013). *The Cambridge History of South African Literature* (2nd ed., D. Attwell, Ed.). Vintage International.
- The Guardian. (2012, August 16). *Philida by Andre Brink* [Review]. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/16/philida-andre-brink-booker-review>
- The Telegraph. (n.d.). *Philida by Andre Brink* [Review]. Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/9464788/Philida-by-Andre-Brink-review.html>