

## Hagar Peeters

### WHAT'S IN MY NAME?

Hagar was the name my mother had chosen for me without consulting my father, who had left her while she was pregnant. Years later he came into my life, but by then it was too late to alter my name. I learned that it was the name of a slave in the Bible, who had been sent away with her young child. Maybe my mother, who had been brought up a Catholic, knew this biblical name from her own religious background.

'It's a Hebrew name', she told me, and I told anyone who wanted to know where that strange name came from. Maybe it was a tribute to my Jewish grandfather (from my father's side) as well, who had lost both his parents, brother, and sister together with her husband and two little children in Nazi concentration camps. But during a holiday in Tunisia my strange name turned out to be a very common Arab name, as a later Moroccan boyfriend also confirmed. It is pronounced there as 'Hadjar'.

As a child, I took my name as a mark of Cain, the sign that I was different. At summer camps I called myself 'Claudia', a much prettier name, I thought, which would make me more easily accepted by the other children. Only much later I started to appreciate this rare but universal name, since I did not know anyone else who was called Hagar, save a Norwegian cartoon character, and a figure who in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions played a key role in the genesis of the human race.

The story of the latter is this: God promised Abraham an enormous number of offspring, that he would in fact be the patriarch of all the peoples that were about to come.

'How am I supposed to do that?' Abraham asked both God and himself, for he was seventy-five, and his wife Sara already ninety: they were far too old to have children. But God said: 'Trust me, just wait and see'.

Sara got impatient. She could not believe that she herself was going to give birth, so she took up what she believed to be a clever idea: she convinced Abraham that he should sleep with their seventeen-year old Egyptian slave, Hagar, and keep the child as if it were theirs.

And so it happened. But the situation turned out less than harmonious. Hagar, proud that she had become the mother of Abraham's firstborn, Ishmael, found herself above household chores. In Sara's opinion, though, Hagar had become arrogant. And God said: 'That's what you get when you don't listen to me. I promised you offspring of your own.'

When Sara found out that she indeed had become pregnant, and gave birth to her son Isaac, Hagar and Ishmael became totally useless, and were sent into the wilderness.

Hagar could not bear to see her son dying. She left him in the only bush she could find in the Sinai desert and sat herself nearby and cried. That was when God showed his more merciful side. He sent an angel who showed Hagar a well and told her that if she went back to her master and behaved like a proper slave, without any whims, and wishes for herself, she and her son would be saved and would stay alive. Ishmael would also have a great number of descendants: the Arab people. Those of Isaac would be the Jews.

When I heard the story of my name for the first time, it made me crazy with anger at the injustice of it. A young girl, given as a slave to a very old man, gets raped by him and then the old man and his wife pretend the child is theirs. And then, when she shows any signs of self-respect and pride, for she has become a mother, she is sent away. Only by promising obedience to her oppressor and rapist can she save her life and that of her young child.

I thought, if this story is at the roots of our culture, at least we can start by changing the story. And the idea arose to rewrite the story of my own name. My most recent book of poetry is the result.

In *Loper van licht (Light Walker)*, I took Hagar as the main character and wrote most of the poems from her perspective. I showed her as a historical and mythical as well as archetypal figure, transporting her to our own time, in which she is an Egyptian housemaid living in the house of an older Western couple. I tried to show the pertinence and actuality of the dilemmas all the characters are confronted with: their confusing triangular relationship, Sara's frustrations about aging without having a child, and her jealousy of the much younger Hagar. I also took Hagar as the symbol of all who have been expelled from their homelands – because of the frank expression of their political opinion, or sexual identity, or whatever – who seek political asylum in the Netherlands, but are sent away or have to wait for years until they know whether they will be accepted as new citizens of our country. And instead of the message you could obtain from the Bible, in which Hagar had to give up her pride and remain the slave they made her, I wanted to show a proud Hagar who only obeys what she thinks is right: I let her stand for human rights in general, and women's rights in particular, for those who suffer from oppression on the one hand, and from abundant sexualisation on the other, when I let her exclaim:

‘Anything that limits my freedom of movement,  
makes me invisible or stands in my light  
I'll cast it off, I'll fling it at the feet  
of whoever requested it, before I trample on it.  
Anyone who asks me to strip off  
I'll tell him you go first  
and leave it at that.’

I don't have time to read the entire poem to you here, but you can find it at the bottom of the text that was handed out to you, so you can read it later if you wish.

When my book was published, critics were confused by my trick of using a literary character whose name corresponds with my own. They allowed themselves to break the first rule anyone who analyses texts should learn: that the ‘I’ in the poem does not necessarily have to be the ‘I’ who wrote the book. It was too easy for them to blame me for feeling oppressed and expelled, and to put the safe etiquette of feminism upon me, which they all seemed to dislike, and which gave them a handle for overly shallow interpretations. Others regretted the fact that the book did not contain enough love poetry, which was easier to understand. Showing Hagar as bold as she should be, I had gone too far, and that – for the theme was boldness - was exactly what I wanted.

**HAGAR'S AMBITION**  
(Translation: Donald Gardner)

Let me be one of the decadents and drink with the men.  
Let me follow you, Baudelaire, Whitman and Álvaro de Campos  
all the triumphant victors who believe in themselves  
all those who ride on the backs of dangerous beasts  
all those who shamelessly raise their voices.  
With my ruddy cheeks and superior mien,  
let me be one of you.  
Prosit!

You are the inventors of deliberate degeneracy,  
dissolute braggarts who see the road to ruin as heaven.  
With my hair done up at the back and my necktie,  
my waistcoat and trousers, my shirt open on my breasted torso,  
the locks in my nape lifted by every breeze,  
let me raise my glass to our select camaraderie.  
Here's to yours!

Hoist me onto the backs of your elephants and I'll ride with you into the bush.  
Let me put on these filthy trousers and I'll be after you, you bunch of scallywags.  
I want to go out on the town with the great men.  
I want to go on an expedition with the powerful fathers.  
Let them spell out the world to me spread out at my tiny feet.  
Open up the continents, drive my elephants  
down the path the slaves have slashed open  
let the workers look up at me  
with my red nail varnish and filth under my nails  
let me be one of those workers whom I slap on the back  
as I yell with the voice of a master:  
Santé!

I will splash through the puddles in my galoshes  
that are the same for everyone – what difference does it  
make to a puddle. And I'll write the world's bloody chronicles  
only to wipe them out immediately and rewrite them  
because I want to weep like a woman over all the pain that's been suffered  
and press children to my motherly breast  
at the get-togethers of your clubs, clans, regiments, societies or assemblies.

And I'll reserve the right to turn down your proposals  
yes, to reject you, never mind if you feel hurt or mortified.  
I don't love someone out of pity.  
Make me your accomplice at your card tables,  
you brigands and pirates. Let me not stand on the sideline screeching  
in panic at the vermin crawling over the earth and in my hair.  
Hunting and larking around and jousting, that's the life for me.  
Santé! Santé! Santé!

Fathers of the world, please have a heart.  
Make an exception just once now and for ever  
to create a precedent all must follow  
admitting me to all the realms and domains of the world  
that have been taboo to me since time immemorial  
as suited the stewards of these royal properties.

Let me squander the cheques with your signature.  
Everything with your seal on it

all inventions with your patent  
let my hand caress them voluptuously  
toss them carelessly over my shoulder  
hand them out to the children  
make bread pellets of them for the sparrows  
let me play Santa  
let me make free with them  
and go on blind spending sprees  
but entrust them to me.

I want the key to the forbidden chamber  
the computer code, the access to systems  
the password to the lucrative terrains.  
Let me wave my fans and fling my lassoes  
in one movement.  
In return for your power let me have my weapons  
and sorely-needed materials.  
Let me speak at table and don't interrupt straightway.  
Dare to talk to me at parties  
without expecting a night of bliss.

I'll snap off the high heels on my party shoes.  
why should I totter over the cobbles  
unless they are the flagstones leading to my palaces,  
and anything that limits my freedom of movement,  
makes me invisible or stands in my light  
I'll cast it off, I'll fling it at the feet  
of whoever requested it, before I trample on it.  
Anyone who asks me to strip off  
I'll tell him you go first  
and leave it at that.

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