

Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*: Home, Homesickness, and Race as Place by Sarah Yates

Abstract

Marion's journey in *Playing in the Light* can be read as a metaphor for South Africa in general. This is evident in three aspects of the novel: firstly, the anxiety surrounding post-apartheid racial identity and the meaninglessness of categories once —pot-bellied with meaningll, secondly the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) as a trigger for this anxiety, and thirdly the idea of the repressed resurfacing to haunt the present (Wicomb, *Playing in the Light* 106). Wicomb's protagonist goes on a journey of discovery after seeing a picture of a woman who resembles her childhood domestic worker in a newspaper. Her parents' past comes back to colour her current identity and understanding of her past and that of her country. This resurgence of the repressed mirrors not only the trauma of Marion's past, but also that of South Africa in general during the transition from apartheid to democracy, and specifically that of coloured people. Through an exploration of the resurgence of the repressed and race as place, Wicomb navigates and deconstructs whiteness and race in general. By reading the novel as diasporic in terms of the way Wicomb uses motifs of home, belonging, homesickness and un-belonging as a spatial metaphor for race, this paper argues that *Playing in the Light* has implications for the ways in which we read race, particularly in a postcolonial context.

Playing in the Light can be read as a microcosm of South Africa's transition into democracy. Firstly, there is the anxiety surrounding post-apartheid racial identity and the meaninglessness of categories once “pot-bellied with meaning” (Wicomb, *Playing in the Light* 106). Secondly, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) serves as a trigger for this anxiety. Thirdly, there is the idea of the repressed resurfacing to haunt the present. Wicomb's protagonist, Marion, goes on a journey of discovery after seeing a picture of a woman who resembles her childhood domestic worker in a newspaper. Her parents' past comes back to colour her current identity and understanding of her past and that of her country. This resurgence of the repressed mirrors not only the trauma of Marion's past, but also that

of South Africa in general during the transition from apartheid to democracy, and specifically that of coloured people. Through an exploration of the resurgence of the repressed and the use of place as a metaphor for race, Wicomb navigates and deconstructs whiteness and race in general.

For Wicomb, the historical memory of coloured South Africans is fraught with issues of shame, ambiguous identity and the often-traumatic legacies of the colonial encounter. In her essay “Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa”, Wicomb argues that the historical efforts of the coloured community to establish their “brownness” as a pure category is a “denial of shame” (92). By “shame” Wicomb means those connotations and implications of violence and miscegenation which surround slavery and racial mixing with the coloniser. The pursuit of a pure “brownness” therefore, is a denial of the multiracial origins of coloured South Africans. Minesh Dass argues that Marion’s mother, Helen, is an example of Wicomb’s subversion and reversal of these connotations and implications, as Helen exchanges sexual favours with Father Gilbert, the priest at her local church, to become reclassified as white. In this instance, therefore, miscegenation “[produces] whiteness and purity, not browned and degeneracy” (Dass 139). During an analysis of Homi Bhabha’s theory of postcolonial liminality in “Shame and Identity”, Wicomb argues that coloured identity is its own distinct identity rather than a liminal space between whiteness and blackness. Colouredness does, however, function as a liminal space for Marion in *Playing in the Light*. For Helen, colouredness functions as a pure category to be escaped. Marion’s experience of her identity as a space of travel, of “unremitting crossings” is evidence of the mutability and fluidity of her identity as she shifts from whiteness to an ambiguous state of colouredness (Wicomb, *Playing in the Light* 107).

Through her discovery of her parent’s coloured origins, Marion discovers the realities of life during apartheid. One of the central ironies of the novel is the contingency of the apartheid government’s definition of whiteness as given in the 1962 Population Registration Amendment. Helen and John’s ability to fit into this definition is further evidence of its contingent and constructed nature. Here, whiteness is defined in terms of what it is not and what it is perceived to be rather than any essential or irrefutable fact:

A 'white person' is a person who (a) in appearance obviously is a white person and who is not generally accepted as a coloured person; or (b) is generally accepted as a white person and is not in appearance obviously not a white person, but does not include any person who for the purposes of classification under this Act, freely and voluntarily admits that he is by descent a native or coloured person unless it is proved that the admission is not based on fact. (Wicomb, *Playing in the Light* 121)

The circular phrasing of this definition brings attention to the contingent nature of race in general, and of whiteness in particular. That this contingent language comes from a white supremacist regime emphasises this contingency even further, as even those who would argue for and rely on the essential and concrete nature of race struggle to define it in concrete terms. Marion's entire identity hinges on this nebulous and precarious definition. She is unable to retreat even to the relative stability of her parents' coloured past:

My parents were the play-whites; *they* crossed over; but if those places are no longer the same, have lost their meaning, there can be no question of returning to a place where my parents once were. Perhaps I can now keep crossing to and for, to different places, perhaps that is what the new is all about – an era of unremitting crossings. (107)

Significantly, Wicomb points out that, in Marion's research, "whiteness itself, according to the library's classification system, is not a category for investigation" (120). Dass maintains that through her literary interrogation of race through the historical narratives which created whiteness and, in turn, colouredness, Wicomb "cracks open the door of the closed home that is race, exposing that home to a critical light" (145).

Due to the placement of coloured people right below white people in the racial hierarchy of apartheid South Africa, as well as their shared first language with the dominant Afrikaans nationalist culture, coloured people were offered some opportunities to assimilate into the dominant regime. The early Afrikaner nation identified with the narrative of Israel wandering in the desert under the leadership of Moses. According to Susan Newton-King, the early Afrikaner nation felt "a sense of ethnic calling, an identification with the Israel of old, and a theologically grounded contempt for people

of ‘heathen’ origin” (7). This Calvinistic sense of nationalism within the early Afrikaner community is ironic, given the creole-like origins of the Afrikaans language and the initially cooperative relationship between the Dutch loan farmers and the people they found already living in South Africa. There was, of course, violence between the Dutch, the Xhosa and the Khoesan, but it was not, at least not initially, systematic. Afrikaans was necessarily created not by those who identify themselves as white Afrikaners today, but dialectically through contact between the Dutch and those they found in South Africa.

Due to the similarities in lifestyle between the early Afrikaners and the Xhosa, there were many instances of intermarriage between the two groups, as well as between the Xhosa and the Khoesan. White nationalism in South Africa was therefore accompanied by a profound sense of doubt about national and racial identity which necessitated the creation of an Other in opposition to which the Afrikaner nation could define itself. Coloured people in particular then, due to their proximity to the Afrikaans, were particularly alienated in the definition of white Afrikaans nationalism. Their access to the dominant culture emphasised their inability to completely assimilate.

One of the main strategies of the apartheid government, due to its status as a minority population, was to divide up the majority. Through the separation and ordering of different racial groups, the apartheid government was able to create tension between the oppressed groups which prevented them from presenting a united resistance against apartheid. The ambivalence of coloured identity allowed coloured people to be “co-opted by – and even [adopt] – an exclusionary white nationalism, or else identifying themselves with an oppositional black nationalism, while nevertheless remaining marginal to both groupings (Jacobs 77). The necessity of claiming black nationalism in order to resist white hegemony points to colouredness as a form of black subjectivity.

Wicomb, through Marion, identifies race as performative. Marion’s experience of race is based on how she is perceived and misrecognized by her society and herself, rather than any essential part of her being. In her unwitting performance of whiteness, Marion *is* white. The very process through which her parents become

white begins with an instance of misrecognition. Her father John is mistakenly identified as white when he, ignorant of the racial requirements of the post, applies for a job as a traffic officer. It is also the perception of Mrs Murray – her host during part of her investigation into Tokkie’s identity – which initially confirms Marion’s suspicion of the truth: “O gits, it’s like seeing a spook, because from down here with your face tilted like that you look the spitting image of Mrs Karelse, my dear!” (97). Wicomb’s portrayal of race as performative and perceived in this sense argues against essentialist notions of race and ethnicity.

The ways in which race shifts depending on interpretation and context in *Playing in the Light* supports Michelle Wright’s theory of epiphenomenal blackness, as Marion and her parents are variously interpreted as either white or coloured depending on who perceived them and at the moment in which they are perceived. This reading is supported by Andrew van der Vlies’s argument that Marion’s unwitting performance of whiteness is the same as being white (590). By treating race as performative, Wicomb emphasises the contingent nature of its use as a way of categorising the world. Her interrogation of racial categories is accomplished through her use of geography as a metaphor for race.

Wicomb uses the home as a microcosm for the landscape of race. The various homes in Marion’s memory serve as symbols for different things. For De Michelis, Marion’s immaculate flat is “an emblem of Marion’s state of denial concerning her origins and misidentification with whiteness” (73). It is significant that the novel begins with a disruption of this space, and therefore of her state of denial. Not only is Marion’s balcony intruded upon by a dead guinea fowl, but her own furniture has begun to stifle her as her four-poster canopy bed becomes the site of recurring panic attacks. These panic attacks are the first instance of repression and resurgence in the novel. The description of the bed as a house within a house is indicative of the ways in which Wicomb uses the motif of house and home throughout the novel, as the bed becomes a space of crisis within Marion’s denial. The other houses and homes are symbols for the different parts of Marion’s identity: her father’s house is the home of her childhood memories, her childhood home is a claustro-

phobic space of unrelenting performance, and the old farmhouse of her father's childhood is a symbol of her origins.

As Marion moved between homes, she experiences the same shift in racial definitions as South Africans in general during the novel as a previously essentialised and taken for granted part of her identity is rendered mutable and unstable. According to Sarah Nuttal, "In South African literary and cultural scholarship there has been, since the mid-1990s, a departure from earlier work in which race was largely left unproblematised and was treated as a given category in which difference was essentialised" (11). Wicomb is part of this literary turn to the problematisation of race. *Playing in the Light* can be read as a microcosm of the national identity crisis which accompanied the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Significantly, it is the photograph of Patricia Williams – a victim of police brutality who had just told her story at the TRC – that triggers Marion's curiosity about the identity of Tokkie. While the TRC sought to address some of the atrocities committed during apartheid, it only accounted for individual acts with individual victims and perpetrators rather than addressing the wider social structure. According to Patrick Harries, the TRC largely ignored the private sector's role in the "[exploitation] and [impoverishment]" of black South Africans (128). Just as the TRC was tasked with the exploration and mitigation of historical oppression, Marion must reverse her parents' pursuit of whiteness "in competition with history" (Wicomb, *Playing in the Light* 152). Her retreat to England and consumption of South African history and literature is evidence of Marion's reliance on history and memory in her exploration of race. She searches for herself within this literature: "how many versions of herself exist in the stories of her country?" (191). Marion does not find a home in England, but rather a "place to cry" (191). It is from this place that she searches for a home within descriptions and images of South Africa.

Harries argues that the TRC functioned in part as a way of repressing those memories which may have continued to separate South African society along racial lines. He attributes the coloured repression of slave history to a similar reconciliatory effort:

During the struggle against apartheid, individuals repressed the memory of their slave origins for various reasons. For some, slavery was a social stigma best forgotten; for others, the memory of slavery

threatened to divide the opposition to apartheid along racial lines. For whites who could be associated with the old slave-owning class, the memory of slavery was a source of guilt and pain that merely served to push 'coloureds' into alliance with African nationalism (133).

Wicomb, however, argues that this repression may have more to do with shame. The social stigma of slavery is particularly significant in the South African coloured community given the desire to assimilate into whiteness, as, although likely a slave owner, any white ancestry would be valuable to those coloured people who chose to buy into the racial hierarchy of apartheid society. Dass argues that Wicomb uses an exploration of shame and coloured identity in *Playing in the Light* to "[crack] open the door of the closed home that is race, exposing that home to a critical light" (145).

Wicomb, therefore, through the motif of home and the concomitant ideas of belonging, homesickness and unbelonging, uses *Playing in the Light* to interrogate race as a method for categorising the world. By drawing on the history of racial definitions in South Africa and the trauma of the colonial and apartheid past, Wicomb posits race and specifically whiteness and contingent and constructed categories, as well as argues for the inclusion of colouredness in a discourse which is too often only concerned with blackness and whiteness.

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