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'IN-BETWEENNESS' DECLARED AND CONFIRMED: ZOË WICOMB'S *OCTOBER* IN THE UNTIGHTENED GRIP OF ETHNIC AND NATIONAL IDENTIFICATION

RYSZARD BARTNIK[1]

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to examine the concept of 'in-betweenness' as a potential frame of reference for Zoë Wicomb's writing, particularly her latest novel *October*. Hence, my primary intent is to focus on the novelist as equipped with a faculty for crossing over separate cultural traditions and embracing different formative experiences. Interestingly enough, in this case, the notion of indeterminate identity begins from, yet is not limited to, a South African version of racial profiling. Therefore, the author's interest in adaptable identities might be discussed apropos of skin color, but also in terms of oscillating between different geographical, cultural locations. In light of the above, a perspective accommodated here examines Wicomb's thematization and confirmation of transitional experiences elaborated on a story of two females as becoming autonomous coloureds as well as mutable/unfixed/migrating characters. And, on top of that, this singular focus coincides with a broader pattern, filtered through the author's aggregate account. As a person of South African descent, yet currently living in Europe, Wicomb acknowledges a specific adaptive domain, which in turn serves as a fitting backdrop for construing contemporary South African-ness from a more nuanced, in-between/cosmopolitan position.

Keywords: Zoë Wicomb; in-betweenness; cosmopolitanism; female identity; female writing; post-apartheid South Africa.

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to examine the concept of in-betweenness as a potential, if not ultimate, frame of reference for Zoë Wicomb's writing, particularly her second to last novel *October*.[2] Her writerly status, in a sense, is congruent with that

[1] Faculty of English, Adam Mickiewicz University, ul. Grunwaldzka 6, 60–780 Poznań, Poland: email: rbartnik@amu.edu.pl.

[2] Wicomb's latest novel *Still Life*, published in 2020, though not directly concerned with the subject matter of this article, is fraught with issues flagged around the poorly recognized

of those authors who successfully traverse separate cultural traditions. Should Meg Samuelson's insistence on the writer's insights into "transitive settings" (2011: 88) hold true, then reading Wicomb as equipped with a faculty for crossing over identities is perfectly legitimate. At the core of the author's literary practice lies the notion of switching between and tackling different formative experiences. Interestingly enough, in this case, the notion of indeterminate identity[3] begins from, yet is not limited to, a South African version of racial profiling.[4] As such, it plays the integral role in her functioning as a writer yet resounds not only apropos of skin color, but rather in terms of oscillating between different geographical, cultural and mental locations. Hence a perspective accommodated here that examines one's use and confirmation of transitional experiences, with an overview of two females as becoming autonomous coloureds as well as apparently mutable characters. And, on top of that, the singular focus coincides with a broader pattern, filtered through the author's aggregate account. As a person of South African descent, yet currently living in Europe, Wicomb acknowledges a specific adaptive domain, which in turn serves as a fitting backdrop for construing contemporary South African-ness from a more nuanced, in-between/cosmopolitan position.

2. Reinforcing a scenario of liminality

Perhaps, for the purpose of clarification, I should underline that the following analysis is drawn upon a conceptualization of hybrid formats as intentionally set in and beyond superimposing layers of routinely released postcolonial criticism. As indicated by Jacobs (2016), it is not uncommon among literary scholars to advance the notion of contemporary South African composite identities in terms of such conventional critical practice. Theirs is Homi K. Bhabha's theoretical framework,[5] placing identity construction "between [clashing] cultural systems"; if viewed from this perspective, any formative

non-white identities. Some of these questions, which take on demystifying South African coloured-ness, will be addressed as a side note in the subsequent discussion, showing the author as determined to square off against the fossilization of identities.

3 Speaking of the indeterminate identity, I would like to refer to Zygmunt Bauman's claim that "an identity solidly founded", due to its rigidity, brings rather detrimental effects, especially to individuals for whom a sense of (dis)location, understood in cultural/geographical/ethnic/mental terms, constitutes an integral part of their personal core (see Bauman 1998: 26).

4 Both Wicomb and her female characters share the status of coloureds, mixed-race individuals. As Maria Ericson indicates, South African legislative acts of the 1950s introduced to the public domain such divisive ethnic categorizations as "White", "Indian", "Native African" and "Coloured" (2001: 152). Back then, the notion of coloured-ness communicated a derogatory identification; whereas, in Wicomb's writing, it undergoes a qualitative change and denotes not only a form of exclusion but prefigures, above all, a fusion of socio-cultural perspectives.

5 Homi K. Bhabha writes about the "Third Space" in *The location of culture* (1994) (Bhabha quoted in Jacobs 2016: 2–3).

fictional writing must embrace tensions between the center and its former peripheries. The question is whether such reasoning can be construed as having the potential to subject a selfhood to "positioning over divides" (Jacobs 2016: 4). In fact, there are discernible tenets of Wicomb's literary output that complicate inscribing her standpoint into accordingly formulated postcolonial discourse. Within the proposed critical disposition, coloured-ness cannot be curbed by negative "indeterminacy" or "borderline existence", two characteristic traits – minding Bhabha's stance – of the postcolonial insubstantiality or "special ambiguity" (Wicomb 2018: 123, 240). A notion of "in-betweenness" conditioned by the above logic would be tantamount to endorsing non-identity, wherein one's presence is marked by "invisibility".[6] The postcolonial subject in general, and the coloured individual, would be doomed to wander around, longing for essential guidelines about racial belonging as well as geographical locality. For this very reason, as underlined by Minesh Dass (2011: 142), Wicomb remains skeptical about corroborating Bhabha's claims. It is so since she is holeheartedly distrustful towards any process of authenticating the 'homeland' in terms of stagnant racial, political or regional categorizations, which eventually are to "essentialize [one's] existence".

In light of the above, Wicomb's elaboration on the concept of in-betweenness can be read via broader, more universal implications and themes beyond the binary logic of post-colonial discord[7]. As I argue, being a migrant, she seems to present and endorse the mindset defined by Zygmunt Bauman as characteristic of a contemporary world in which no "routes [are] privileged" and these are no longer "determined [exclusively] by the imperial/colonial links of the past" (2016: 25). Central to this critical reflection is the novelist's skepticism about the ascendency of a narrowly defined discourse. Both as a writer and intellectual, she is unwilling to comply with some of the flawed assumptions about a prevailing sense of dislocation, made by such thinkers as (the previously mentioned) Bhabha. Her understanding of identity formation, as suggested before, breaks new ground in avoiding any forms of national or ethnic essentialism. Dorothy Driver (2011: 93) comes up with a very adequate term that clarifies the writer's standpoint, namely "rooted cosmopolitanism". The idea

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6 Maria P. Guarducci summons up Wicomb's disagreement with Bhabha's view on "the in-between space" as conducive to the experience of deficiency (2015: 36). Nevertheless, as suggested by Grant Farred, the coloureds are in a quandary due to their hybrid status, which often locates them "neither in one place nor the other" (2001: 181).

7 Very telling, in the above context, is Jacobs claim – after Stuart Hall (1990) – on forging "identity politics". According to Jacobs, whenever one aims at self-formation, it becomes central to remember that such maneuvers are always about "a positioning" but not about "an essence" (2016: 2). Delving into Wicomb's writing, it is exactly essentialism that she does contest within the promoted identity politics.

behind this oxymoronic expression is to regard the author as strongly averse to a discursive path built upon false dichotomy. Hence, rather than relying on constraining intellectual geometries, she seems to project herself in motion, between boundaries,[8] with a sense of "freedom",[9] that of which Zimitri Erasmus (2017) was cognizant.

While seeking a potential theoretical model which sheds light on Wicomb's conceptualization of in-betweenness, I would invoke Young Yung Kim's template of identity formation. Of utmost importance, in this context, is the notion of "international personhood". As he points out, this theoretical construct relates to individuals who, over time, are to "cross … cultural boundaries", and eventually undergo "the process of … adaptation". Nevertheless, the final stage of self-identification is not marked by the utter acknowledgement of a new cultural disposition at the expense of former affiliations.[10] On the contrary, "a person's identity orientation" becomes inclusive, heading towards and revealing "an increasingly intercultural nature" (Kim 2015: 4). By no means, however, should the internationalized sense of selfhood be construed as a difficulty in positioning oneself against a concrete socio-cultural setting.

Duncan Brown, speaking of young South African writers, claimed that they are "essentially adrift in a world that is both familiar and unfamiliar" (2016: 161). The word "adrift", in Brown's use, is pejorative and denotes the lack of ability to stand firm on any social, cultural or political ground. To an extent, Wicomb and her characters might be seen as similarly unsettled; yet, in opposition to the angst of non-location, they position themselves as "being in the space of crossing, in transition" (Stephen Clingman (2009), quoted in Jacobs 2016: 5). Rather than anchored in a single cultural framework, one benefits from traversing fixed positions acknowledging the realm of in-betweenness.[11] As indicated by Bauman, this kind of reasoning resembles countermeasures taken against the sentiment of a downright and disconcerting unsettlement. The "metaphor of uprooting", for that matter, then proves to be fallacious since it ignores the importance of interconnections between "continuity and discontinuity in the history of …

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8 This sort of positioning of the writer is postulated by Samuelson, who points out that reading Wicomb must take place "simultaneously" in two, seemingly opposing domains. On the one hand, her writing is "provincial"; on the other, Wicomb's horizon is much broader since she functions as "a citizen of the world" (Samuelson 2011: 88).

9 Erasmus calls for the forging of a new dimension wherein "Eurocentrism" and "nativism" are replaced with an alternative "logic" which denies "confrontation" (2017: 26).

10 Taking the above into account, Kim's template can be seen in the same vein as Driver's definition of Wicomb's paradoxical blend of detachment from and affiliation with policy (Driver 2011: 93).

11 Accordingly presented liminality goes in line with a view of Maria Paola Guarducci on the use of "space" in Wicomb's works, with its unconfinement that "entails a continuous shift of meaning" (2015: 31).

contemporary identities" (Bauman 2016: 29). Instead of compensating for the loss, there is a pronounced tendency to affirm a position beyond the boundaries of national essentialism.[12] Unlike the aforementioned group of aimlessly wandering authors, Wicomb seems to be certain that only when belonging is not challenged by derivation, when such notions as "host home, origin and return" have been subjected to serious reconsideration, does "the conundrum of [South African-ness and] 'coloured' identity"[13] have a better chance of being adequately referenced. Being in transition, in movement or in-between, by endorsing the significance of intercultural personhood, helps – according to Mark Sanders – turn on "the transformative dimension of human-being" (Sanders 2002: 145). In this sense, Brown is right saying that Wicomb's novel is about the protagonist and "the meaning(s) of the remembered locale" (2016: 163). The plural of "meaning" shows a shift from a sense of fixed (non-)dentification with the place of belonging to a more inclusive bridge-crossing, set against the backdrop of a less enclosed view on South African-ness and coloured-ness. Wicomb, in order to achieve the postulated aggregate of perspectives/voices[14] as well as to affirm her stance on in-betweenness, makes "the line dividing 'the insiders' from 'the outsiders'… a contested issue"[15] (Bauman 2016: 25) as the story unfolds. Only by a combination of mental pictures, shared by both resident and visiting coloureds, does one's identity as well as the notion of contemporary South African-ness seem to gain a more representational weight.

Wicomb's focus on providing formative narratives of the kind seems to be refracted through two synergic ambits – private and public.[16] What predominates in the novelist's repository of literary voices is a standpoint of individual – coloured – women. Yet as regards the latter angle, they happen to be oscillating between broader cultural legacies of European and indigenous African milieus, or between "European-ness and non-European-ness", as maintained by Erasmus (2017: 7). In *October*, one of the viewpoints proposed by Wicomb concentrates on the predicament of a coloured woman as related to some domestic factors of the South

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12 Kim describes the above situation through the context of an individual seeking a place of identification by a claim for "a 'home' beyond culture" (2015: 10). In order to make this statement clear and resonant, it is worth considering Andrew van der Vlies' indication that Wicomb's "oeuvre offers an insistence on exploring the complexity of individual lives not easily aligned with national or ethnic narratives" (2018: 5).

13 See Jacobs (2016: 13, 22).

14 Consider the above-mentioned idea of "international personhood" (Kim 2015: 4).

15 Farred rightly noticed that "the marginal subject" remains within the "nation's internal boundaries … to express alienation"; whereas Wicomb's projection of liminality speaks on behalf of a more constructive identity formation that "exceeds national boundaries" (2001: 188).

16 The two terms – private and public – are used here with the intention to underline the personal voice of individual females as well as presenting these characters within collectively-construed social, cultural and political frameworks.

African puzzle. Furthermore, the author constructs a fictional equivalent to her own life-meanderings, namely a coloured migrant who by taking a circuitous intercultural route feels an urge to return[17] to and re-examine not only herself, but also post-apartheid South Africa. Thus, coming back to the source of origin forms an appendix to one's having put down roots in a European framework of signification.[18] And with interactions of the two coloured individuals, one is informed not only about their gradual self-development, but also about the country's (un)changing collective identity.

Consequently, my argument revolves around showing *October*, written and published in 2015, as resonating with sentiments that illustrate the advantages (rather than drawbacks) of in-between positioning. With a fictional account, the novelist ventures onto the ground of fluctuating identities in order to comment on the (in)determinate sensibilities of coloured individuals in and outside South Africa. As in other works, also here Wicomb's elaboration on formative positions of biracial women becomes the locus of an argument on the contemporary state of South African-ness. In *October* its presentation comes almost twenty years after the democratic revolution, delivered by those whose mixed-race distinctiveness has always been under negotiation. Just as the author sanctions intermediary positions by upholding the validity of in-betweenness, by making use of a wider spectrum of individual/national/supranational mappings the notion of identity is given a chance to be treated with adequate complexity. Through the borderlines of ethnic and cross-regional temperaments, we receive a chance to explore three closely interlinked thematic areas. Firstly, some depth is added to the unapparent subjectivity of an indigenous coloured woman. Secondly, the adjustable nature of a worldly coloured is highlighted as destining her to investigate one's origins. Finally, it is a picture of the new South Africa, curiously at odds with a success story of post-apartheid transformation, which is given a thorough examination.

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17 The idea of homecoming has little to do with compensation for "nostalgic dislocation", a sentiment frequently observable, according to Jacobs, in diasporic experiences (2016: 21).

18 It is worth noticing that Rob Gaylard in 1996, writing about Wicomb's short stories – *You can't get lost in Cape Town* – observed how the pendulum swung back and forth between the local and the foreign: "[c]entral to Wicomb's … stories is the question of identity, and immediately bound up with this are the polarities of home and exile" (1996: 177). Considering the above, one cannot ignore the fact that both the author herself and *October*'s main character, settled down in Scotland and take on a journey back to the homeland. Concurrently, such wandering back and forth, instead of being aimless, becomes conducive to "'a continuous process of criticism' that includes [re]assessing the spaces in which [the given] commentary takes place" (van der Vlies 2018: 19)

3. A coloured woman – autonomy in dormancy

To discuss the novel in light of the above, it is necessary to give a brief outline not so much of the entire plot but of Wicomb's pattern in her setting up of pivotal characters. The whole story unfolds across the ups and downs of the life of Mercia Murray,[19] a middle-aged, educated woman, living and working in academia, in Scotland. Informed of her brother Jake Murray's inner malaise, she decides to pay a visit to the brother's family, which turns out to be a far more significant journey than a mere overseas trip. Eventually, it denotes an unintended peregrination to the homeland and confrontation not only with its current socio-political format, but also with its impact on the lives of coloureds. Having arrived in South Africa, Mercia stands facing her sister-in-law much sooner than the reportedly-in-bad-condition brother. This opening sequence is dictated by the need to come to terms with Sylvie,[20] whose status as a self-sufficient coloured female living in post-apartheid South Africa remains obscure. Due to her lack of education and wifely submissiveness, she is by default disrespected by her husband, but also looked down upon – at least initially – by the European academic.[21] Sylvie's coarseness is perceived in light of the old South African

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19 As foreshadowed elsewhere, a certain thematic continuity can be observed in Wicomb's recent works. For that matter, Mercia, as a character, resembles another heroine, that is Mary, from the previously mentioned *Still Life*. In both cases, we are dealing with women whose initial focus on the local South African identity is one-dimensional, and as such requires further correction on their part. Correspondingly to Mercia, Mary in her attempt to reconstruct the story of a coloured servant/slave, notwithstanding bona fide objectives, shows a patronizing attitude towards (an)other (native) female. When asked to consider the picture that displays her namesake as a relic of the remote past, she reacts with indignation: "… this image on the cover looks nothing at all like me. … I don't speak in slogans, and I would never have asked such a stupid bloody question. I'm Mary Prince, and a fair sight better, healthier looking than that tragic person" (Wicomb 2020: 61).

20 Interestingly enough, the character of Sylvie, just like Mercia, has her counterparts in Wicomb's next novel. As will be seen in this paper, the author depicted Sylvie (*October*) as a South African coloured woman whose independent substantiality awaits discovery. Wicomb, in a similar sprit, constructed at least two *other* female figures, playing both major and minor roles in *Still life*. One of them is Mary, who has been mentioned in the preceding footnote, the other is Vytje. In this regard, I would argue, Sylvie could be considered the progenitor of Vytje who, though in a different context, finds her status jeopardized as her identity has been defined as if *in absentia* by those wielding actual or symbolic power. Vytje elaborates on the predicament in the following way: "I may be a minor character, a latecomer, a country woman, ignorant of their fancy ways, but I will stand my ground and not be bullied. … the least I expect of them is to listen, not to interrupt" (Wicomb 2020: 130). Making one of her protagonists draw that conclusion, Wicomb seems to have added a worthy of note postscript to Sylvie's commitment not to be pigeonholed within a fixed, insular and pre-conceived identity framework.

21 At this stage, it would be premature to position Mercia along with the 'European self' that shows the capacity to "interweave itself with [excluded] others" (Driver 2011: 96). Rather, a more

order,[22] and as such is resented by Mercia – an independent woman, a scholar and a humanist. Convinced of her own rectitude, looking at local conditions from the angle of an outsider, Mercia reveals a patronizing attitude towards the native. This grounds Mercia's decision, though eventually unrealized, to take her nephew back to Europe, away from the parents and, as it seems, uncultured territory. Gradually, however, due to dynamic interchanges with the autochthonous Sylvie, the nature of her own identity[23] can be considered more insightfully. Such complexity plays a role in bringing Mercia's quest for the self to culminate in a more adequate understanding of her own inner core, as positively placed at a cultural crossroads. Under this approach, also the countrywoman's uncouthness begins to be read as the intermediate step towards forging a way for individual sovereignty. Paraphrasing Grant Farred (2001: 182), Sylvie inadvertently runs a personal project that safeguards her against tunneling a sense of personal identity into coloured uniformity. Therefore, rather than a disrespected coloured and symbol of South African belligerence, Sylvie begins slowly to be identified as a more full-fledged woman who – by resorting to boorishness – has tried to secure her rights and interests.

Given the author's general insistence on the lots of women, as well as on the qualities of unyielded womanhood, one of the pivotal elements in this text relates to exploring the intersecting histories of Sylvie and Mercia. Wicomb's presentation of a reactive, coarse, yet attentive countrywoman is counterbalanced by Mercia, an educated woman of worldly appeal. This juxtaposition is crucial as the latter, while returning to South Africa, finds herself on the cusp of negotiating her own identity through interacting vectors of intercultural exchange. As indicated elsewhere, Wicomb was always eager to admit the significance of a broad-based, wide-reaching standpoint. It is the author herself who highlighted that "[w]riting from the outside has always been celebrated for its special, insightful perspective" (2018: 230). On the other hand, as Driver claims, one should not forget Wicomb's resistance towards "rootless

adequate context is provided by Erasmus, who spoke of "[w]orlds outside of Europe [which] come to constitute … the underside of modernity" (2017: 25). Though it is too early to see the character through the lens of cross-cultural experience, one needs to underline that one of the final effects of Wicomb's narrative is Mercia's evolution towards a more inclusive approach.

22 According to Wicomb, "the newly democratized South Africa remains dependent on the old … epistemological structures of apartheid" (2018: 117). In a similar vein, Samuelson writes about Sylvie as a character that happens to be perceived as a coloured countrywoman, "provincial in the pejorative sense of the word" (2018: 8). Not only, however, is she marked by the stamp of backwardness, but also she seems an aggregation of other clichés. Amongst them, as indicated by Mohamed Adhikari, one finds the depiction of coloured people as "intellectually limited and socially inferior", with their "propensity for violence and innate corruptness" (2005: 164, 180).

23 Her identity is the composite of a European/British/Scottish scholar and a coloured woman/migrant of South African descent.

cosmopolitanism" (2011: 105). Hence, not to have the visitor utterly driven by unfavorable impressions, Wicomb places emphasis on the protagonist's revision of initial assumptions about the nature of an unrefined coloured. Having drifted far away from South African mindsets, Mercia needs to recalibrate the negative judgment of her peer. Nevertheless, the process of revaluation pertains to both women, one of local and the other one of foreign sensibility. The former must take the more audacious step of defending and acknowledging individual self-sufficiency; the latter is expected to shift their perspective to confirm *the other*'s[24] site in the world. While in interactions with Sylvie, he academic concedes that, regardless of cosmopolitanism, she bears a stamp of South African-ness as well. As Samuelson (or Kim) postulates, a broader viewpoint needs validation here, so that "the local and the international" are not in opposition to each other (Samuelson 2011: 90). From this angle, in order not to let the visitor go astray in evaluating the local, none of the above positions can be disavowed.

For a brief digression on Wicomb's insistence on unfixed formations of the female characters, I suggest considering the author's composition of another coloured persona, which played a significant role in *David's Story*, Wicomb's earlier novel from 2001. Amongst different aspects of the book that demonstrate certain relevancy to the subsequent analysis of *October*, one could foreground the novelist's depiction of Dulcie. Hers is the tale of a character who, placed between the expectation to embrace "silence" and the imperative to "think of herself" anew, must weigh up the advantages of being in position for self-redefinition (Wicomb 2002a: 190–191). Within the optionality proposed by the author, there are two basic moves to consider. First, in mute acceptance of one's passivity, any hopes for escaping the confines of a received self-identity are to be renounced. Second, an alternative to this inert reasoning is the call for individual reconstitution, which becomes workable only when the impulse to act on one's behalf is recognized and articulated. As Dulcie's story implies, no matter how diffident and undecided the female protagonist is, she eventually faces a groundbreaking decision to strike back against the overwhelming routine of submissiveness. With the same spirit of an individual's ambivalence over a formative breakthrough, *October* provided the very telling picture of a South African woman as tuning in to overcome personal dormancy:

> Sylvie is unnerved by the child's silence, by his unflinching stare. Standing like the countrywoman that she is, her left arm is tucked back, the left hand stretched across her back to clutch at the right elbow. The right hand rests on her chest. In this manner, an expert on the television said, countrywomen announce at the

[24] The above term has been italicized as it is central to indicate the presence of a standpoint of the disregarded.

> same time their humility and their … determination to see things through. Sylvie listened with interest; she is not averse to explanations that show her to be part of a wider world … (*October*, 5).[25]

Not without merit, in the context of Sylvie's self-awareness, is Hein Viljoen's, Minnie Lewis' and Chris M. van der Merwe's viewpoint referring, by and large, to a framework of "coloured space and identity". What they underline relates to individuals functioning in "different dimensions", who are prompted to consider "adopt[ing] different identities" so as not to be compliantly torn apart "between different worlds" (2005: 5). For this reason, we observe Sylvie as actively pushing for self-reconfiguration. But also, Mercia, in the wake of confrontation with varying shades of a coloured life, must embrace her own multifaceted self-identification. Presented as the brother's foul-mouthed wife/a relic of South African intransigence and confinement, Sylvie progressively shows the true colors of an independent/experienced woman, and those of a full-fledged individual struggling to mold her life in the post-apartheid reality. Such reformed self-perception runs counter to certain cliched depictions of the coloureds as in a "position of weakness and vulnerability" (Adhikari 2005: 181). The perception of various facets of Sylvie's disposition becomes the *sine qua non* of writing down/voicing Mercia's own story[26] of a female individual who eventually endorses positioning herself both as a refined thinker of Western eloquence and a South African woman/coloured. With these perspectives in play, a more efficient dialogue, a "communication across traditional … boundaries", has a chance to settle in. It allows her to go beyond traditional scripts and give voice to coloured women who have been often chronicled as on the margins of public recognition.

Prior to Mercia's acknowledgement of a comprehensive outlook, first we see her one-dimensional portrayal of the unsophisticated female as inscribed into inimical socio-cultural formats of the past. Sylvie as an unpolished persona, being part of the parochial uncivilized territory, determines the reason for the main protagonist/the outsider assuming a condescending attitude towards what the former represents. Although Wicomb's protagonists are supposed to move in realms wherein no lamentation over the "clear-cut rhetoric of nation and identity" is met (Guarducci 2015: 31), the leading character of *October* is temporarily operating with proverbial insults and overtones of the apartheid era. In this vein, Sylvie is not only to blame for insularity or for turning Jake into a boor, but she also stands for a bigger picture of South Africa – a country of belligerence – from which Mercia tried to free herself:

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25 All quotations from the novel are from Zoë Wicomb (2015), *October*, The New Press. References include the title of the novel followed by (a) page number(s).

26 As indicated elsewhere, a literary scholar living and working in Europe, considers commencing an autobiographical project by putting on paper the life-experiences of a South African migrant.

> [What] puzzles her [is] Jake's retreat to Kliprand. They have always talked about it as a place to leave behind, so why has he stayed and taken this Kliprand girl as wife? …. Should she [Mercia] say something? Let the woman [Sylvie] know that it is despicable to beat children? …. Mercia all but hears her say, there overseas where people still are decent, children may know how to behave and so, of course, do not need the belt. But here, in this godforsaken place, nothing other than a smack will keep a child on the straight and narrow (*October*, 29–30).

In time, Mercia learns that 'truth' is called by many names. Still, as if under the limits of Manichean thinking, the émigré shows an unnuanced understanding of *the other*'s functioning in South Africa. Unless a more inclusive view on local life-meanderings based on "less rigid categories" (Kim 2015: 7) is realized, the changed viewpoint of 'the stranger' entails little materialization. Only a more adequate representation of the countrywoman can counter the stereotype of Sylvie as one who is inert and unable to escape certain damaging ruts of the old South African order. Without the aforesaid revision of her stance, Mercia is left with the simplified image of a coloured female as contingent on and driven by the rules of degrading apartheid offensiveness. Unwilling to endorse the spirit of former days, the European visitor will have to eventually find a way not to pigeonhole *the other* South African into a tarnished idea of coloured boorishness. Otherwise Mercia, as another coloured, stays incapacitated by "… suffer[ing] from the anxiety of influence". Just as discovering Sylvia's personal dimensionality becomes possible, so too does "… feel[ing] like carrying on with her story, vouch[ing] for the truth …" become imaginable (*October*, 13). Without an insight into the local, circumscribed within the boundaries of her secure lines of scholarly reasoning, she falls victim to the mentality of a 'modern' observer from a foreign country. Her efforts, in this case, come down to safeguarding herself against the unrefined intellectual framework of an uncultured, violent, submissive woman, whose capacity to articulate herself is limited. As long as Mercia perceives her sister-in-law from the lens of a casual visitor, the latter's actions and distinctiveness remain misread.

What possibly steps into the void of potential misconceptions is the picture of a coloured female of "… the beautiful name Sylvie, which meant Good Girl".[27] Instead of following Mathey's understanding of the old paradigm (clarified in the

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[27] Let us consider Mathey's understanding of one of the South African traditionalist patterns of molding coloured female identities. As she indicates, speaking of such an unprogressive mental background, one should have in mind a person "brought up in a … conservative coloured community in which traditional male-female constructs were taken for granted. [There], social identities of wife and mother worked with this conservative paradigm to fix [women] into a position in which a husband was unquestionably and naturally the dominant partner", and women felt "constrained by the perceived limits of how far [one] could go in terms of asserting [one's] own individuality" (Mathey 2004: 132).

footnotes), Wicomb, in due course, presents the local woman not only as a naïve and compliant boor, but also a person of accumulated wisdom. She could "… stretch out her arm, point a finger, skim it across, taking in you and you and you, all of you stuck-up ones, who will say not a word against her, who wouldn't dare, 'cause why, she is the Reckless One who's seen it all …'" (*October,* 94). The same woman, with years of experience of being a wife to Jake and enduring the plight of belonging to one of the underprivileged ethnicities in South Africa, will not allow anyone to objectify her. Hence, as an independent woman, she expresses zero tolerance for Mercia's patronizing attitude. And it is exactly this disrespect which led the latter to believe that by taking Sylvie's child abroad, away to Scotland, she would save the youngster from filling the shoes of 'uncivilized' South Africans. Apart from that, of concern was also not to let the youth be brought up by a 'horrible' native mother. Along with this 'noble gesture', Mercia could think of herself as contributing to rescuing the boorish countrywoman from further troubles. Due to her outsider's arrogance, the guest seems not to have noticed that on being asked for financial "help with the nephew's education", at no point was she encouraged to show a patronizing attitude towards *the other* coloured. Reduced to an unwelcome embodiment of uncultivated/clichéd South African-ness, Sylvie responds emotionally: "I'm a nobody, so you think you have to take my child away? That I'm not good enough to bring him up?" (*October*, 238). Having crossed the borderline of acting in good faith and being blindfolded, Mercia realizes that this "misunderstanding" stems from an unjustified sense of superiority as well as from little heed paid to the sister-in-law's strength. Eventually, the educated one/the outsider must admit how "sorry and deeply embarrassed" she is (*October*, 239). In accordance with Kim's terminology, the overall objective does not come down to tuning these two into the same wavelength, but rather into "cultivating a mindset that integrates, and not separates … differences" (Kim 2015: 8). Mercia "should have known better" (*October,* 239) and have presented more eagerness to move the goalposts to reach out to Sylvie's world and put herself on an equal footing with a family member. After all, Sylvie is a resident female ally, whose untampered demeanor was a side-effect of the individual's/coloured's struggle to survive and reclaim one's voice in the surrounding world of unrelenting South African roughness and coercion.

4. A European coloured – crisscrossing the boundaries of time and space

Much as Sylvie's subjectivity has been mediated, with a fuller sympathy towards the self-sufficiency of a *coloured* South African woman; further on it is the character of Mercia – intriguingly, pursuing Wicomb's life paths – whose autobiographical efforts come to the fore. The idea of self-reconstitution is a prerequisite for coming to terms with a sense of "multiple belongings"

(Wicomb 2018: 127)[28]. Already in 1996, Rob Gaylard presented a view that Wicomb's "position and perspective" (1996: 177) was unique and took her characters onto the ground of shaky identification by highlighting – as phrased by Driver – "a woman brought up 'coloured' in South Africa" who moved on to live on a different continent (Driver (1993) quoted in Gaylard 1996: 177). In *October*, it is evident that the author's frame of reference has apparently not changed much. This novel's focal point, as indicated before, concentrates on a female born in South Africa, currently living in the north of Europe, who takes a stance on disrupted bonds with the homeland. The major questions pertain to defining whether/how one succeeds in facing the dynamics between the country of origin and the one of actual residence. Of concern, for the visitor, is whether a clear line of demarcation between the time of apartheid and what comes after its demise can be drawn. As it turns out, for someone who has long been dwelling outside the country, the South Africa of today poses a challenging puzzle. Adhikari adequately named the phenomenon by indicating how often post-apartheid transformations have put forward an either/or dichotomy. On the one hand, few changes have been brought to the lives of coloured people; on the other, "regarding their position in the new South Africa, few will deny that their lives have been profoundly affected by changes since the transition to democracy" (Adhikari 2005: 176). Worth noting, in the above context, is the question as to whether any looked-for traits of a reformed post-apartheid reality have been materialized; whether South Africa's transformation has worked toward validating the role of coloured women. None of the above questions can be addressed, however, should the academic continue shutting herself off from identification with the native land's 'lesser folk'. Rather, by seeking a middle path between far-off places/standpoints, she finds common ground with other coloureds, without downplaying the significance of Western experience, but also with minimal detachment from the South African locality.

The part of Wicomb's story which relates to Mercia is clearly concatenated not only with "the idea of 'here' and 'there', 'home' and 'away'", but also with being between the old and new South Africa. As further maintained by Guarducci, "this is structured in such a way as to produce a continuous sense of relativity about spatial issues" (2015: 29). According to Viljoen, Lewis and van der Merwe, in narratives of this kind the "hero[ine] … move[s] into a liminal zone where identity might be analyzed into factors that can be recombined in new ways" (Viljoen, Lewis & van der Merwe (2005) after Turner 1982: 18).[29] Indeed, one of the key aspects of the novel, as I argue, concentrates

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[28] In a nutshell, Wicomb disputes any essentialist formats of "coloured-ness", especially if those were to be confined to national interests (2018: 127).

[29] As underlined by Viljoen, Lewis and van der Merwe, a potential thematization of the individual

on the leading character finding herself at a specific crossroads, resonance of which is enhanced by the overlapping planes of two separate geographical locations. Mercia, as a more refined and knowledgeable individual, with a life spanning over two distant socio-cultural realities, operates against international and local backgrounds to re-imagine herself in terms of the tangled roots. After weighing up the benefits of being in and out, she begins to construe herself in terms of her overseas dwelling and South Africa's transforming socio-political composite of yesterday and today. Nonetheless, the initial stage of her 'peregrination' seems intensely dualistic, generating some judgments at the basis of which lies the empowering of a cosmopolitan worldview[30] as opposed to South African essentialist intransigence.

Beyond doubt, as the author seems to imply, what Mercia has gained by living abroad is a new sensibility that results in sympathizing with the lot of women. As I discussed earlier, one observes a better understanding of Sylvie's condition, even if its materialization, preceded by initial condescending undertones, comes after a strenuous face-to-face confrontation with the rises and falls of the family's everyday life. Nonetheless, despite the developing sense of community the academic feels towards the less cultured countrywoman, Mercia has difficulty in building up an improved, positive aura of belonging to *the other*'s place of living. Sylvie's habitat is perceived as dualistic, seen either through the prism of the goodwill of the 1990s or through certain fossilized socio-cultural patterns of bygone intransigence. In post-conflict South Africa, only by encountering the routines of Jake and Sylvie's existence can Mercia receive confirmation of the inaccuracy of the naïve dichotomy. In interviews, Wicomb repeatedly underlined that insightful observations and commentaries on the native country remain an imperative.[31] With her status of an (e)migrant, as Heilna du Plooy

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as set against the backdrop of such liminality shows that functioning within that domain and being "… caught between … often opposing spaces" does entail "being neither one nor the other, but rather borrowing useful characteristics from both" (2005: 18).

30 At this point, the term cosmopolitanism signals the character's detachment from the local. Yet, as noted elsewhere, the author constructs the protagonist in accordance with an alternative dictum about the significance of one's roots. Determined to examine the local/national dimension, one is not to embrace narrowly phrased nationalism, but rather to "reimagine [it] as open and fluid, receptive to change and exchange" in the matter of individual or collective identity (Driver 2011: 104). Eventually, Mercia's cosmopolitanism in a sense turns into in-betweenness or, as Kim would say, "international personhood" (2015: 4) that does not disqualify the provincial perspective.

31 In an interview with Hein Willemse, Wicomb leaves no doubt as to how vital a part of her literary output consists of references to South Africa. Thinking of India as a recurring theme in Rushdie's fiction, she considers Scotland as another, less pressing domicile than the country of origin: "I realized that I [need to] write about South Africa. I don't want to sit in Scotland. …. I wondered, 'Does Rushdie have the same problem? Why doesn't he write about living in England? Why is he still writing about India?'" (2002b: 151).

asserts, "telling stories" – under such conditions – "becomes a complex process of identification and acknowledgment as well as questioning and distancing" (2005: 49). And no matter if the author discusses the figure of a South African countrywoman or outlines the female scholar's attitude towards the homeland and its inhabitants, it is most likely that Wicomb wants to speak from the middle ground.[32] Hence her characters must learn to criticize what still requires further modification in the new socio-political order, as well as be keen to recognize what has been achieved in cultural, social and political terms.[33] The same spirit that manifests in carving the middle ground to a new understanding of the native country eventually compels Mercia to affirm her own formative standpoint exactly halfway between distant denotations of time (before and after apartheid) and space (away from and back to South Africa). As pointed out before, marked by in-betweenness/international personhood, Wicomb causes her character to be exposed to competing viewpoints and socio-cultural factors. Before such a cross-cultural consensus comes to the fore, confirming the somewhat rewarding essence of alternating identities, Mercia will have to navigate through background tensions, misconceptions and misunderstandings, both of her own and of the other world's making.[34]

Prior to leaving for the African continent, immersed in cultural imprints of the European north, Mercia appears to be on her guard against blindly considering this trip in terms of a sweet homecoming[35]:

> … in the Southern Hemisphere, with the sun well on its way to the equator it will be warm, at least during the day. How effortlessly the word comes: home, the place she has not lived in for more than twenty-six years. Hot, oppressive, and heavy with the memories … of the old man. … Home, no more than a word, its meaning hollowed out by the termites of time, a shell carrying only a dull ache for the substance of the past" (*October*, 18).

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32 In that sense, the idea of "home" is less palpable and, as argued by Guarducci, resembles "[a] network of connections more or less visible between [distant locations]" (2015: 31)

33 Viljoen, Lewis and van der Merwe, speaking of "interrelated" cultural domains, point out people functioning at different levels of signification. With this in mind, it should not come as a surprise that Wicomb tries to embrace the notion of acknowledgement and distancing through the story of individuals who "belong to different levels–an ethnic … level, a gender level, a national level" (2005: 5).

34 Speaking of the other world, I invoke the framework of the discreet distance maintained by the main protagonist towards the native country and her compatriots, who by some thoughts given to their status eventually do play their role in adjusting Mercia's personal identification to the pressing sense of in-betweenness.

35 The notion of distancing oneself from the place of birth derives from the fact that Wicomb has been always on guard against nationalism which feeds itself off the nostalgic "search for 'authentic' tradition" (2018: 204).

Not only is she wary of too easy an identification with South Africa, but also her affiliation with indigenous *others*, like her own brother, comes equally difficult. On top of this, full of bitter reproach, it is Mercia's closest relative who assists in tagging her as oriented towards the cultural sophistication of the Occident. In line with dialectical reasoning, reserved about the early roots, Mercia appears incapable of defining representatives of the local framework, like Sylvie, in any better terms than those of the former South African coarseness: "You don't know Sylvie, but you know that she's not your kind, not good enough for your brother. You've become European, too grand for us; you don't belong here anymore" (*October*, 158). Yet, to think widely about contemporary South Africa, its people and herself, it becomes central to employ a more nuanced perspective enabling one to reconsider an indigenous socio-cultural tapestry very much from the outside as from within. Only when Mercia spans the continents – physically and mentally – does a valid inference establishing more than one truth become workable. In this sense, the overall milieu of South Africa can neither be schematically fossilized for its past crudeness nor idealistically wished for its completed socio-political transformation. The same is true with South Africans, who cannot be perceived through the framework of misleading binary oppositions. While steering the middle path, she eventually identifies an error of judgment of her own making: "Jake was right, she [Mercia] conceded, and her view of the girl was inexcusable, so that she would make every effort to get to know Sylvie and rise above prejudices" (*October*, 159). Let us not forget that Wicomb tends to stress a more three-dimensional image (discussed earlier) of the countrywoman. To see Sylvie beyond the façade of unjustified appearances allows the visitor to formulate a sounder judgement on the present shapes of South African-ness.

Along with a more insightful observation on the meanderings of South African life, pressing questions concerning Mercia's domestic origins begin to substantiate themselves. Unsurprisingly, part of that homeward journey contains a reminiscence of "the comfortable familiarity". With this fondness in mind, "… the moderate October heat is comforting, and she does love the familiar view of gray-green scrub with flat-topped mountains looming blue in the distance. She loves that hot, red sand where ancient tortoises sit for days resting in the same scrap of shade …" (*October*, 127). Although this shade of sentimentality has its resonance in the novel, nonetheless the bulk of Wicomb's story aims at a more resolute and comprehensive analysis of what coming back home, to the place that used to be hers, (truly) denotes. There is no room for solipsistic daydreaming or any authentication of "nostalgic sentimentality" (Wicomb 2018: 2005). As signaled elsewhere, of crucial importance is the extent to which the idea of homecoming corresponds to an image of the country after its transformation as

contingent on that which was[36]. The main character's angst suggests that the unsolicited past has been stored in her memory. But recalling the 'old' South Africa, with its culture of violence, neither can be routinely brought to the fore nor can result in mere disavowal.[37] The former nevertheless manifests itself since Mercia, enhanced by a slightly changed hierarchy of socio-cultural expectations, is alert to any signs of the bygone maladies in the contemporary South Africa. Alternatively, whenever the slightest trace of sprouting romance with the idea of reformed South African-ness prevails, it is counterbalanced – precisely – by the protagonist's reminiscences of the insanity of apartheid.

The intersections of the past and present are communicated, among other things, through the main character's ambivalent but acutely symbolic feelings over the phenomenon of the salmon journeying back to the place where they "were spawned". For one thing, Mercia is fascinated by their strength, vigor and determination. Nonetheless, she also reckons their effort "repellent": "… the endless repetition, … the need to return to origins, to the very same stream … the circularity of their lives, and the return all tainted with October blood" (*October*, 124). What becomes apparent here is the author's determination to underscore the double interplay of a repetitive motion as tantamount to a (non-)reflexive life-expedition to the place of origin. Samuelson, pointing at *October*, wants to read it *inter alia* as imbued with insistent life-patterns, wherein "nostalgia" is brought to light as a major driving force (2016: 129). Indeed, Wicomb's protagonist does labor over nostalgic re-imagining of the place in which she used to reside. With this narrative viewpoint, we are drawn to a certain South African geographical locale as marked by a sense of the aforementioned alluring familiarity. Such sentiments are understandable, yet let us not forget that the novelist singles out referential actuality as her artistic goal[38].

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36 Regarding the above, I allow myself a brief digression on the claim of Annie Gagiano. Interviewed by Michela Borzaga, she underlined what comes after apartheid should be "envisioned … as an opportunity to establish a just society …". In her understanding this entails "[the] break[ing] out of that closed circle [of the past] and becom[ing] future-orientated, to turn the society into a dynamic one" (Gagiano 2010: 195). Concurrently, an individual's reconsideration of the troubled past is necessary, if a newly assumed attitude towards one's present life in a reformed national framework is to be drawn upon healthy grounds. Under such a disposition, it becomes obvious that there is no going back to "that which was" (after Glenn Patterson's novel, published under the same title in 2004) without critical reflection.

37 Referring to such a background in terms of its vehemence, I present Mark Shaw's conceptualization of the post-conflict South African socio-political milieu as "… a culture of violence which resulted from years of apartheid brutality" (Shaw (2002), quoted in Bartnik 2014a: 22). As underlined by Wicomb, it is not easy to dismantle that bomb since South Africans "have grown into being through violence necessitated by apartheid's intransigence" (2018: 63).

38 The above distinction between the textual and the historical in writings I take from André Brink, who associated the latter with a writerly intervention in the public domain that always carries the baggage of a certain "political load" (1998: 185).

Responsive to the homeland, she makes it resonate within the characters' mental maps as a captivating point of reference,[39] rather than affectionate tribute. If so, then any reoccurrence of South African imagery and depiction of other South Africans cannot be devoid of critical reflection. Drawn to the native land, Mercia is gradually forced to reach an equilibrium in getting to read/write her 'self' in juxtaposition with the complex, and often bitter flavors of contemporary South African lives.

Edward Said once said that, in thinking of a specific socio-political dimension, we come up with a "…constructed and maintained sense of place" (2000: 180). While Wicomb's narrative about South African contexts appears mindful of the notion of constructed-ness, it is difficult to read her story as hypothesizing significantly unchanged or completely transformed South African mental backgrounds. My point, then, is that such agreeable familiarity would have gone undisturbed, save for the locus of in-betweenness that rests with the author. As Agnieszka Bielawska indicates, it is only with a steadfastly upheld formative standpoint that "[i]dentity is formed through the … self-conception of a person … based on a feeling of [definite] belonging and of being recognized as part of a *particular* [read 'unalterable'] socio-cultural group/setting" (2012: 19, emphasis mine). Since the whole narrative is averse to uncritical representation, be it individual or collective, Wicomb's characters and the backdrop of South Africa can by no means thus be formulated as immune to revision. Therefore, Mercia (but also Sylvie) is imbued with the formative flexibility to eschew the immutability of fixed personal positionings and resultant outlooks upon a countrywide character.

Mercia frequently shifts perspective, which indicates the character's internal struggle over a sense of "[un]belonging and affiliation"[40] (Guarducci 2015: 30).

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39 In an excerpt from the interview mentioned above, one reads about Wicomb's conviction that the native background has never ceased to resonate in her writing, and that she "… draws extensively on her own [South African] experience, the people and landscape with which [she's] familiar and [which she] loves" (Samuelson 2016: 129).

40 With regard to the above assertion concerning the protagonist's tensions, brought about by an observable struggle over her place of settlement, it is worth noticing that Wicomb's personal experience seems to have overlapped the fictional scenario of an individual life as thematized, for instance, in *October*. As Gready underlined, Wicomb living abroad tried to visualize "… a home in writing about home, [but also] in characters who seek a home … in a kind of vicarious homecoming" (Gready (1994) quoted in Gaylard 1996: 177). It does not seem too controversial to claim that such a motif reoccurs on a relatively permanent basis in Wicomb's oeuvre, especially if one takes into account what Phaswane Mpe says about the power of "change", be it "social, political, economic or cultural". Accordingly, whenever a writer is exposed to that kind of experience–such as Wicomb living and creating under the impact of intersecting cultural realities – "a feeling of [dis]location" comes to the fore (Mpe 2005: 182). Considering the above conclusions arguably correct, the search of Wicomb's characters for a sense of place in the state of impermanence becomes evident and comprehensible.

In a flashback scene of the protagonist's life in Scotland, Mercia thought, rather anxiously, "… of Glasgow as home". But then the following questions were posed: "Was there not the risk of being irretrievably lost? between cities? between continents? …. What kept her in Scotland?". Maybe, inadvertently, "she would have liked to return to South Africa after the demise of apartheid?" (*October,* 111). But even if homecoming sounds a more authentic and appealing experience, Mercia's arrival in Kliprand seems deficient in clarity as regards to what country she returns. Apparently, with aversion to the spirit of erstwhile apartheid belligerency, the protagonist shows some inclination to welcome the 'new' South Africa:

> Return has always been a tricky notion …. [P]eople often ask why she has not returned to the country after Mandela's release? She would shake her head, shrug, would not deign to answer. As if exile were a frozen affair in which you are kept pristinely in the past, one that a swift thaw could restore so that, rinsed and refreshed, you are returned in mint condition to an original time, an original place" (*October*, 144).

But even if formal transformation/democratization of the national setting has become a fact, it is evident the old temper of South Africa does not go away so easily.

Regardless of intellectual competences, Mercia's perception is tarnished by her revulsion towards the country's former days. With no deeper self-reflection, it is immediately activated and translates into her regarding Sylvia as "the butcher girl", whose unruly "get[ting] around" with raw flesh, reminded the former of the bygone violence she resented/resents so much:

> What is happening to Mercia, the carnivore …? Is this the measure of her distance from the place, … from her people? … Is Mercia growing fastidious about meat, about the killing of animals? She doesn't know. …. everything is topsy-turvy here. She would like to think that it is only the head, the face that is after all so like a human's, that is repellent. She remembers … the picture of John the Baptist's severed head on a plate …. Hideous and barbaric, she thought … (*October*, 168–169).

Such unpleasant associations position Mercia as expressing an uneasy welcome to the place where a lot of coloureds, in order to endure, were forced to use all means to 'adapt to' the surrounding violence. By looking at Sylvie, the overall aura of infamous scenes of the apartheid era happens to be re-projected. The new South Africa, when envisioned by the visitor, is supposed to be different. Hence Mercia's spur-of-the-moment repudiation of the Sylvie character (and everything she stands for), though understandable, requires further modification.[41] Consequently, neither

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41 According to van der Vlies, Wicomb is persistent in claiming that real change can only be built on two pillars. One of them is strictly political and relates to "the remaking of the constitutional

the 'unworldly woman' nor the current state of South African democracy should be depicted in black and white, but in decidedly more subtle colors. In the same vein, the perspective of the academic, whose sense of intellectual aloofness and cultural superiority is seen in time to be deceptive, must be replaced by a more nuanced understanding of the past legacy (properly internalized) as well as of the present (without excessive idealization).

To recapitulate, having come to the country as a sublimated foreigner rather than as a South African coloured, Mercia disavows Sylvie's old ruts of reasoning and life-conditions, seeing nothing else but the native acting allegedly like a brute molded by the past. This script stands in contrast to South Africa as an imagined area of democratic change and assists Mercia to demonstrate a sense of superiority. Yet such a schematically sanctioned discrepancy between the two coloureds proves only that this vision of reality must be subject to correction. Not to be crippled by dialectical thinking, it is the visitor who learns to tone down and assume a new approach that safeguards one against critical oversimplifications. In order to acknowledge the axis of intersecting influences as well as mitigate the preconceptions of a free woman from the European continent, Wicomb interleaves a subsequent, though digressive story about Nicolas Murray. Nurtured in an environment of ethnic divisions and widespread violence, Jake and Mercia's father seemed to press for a puzzlingly optimistic view on the life and identity of coloureds. In this sense, with a progressive agenda, Murray stood in opposition to the allegedly compliant Sylvie. He reasoned, on the one hand, that "[w]e can't think of this country as ours …. Coloured people can't support the Springboks; no, when we sit with our ears glued to the radio, it's the Lions or the All Blacks whom we cheer. … We're free to belong anywhere" (*October*, 145). Is it legitimate then to claim that Mercia's father and those like him are synonymous with building the identity of a non-contextual life "above geography" (*October*, 145), attributable to anyone untainted with South African belligerence? Not necessarily. Irrespective of his backing of formative freedom and the above-geography identification, in Jake's as well as Mercia's eyes, Nicolas stands out as a representative of both the aggressive and defeatist mindsets of the apartheid state. His son, mindful of the father's quasi-pedagogical methods, reduced to the rule of strong-arm or regular beatings, "… had addressed [him] as Grootbraas …. Mercia knew that Jake could not bring himself to call him Father, saw that the child's fear and dislike of Nicholas had not dissipated with time". And it was Jake's sister who had to realize that Nicolas Murray, a coloured man, resorted to such violent means of upbringing

order"; the other sounds more nebulous as it relies on "the ethics of interpersonal relationships" (2018: 28).

since he was nothing else but "a product of his time"[42] (*October*, 22). Under the spell of homecoming and with the benefit of hindsight, Mercia starts to see their father in terms of evident flaws, and herself in terms of counterproductive mental escapism. As a coloured, also as a culturally in-between person, she must eventually acknowledge that her position compels her to "think outside of the [self-imposing] ideology" (*October*, 80), be it the father's declarative broad-based progressive identification or her own disregard for and aloofness to South African crudeness. Abdicating a personal responsibility for encompassing the entirety of South African-ness would compromise a well-adjusted sense of individual and collective identity. Hence Wicomb's affirmative presentation of Mercia's viewpoint in-transition turns towards a far less uncompromising reception of contemporary South Africa, which roughly corresponds to projected images of a diametrically opposite-to-what-went-before national coexistence.[43] Additionally, the eye-opener tale prompts her to see *the other* female's coarseness and violence through the lens of a self-defensive response to the only slightly changing brutality of the surrounding world. Without this knowledge, without a complex outlook upon up-to-date South African lives, Mercia's autobiographic project provides only a baffling picture of her own persona as a condescendingly detached individual. This in turn runs counter to Wicomb's objective to embrace "personhood in the direction of an increasingly intercultural nature" (Kim 2015: 4), which prevents one from seeing just broken images of South African identification.

5. 'Writing about South Africa' by setting a new liminal space between two identities

Graham Dawson claims that a socio-political contextualization of literary narratives is often reckoned as "… central to the process of … transformation"[44]

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42 That patriarchal figure seems to resemble those coloureds who, as described by Erasmus, pondered their place in a world under the rule of apartheid, thinking of "a future with possibilities" (2017: 24).

43 Over the years, however, one encounters some scholarly voices which have indicated that the optimism concerning a genuine transformation in the wake of the demise of apartheid was rather far-fetched. In 2003, for instance, Melissa Steyn expressed her distrust towards the projected unity of the Rainbow Nation. According to her, the political change, and the time after, solidified the country's inner conflicts (2003: 242). Seven years later, Chris N. van der Merwe's diagnosis sounds even more ominous. In his opinion, though the open conflict had been brought to a closure, in political terms, its ramifications in 2010 were still resonant, for the past has effectively "structured everyone's life" (van der Merwe & Gobodo-Makizela 2010: 180).

44 Crucial, taking into account the above, is to understand that literature of this kind inscribes itself into "the development of a pluralist culture", where the real undergoes re-readings beyond the dominant language (Cathie McKimm (2001) quoted in Dawson 2012: 140). This viewpoint

(2012: 139). In accordance with this stance, Wicomb presents a narrative on the individual self and South African reality as closely interlinked. The juxtaposition of two divergent perspectives, as reflected in Mercia's personal journey, becomes an interesting version of the objective correlative that reveals a polemical agenda on "the New South Africa", evoking such raw emotions *inter alia* as "disappointment" (*October*, 15). Wicomb's fictional account, in this regard, runs parallel to critiques expressed in her non-fiction, wherein she discloses "the dangers of the hegemonic discourses of a new post-apartheid nationalism" (Vlies 2018: 4). Talking to her brother, Mercia bluntly stated that the reality they are facing, so many years after the political watershed, legitimizes one to highlight "… how much of the old South Africa is still in place" (*October*, 16). In fact, Wicomb eventually presents both Sylvie and Mercia as of one mind with respect to the results of the country's transformation. The difference between these two amounts to a sense of disillusionment that is based, respectively, on years-long experiences of the local inhabitant as well as some new observations of the outsider made at different stages of the latter's visit to the homeland.

In maintaining an orientation towards the country's future, but remaining mindful of the past of social, cultural and political divisions, Mercia's reflections imply how little has changed within the very fabric of South African society. Hers is a sad conclusion regarding how the old rifts, in fact, seem to have been petrified. Vague and undecided, in this light, is the future of the underprivileged. Thinking of the dwellings where coloureds, blacks and other have-nots live, she is not only "amazed" by their architectural design – "… in a country where land is plentiful, houses are virtually butted against each other with barely any space between the boundary fences", but also very critical of the whole concept *per se* – "[h]ow strange that the architects …, living as they no doubt do in comfortable houses lost in large gardens, and well out of sight of their neighbors, should imagine that [*the others*] want to huddle together in cramped conditions" (*October*, 43). Sylvie's response is consistent with the academic's conclusion, yet goes even further in indicating that the brutalization of post-apartheid reality extends across the former walls of partition: "[b]ut what can you expect? The state of the country, with nothing working! The blacks now wanting to kill all the coloureds …. Who knows what will happen … in such place[s]" (*October*, 44). Towards the end of the novel comes an interesting prediction as to the direction contemporary South Africa is heading. In a conversation with a school-time colleague, Mercia exhibits a tone of disenchantment, which echoes Sylvie's

allows to better understand Wicomb's persistence on weaving referential/polemical stories mainly by female characters. As she explained in one of her articles, such a literary device is aimed at "double emancipation". On the one hand, simply a female character is empowered; on the other hand, women are constructed as "racialized other[s]" (1998: 93) whose voice, instead of being suppressed, enters the public domain to overhaul narrative hegemony.

state, concluding that it is "[t]oo late now for [us and the like] of South Africa …. For all the shit in this New South Africa, for all the complaints that the country is going to the dogs …" (*October*, 182).

Irrespective of all the flaws in the country's policies, Mercia – as a friend of her stated – continues "… to write about South Africa" (*October*, 211)[45]. No other option is on the table as her fate is predetermined by the place she was born in, so there is no break from writing in which reconsidering the tangled roots plays a marked role. For this reason, Wicomb constructs her main character as being of two minds. Prior to a more profound reflection, there is Mercia's eagerness for giving up on "this place" (*October*, 15–16). On the other hand, the same protagonist, exactly because of the rediscovered ties with the homeland, voices reservations concerning the effectiveness of self-exile. For an in-between person, for a Scottish-South African, for a cosmopolitan coloured, to work out some sort of desirable condition of mental stasis, away from that place, turns out to be no option at all. What is on offer is the reverse effect of to-and-fro journeying. An interesting point on the matter was raised by Dass, who indicated that Wicomb's idea of belonging is slightly paradoxical for it implies not cementing one's position but being "in the [endless] process of … 'coming home'" (2011: 142). The best illustration of such a transforming mindset[46] comes in the mid-section of Wicomb's narrative when Mercia, living concurrently in two realities, … knows that home is here as well. There is a part of her …; the light slants onto the floor precisely as it does at the other end of the year in Glasgow – the world simply reversed. … no point in saying that traveling had brought very little, that apart from the civility achieved through money and self-regard the northern world seemed much the same …" (*October*, 127–128). To come and go, in the context of the above discussion, is not synonymous with the mechanical repetition or metaphorical dead-end mentioned in relation to salmons and their annual route up the river. Rather, the whole narrative implies

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45 In this sense, Wicomb's protagonist repeats the words used by John Maxwell Coetzee, expressed in one of his fictional autobiographies. Coetzee's was also of an opinion that, notwithstanding the general objective to leave behind the South African domain in order to create 'art' (with no further adjectives attached), eventually the country remains resonating in his writing. Not only Coetzee, but also James Joyce should be referred to in the above context. First, he is – by definition – associated with writerly, yet ineffective efforts to disengage oneself from commenting on the complexity of Irishness. Second, as Gaylard noticed, Wicomb already in the early nineties created a female character who underwent a similar development as Joycean Dedalus. Her *idée fixe* was to "… escape or overcome whatever is limiting or constricting in the environment and society in which she has grown up; and … the countervailing impulse to return home and reconnect with the family and the milieu which has both helped and hindered her search for self-definition" (1996: 178).

46 Kim points at certain traits of a new mindset to be associated with the aforementioned "international personhood". The claim is that with such an in-between approach one "cultivates … integrat[ion] and not separat[ion]" regarding "cultural differences" (2015: 5, 7)

attempts to affirm one's place in the world by a reflection over the adequately construed cosmopolitan self and by a profound and critical re-definition of the domicile with which the protagonist cannot cease to identify.

A combination of related experiences of someone living in Scotland, yet mentally residing in the fatherland, allows the author to bring out the flavors of an unorthodox/flexible identity formation. From one angle, this is a disadvantageous mental state of being suspended between two separate formative influences. Hence derives Wicomb's thematization of identity as hanging in the balance. In light of the above, that the author's exploring persistence to foster questions like 'who I am'/'who we are' is consistent with Minnie Lewis' diagnosis of similar formative approaches pointing at "identity in jeopardy" (2005: 164)[47] does not seem far-fetched. On the other hand, what has been proposed by the novelist does not necessarily need to be seen through the prism of a negative scenario. In this sense, it is also a story through which Wicomb acknowledges more constructive ways of identification that may lead one out of narrowly construed formats of unwanted cultural dominance or nationality. Paradoxically, the entire concept of looking at one's persona and geographical origins from a healthy distance, in the state of in-betweenness, evidently guarantees the author and her main character the space to initiate a more balanced debate upon their *colored* selves and upon their perception of themselves in and beyond contemporary South Africa.

6. Conclusion

In a nutshell, there are three pivotal points around which my discussion of the novel revolves. In presenting the Sylvie character Wicomb points at the tangled tale of a female coloured individuality. On account of a sympathetic tone towards the countrywoman, we observe someone confined within the rigidified socio-cultural paradigm[48]. Throughout the narrative, Sylvie looms larger as a more complete individual who compels a European to verify her own misconception regarding *the other*'s cliched exemplification of the much-resented face of South African-ness. Nurtured on apartheid antagonisms, Sylvie's noticeable uncouthness makes her a representative of the old days when belligerence laid the foundations for socio-political discord. With such insularity in sight, Mercia – as remolded by some standards of liberal (Western/European)

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47 More than a decade before the novel was written Wicomb had strongly emphasized that, even though coloureds always struggled to position themselves within the framework of South Africa, they should not feel any "discomfort" when it comes to boosting the "business of finding who we are" (Wicomb 2002b: 147).

48 According to Kim, personal transformation, among other things, results in positioning oneself against "rigid boundedness" (2015: 7).

democracy – expresses little readiness for any reciprocal dialogue with someone whom she sees as a coloured simpleton. Nevertheless, only when the main protagonist's mindset is set half-way between two distinct cultural/socio-political contexts does her own insight into coloured South African-ness gain substantiality. What contributes to the shift in perspective is a more favorable and inclusive approach to local womanhood. Marked by violent gestures/ actions/expressions, the native coloured's measures are finally seen as taken to forge a gate towards self-recognition. The story reveals itself from such an angle only when the power of an unfixed/in-between narrative stance, wherein neither South Africa nor Scotland can be recognized as ultimate sites of belonging, comes to the fore. The place that provides a chance for giving serious thought to female and coloured identity resides in the middle or nowhere at all.[49] The most telling fragment, for that matter, relates to Mercia's explanation for her staying in a state of transition: "… the northern world seemed much the same– there was only the business of … inching this way and that, scratching about like a hen in the straw for a place in which to be comfortable" (*October*, 128). Interestingly, thanks to the existential persistence of a dialectical ideal of belonging and unbelonging,[50] we find a more adequate positioning of the coloured woman as set against the backdrop of post-apartheid South Africa. With this reference to the national domain, there comes the last of the three central points to mention. After the demise of the old regime, due to the 1994 political changeover, it seemed legitimate to expect meaningful changes within a new social fabric. Nonetheless, whether the present state of South Africa has lived up to envisioned democratic standards remains highly problematic. The deficiencies of the new systemic disposition become visible, especially if diagnosed by someone who, because of her descent, has all the tools to understand life-meanderings in the country of transition[51]. Viewing South Africa from the outside, but in fact from two different, yet interlinking cultural standpoints, allows Wicomb to avoid reductive essentialism. All in all, as the author claimed

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49 The notion of being 'somewhere' and 'nowhere' at the same time corresponds with Gaylard's indication that in reference to South African coloureds there is no mention of "homogenous identity" (1996: 187). This, in turn, explains why in Wicomb's works the main accent and approval is often put on "the space between". In this context, slightly digressive, yet worth considering is Lewis' discussion of a very local facet of coloured identity (Nomsa/Nansy from *A String of Blue Beads* by E. K. M. Dido (2000)). According to the critic, the female protagonist "… finds herself not truly belonging to either the center or the periphery, but rather the space opened by the dialogue between [two different backgrounds]" (Lewis 2005: 161).

50 In Bauman's understanding, "the phenomenon of … hybridity has been recast as a virtue and a sign of distinction, rather as a vice and a symptom of cultural inferiority" (2016: 29).

51 Asked about contemporary South African writing, Wicomb calls on Nadine Gordimer's acknowledgment of home-grown literature as authored by those who "… are capable of escaping from the narrowness of national boundaries" (Wicomb 2002a).

when interviewed by Willemse, one of the objectives in her writing is without a doubt to depict the South African reality, but in terms of internal discord rather than of "pureness". Unprocessed and left intact, "the notion of … essentialism" (Wicomb 2002b: 145–146) leads to striking a dissonant chord and hailing the post-apartheid order, with little room for a nuanced discussion on the nature of female coloured-ness as practiced and understood by an (un)sophisticated country-wife (Sylvie), a cultured academic woman (Mercia) or a female writer of South African descent (the author herself), all of whose in-between status turns out to be a personal and discursive asset.

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