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'You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town' by Zoë Wicomb: Decoding Democratic Discourse: Examining Authority and Gender Perspectives

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Abstract

This essay explores the complex literary analysis of Zoë Wicomb's widely read book "*You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*," paying particular attention to how the story undermines authority and gender norms. Employing a qualitative approach founded in literary criticism, the study dives into the intricate layers of Wicomb's work, giving light on the character dynamics, socio-political circumstances, and power structures woven into the fabric of the tale.

The process entails a thorough analysis of the novel's major themes, character relationships, and symbolic components. Using a close reading and contextual analysis, the study aims to interpret the democratic discourse in Wicomb's literary works.

Keywords: Apartheid, Identity, Gender Roles, Black Womanhood, Democratic Transitions

INTRODUCTION

This study deals with the South African author Zoë Wicomb. Her novels and essays present structures of authority in a critical perspective that defends democratic values. Moreover, in her first novel, *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (London, Virago Press, 1987), the main character Frieda is a young woman and, as a colleague of Wicomb points out: "Black womanhood is the political subject position from which she writes" and "it is fascinating to read her word from a gender perspective" (Samuelson, as cited in Hambidge, n.d.).

Wicomb was born in 1948 near Vanrhynsdorp, Western Cape, in South Africa. Growing up in small-town Namaqualand, she went to Cape Town for high school, and attended the University of the Western Cape, which was established in 1960 as a university for "Coloureds".

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After graduating, she left South Africa in 1970 for England, where she continued her studies at Reading University. She lived in Nottingham and Glasgow and returned to South Africa in 1990, where she taught for three years in the Department of English at the University of the Western Cape.

Since 1994 she has lived in Glasgow, where she was, until her retirement in 2009, Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Strathclyde. She was Professor Extraordinaire at Stellenbosch University from 2005 to 2011. She is now an Emeritus Professor at the University of Strathclyde.

CAPE COLOUREDS

In her first novel, Wicomb describes the everyday life of Cape Coloureds, some of whom would rather be considered as Whites while others would get closer to Africans which, according to apartheid laws, would bring them relegated far from the Cape Town city centre into new areas where social lodgings had been built rapidly and where public transport, dispensaries, public libraries and schools were still being built. Finally, others accepted being coloured and having a status of “in-between,” of “sandwiches” between Blacks and Whites, which, at the end of the apartheid years, was not at all a comfortable social situation.

It seems necessary to recall first the historical and literary contexts of the publication of Wicomb’s novel to help understand her various layers and her main character Frieda Shenton’s legacy. Then my analysis will focus on the novel itself and its deeper significance and impact. As concerns the historical context, I rely on the Historical Introduction of the novel by Marcia Wright in December 1999 and the 2014 edition of *A History of South Africa* by Leonard Thompson: “In 1999, the struggle in S.A. is defined not by race-led laws but rather by class aspirations and economic disadvantages that carry forward a history of vulnerability” (Wright, 1999, p.6). Frieda has to “cope with and transcend essentially conservative anxieties that feed the stereotypes purveyed by her mother,” who belongs to the petty bourgeoisie. The area of Namaqualand “encompasses a confusing array of identities” (Wright, 1999, p.8): indigenous Namaqua are one of the groups of Khoikhoi, cattle breeders, met by the Dutch when they first settled in the Cape area in the middle of the 17th century (Thompson, 2014). In the middle of the 19th century, the Namaqua group was replaced by Basters who formed groups of different origins from the frontier area. In the novel, the character of the servant Skitterboud is part of this group. The Griqua constituted the most important of the coloured frontiers people (Wright, 1999, p.9).

Boers settled in this marginal environment from the beginning of the 18th century. Even though, according to the British, they were poor and little cultured, indigenous people considered them as privileged as they belonged to the ruling class (Thompson, 2014). Here

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are some more details on the formation of the coloured Cape community: throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, religious marriages were celebrated between white men and Khoi or coloured women. In Cape Town, sailors who would stop over had sexual intercourse with slave black women imported on vessels of the Dutch East India Company. At the end of the 18th century, Deutsche soldiers brought as mercenaries by the same Dutch East India Company got married on the spot.

In fact, for more than a century, members of the Xhosa community, who had adopted Western culture, had been settled in the northwest part of Cape Town to constitute a buffer community against the attacks and raids by bushmen. From the early 19th century, other Xhosa arrived with the London Missionary Society or as workers to build railways and in the copper mines. It is important to recall that, as early as 1853, in the Cape colony, civil rights were theoretically equally shared among men of all races, provided they were qualified. Even though a colour-blind Constitution prevailed, the threshold of qualification kept rising, notably in the 1890s. In 1936, the inscription of Africans on electoral registers ceased. The process of abolition of voting rights was completed during apartheid (Wright, 1999, p.11).

When in 1808 the British took possession of the Cape colony, most Coloureds worked as domestic servants (Wright, 1999, p.18).

APARTHEID

Apartheid was established in 1948 and was to last till 1991. During the apartheid years, the various identities did not have the same value: Africans were at the foot of the ladder, Indians and Cape Coloureds higher and Whites at the top (Wright, 1999, p.12).

The apartheid government wanted to erase Coloured people from the electoral roll of the Cape Province (Wright, 1999, p.12). The latter resisted disenfranchisement through several trials but they were finally defeated in 1956.

During the 1950s, together with a Bantu Affairs Department, a specific ministry was created to supervise Coloureds, the Coloured Affairs Department. Among the apartheid laws, the 1950 Population Registration and Group Areas Acts would henceforth prevent them from being owners in their province. Moreover, the Population Registration Act particularly impacted the coloured community. Sub-categories were created: Cape Coloured, Cape Malay (Muslims), Griqua, and “other Coloureds.” As always, the National Party government divided and ruled. As a result, members of the same family could be classified into distinct categories, which made daily life extremely difficult. Moreover, the classification could be changed every year, which raised the feeling of fear and insecurity (Wright, 1999, pp.11-12). In the 1970s, the Black Consciousness Movement at the University of the Western Cape led protests. The

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1973 manifesto expressed the refusal of separate universities following the race of students (Wright, 1999, p.6).

In 1983, a tricameral Parliament envisioned a separate Chamber in which Coloureds could vote laws on their affairs. A substantial number of coloured people, following the campaign led by the United Democratic Front, understood that it was not a real democracy and they did not vote for the candidates for the separate Chamber (Wright, 1999, p.10).

In 1994, at the first democratic multiracial elections in South Africa, a majority of Coloureds supported the National Party mainly composed of Afrikaners in the Western Cape province. Meanwhile everywhere else throughout the country, the African National Congress largely won the presidential election. The Coloureds supported their masters because they were strongly attached to the Afrikaans language and the Calvinist protestant religion, both major factors of identity (Wright, 1999, p.16).

The ambiguity of Coloureds stems from their double descent as well as from two prejudices: one is against their skin colour and the other one is against women supposedly ready to have affairs with Whites (Wright, 1999, p.11).

During the apartheid years, their wages went down as compared with those of Whites. Women would be afraid to lose their work, which would lead them to be ready to make compromises (Wright, 1999, p.11I).

CHARACTERS IN WICOMB'S NOVEL

In Wicomb's novel, characters do have a deep conscience about their race and cultural status. To be allowed to practice an abortion Frieda denies she is coloured. An exceptional woman in her community, she refuses to follow traditional tracks followed by other coloured women. The reconciliation that ends the novel reminds us "that rehearsed, constraining histories can be transcended, at least momentarily" (Wright, 1999, p.21).

Literary Context

After the end of WWII, in an address at the first session of the general conference of UNESCO in 1946 Jean-Paul Sartre explained his conception of the power of words (le mot est « un véhicule d'idées » - Sartre, 1946, p.15) and of the impact of language, defined as « une activité humaine de dévoilement » (Sartre, 1946, p.16). As a consequence, the action of "nomination" is especially important because « nommer une chose c'est la transformer » (Sartre, 1946, p.17)… Language puts a person in front of his/her responsibilities (Sartre, 1946, p.18). Literature brings a fact onto the plane of reflection and objective mind (Sartre,

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1946, p.19)… willy-nilly a writer gives the name of love and hatred, oppression or comradeship to unclear social relationships between human beings (Sartre, 1946, p.20). A writer writes because he wishes to perpetuate the assertion of and the call for freedom in a world in which freedom is constantly threatened (Sartre, 1946, p.29). To him, contemporary literature is linked to democracy (Sartre, 1946, p.39).

Sartre's message takes a significant dimension when applied to the situation of literature in South Africa during the apartheid years. We will recall the respective situation of black and white writers as, at that time, any consideration was based on the difference of race imposed by the political system. The following development relies on the South African writer Njabulo Ndebele, who has participated in several conferences organized by our Research Group on South Africa (Groupe de Recherches sur l'Afrique du Sud - GRAS) at the Université de La Réunion (Sartre, 1946, pp.15-20; Ndebele, 1986).

From the 1950s most black South African writers were engaged. In a world of repression, oppression and daily suffering, they deemed that they could not be but engaged. As they were accused of being too political, and not artistic in their writings, they would respond that literature as such was a real luxury they could not afford because of the seriousness and urgency of the context. They would raise the emotions of their readers by representing daily oppression in a dramatic way and by using stereotypes such as the brutal Boer, the hypocritical liberal Anglophone and the exploited African, as well as sharp contrasts between oppressors and oppressed. They would help the reader recognize a situation and appreciate unfair features. As a result, the white minority would receive a negative image of itself that could help it move forward while the oppressed majority could find an expression of its indignation. This literature was received enthusiastically among the educated black population. Ruling Whites did not change their position whereas the black majority had no chance to appreciate this literature as they did not have access to a sufficient level (Ndebele, 1986). Let us not forget that the 1953 Bantu Education Act relied on the conviction that learning the basis of reading, writing and arithmetic (the 3 Rs) was largely enough for the majority of the South African population, who had to learn how to obey, be clean and correctly serve Whites. Verwoerd, Prime Minister from 1958 to 1966, was very explicit: "If the native in South Africa today in any of the schools in existence is being taught to expect that he will live his adult life under a policy of equal rights, he is making a big mistake... There is no place for him in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour" (Thompson, 1961).

Black Consciousness Movement

Little by little, protest writers understood that exclusive denunciation of the evils of apartheid was leading to a lack of interest among readers without helping liberate the black masses. Already in 1960 when the massacre of Sharpeville occurred, they would consider that nothing

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was to be expected from liberal Whites. Then they reconsidered the nature of their commitment and, influenced by the Black Consciousness Movement, they found another form of dedication. The emergence of the Black Consciousness Movement in 1968 encouraged Blacks to reject negative definitions imposed by the apartheid regime and to rediscover traditional African values (Ndebele, 1986, passim). Henceforth black writers began celebrating African assets: literature was no longer white-oriented, the expression of righteous moral indignation but black-oriented, the expression of a deep wrath. From then on, the level of political conscience had to rise to make them ready for the fight for their liberation. To succeed, literature needed to reverse passive and negative images the State had imposed on an alienated black majority.

In 1973 students began to rebel at the University of the Western Cape (apartheid-defined as for coloureds only under provisions of the Extension of University Education Act of 1959) led by the Black Consciousness Movement. All united, Indians, Coloureds and Africans opposed Whites and declared in their first important manifesto: “We reject completely the idea of separate ethnic universities because it is contrary to the historic concept of a university - that of universality – but are forced by the laws of the land to study at the (coloured) University of the Western Cape…” (Ndebele, 1986, passim). A new sense of power emerged from the workers’ strikes of the 1970s and the Soweto events of 1976. South African black writers began writing liberation novels. Rapid economic growth resulted in a major rise in the number of black workers without a qualification or with a modest qualification and the emergence of an efficient black trade movement was still excluded from the discussion process (Thompson, 1961, p.212). In front of a new situation, a writer had to contribute to strengthen this power. A writer had to go beyond protest novels and publish liberation novels, create new social values, and explore not only the political field but also the whole social field.

Both the Black Consciousness Movement in the 1970s and the Democratic Movement of the 1980s resulted in a total upheaval of established ideas in literature by promoting forgotten forms of culture and allowing a vast array of voices that had never been heard in South Africa to shatter the silence. This was how the concept of Ubuntu was put forward: it includes the idea of tolerance, solidarity and conscience to belong to a community that has to move forward, even if its members go through fights and conflicts. The concept of Ubuntu was founded as the main part of the process of national reconciliation initiated in South Africa by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission after 1994.

In, 1979, Nadine Gordimer faced the challenge launched by the Black Consciousness Movement to the role of white writers in South Africa by describing social and political conditions vastly different for black and white writers and the seemingly unbridgeable gap that separated them (Gordimer, 1979, p. 135). In apartheid society, black writers were alienated: “… man becomes divided from others and distanced from himself. Alienation as such is a

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condition of rejecting and/or being rejected. The black artist lives in a society that rejected his culture for hundreds of years" (Gordimer, 1986, p.136). Although Gordimer never had any political commitment, it was the act of writing that became the essential gesture for a writer as a social being described by Roland Barthes (Barthes, 1953). Through her writings, and what she said of life within and around her, she would enter the community of her country. From 1994 she enjoyed repeating that she could say "my people".

White writers belonged to the culture that had rejected black culture but they were now in their turn rejected by black culture. They were perceived in negative terms as "non-European" or "non-black." From there on, they did not know what they would become "whether this is a dead-end or can be made a new beginning" (Gordimer, 1986, p.136). They could but hope that a new synthesis would appear that could go beyond the barriers set by apartheid to separate communities, which would allow them to reach a new vision of a new culture that would no longer be fragmented. To get rid of alienation the aim of white writers should be to dedicate themselves to cultural values understood, and shared by all and that represented a single common reality, indigenous culture. An echo of such exhortation can be found in the speech by President Mandela when he describes the feeling of "spiritual and physical oneness we all share with this common homeland" (Mandela, 1994).

Democratic Transition

Already in the 1980s Nadine Gordimer (Nobel Prize in Literature 1991) and John M. Coetzee (Nobel Prize in Literature 2003) disagreed on the question of political commitment and social responsibility of South African writers. André Brink considered he did not have to include a political dimension in a story. Breyten Breytenbach would underline that the future of South Africans, whatever their skin colour would develop on a continental scale because Africa, they do not realize they belong to is so rich and there is a lot to learn from her. Mike Nikol, about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, deemed that the process to deal with apartheid years in literature could begin after the end of hearings.

In his Ph.D. thesis, Serge Breysse tackles the literature in English of democratic South Africa. He shows how other novels deal with the colonial period as well as apartheid in a historical context, which allows him to ask contemporary questions of community belonging or of the validity of tradition face to development and progress. He demonstrates that writers develop a new view of national history in conformity with contemporary multiculturalism (Breysse, 2006) and with the metaphor of the rainbow nation especially in the novel *David's Story*: A Novel by Zoë Wicomb published in 2009 by The Women Writing Africa Series.

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THE NOVEL

The main character, Frieda, a young woman tries to free herself of the rigid frame of her milieu. Similarly, later, in his novel *The Cry of Winnie Mandela,* A Novel (Ndebele, 2003), Njabulo S. Ndebele introduces the characters of four women who, like Penelope in *The Odyssey* by Homer have spent their lives waiting for their husbands or lovers. They do need to free themselves. In the novel, the four women are allowed to speak up and express their most secret feelings. At the end of the novel the four of them, with Winnie Mandela launch into an adventure far from their familiar context, at this moment bringing an original vision of the definition of freedom (Ndebele, 2003).

Zoë Wicomb strips away structures of authority in a critical perspective that defends democratic values. She asks probing questions: What does it mean to be at home in a nation and region in which home-place has been denied to so many or is constructed out of racial and gendered terror? She refers to the way Coloureds have been forced to leave their dwellings in the centre of Cape Town and be settled north of the city. What kind of force does nationalism become when it is detached from national liberation, while still claiming legitimacy from that struggle? What kind of democracy is achieved out of militarized struggle - and masculinist memory? How will the legacies of company, colonial and apartheid rule and their refusals mutate into new social pathologies or potentialities? How to become a citizen of the world? (Samuelson, 2018)

Wicomb published her novel three years before the end of apartheid, at a period when State violence and insurrection throughout the whole country were in a paroxysm. Back from the UK after twelve years of absence, Frieda finds Cape Coloureds in a situation of acquiescence (Wright, 1999, p.16).

The novel develops during the apartheid years when identities were changing. Wicomb shows how several Coloureds would play an ambiguous part as they were oppressed by Whites but attached to privileges guaranteed by the State that protected them from competition with Africans still more oppressed living in misery in the Eastern Cape, in the homelands of Transkei and Ciskei. Before 1950, unlike Indians and Africans, Coloureds were not obliged to have a “pass” to go to and from their home and their place of work. In *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town*, the author lets a Cape Coloured woman, Frieda, speak and Frieda makes different voices of women in the apartheid society heard. As a consequence, the reader discovers a panorama of the living conditions of modest women, illiterate or belonging to an intermediary social category, Coloured. The author questions the meaning of being a woman in a fragmented society. It looks as if, whatever their skin colour, they all have to get married and have children if they want to find a place in society (Wicomb, 1987). They have adopted the rules of a patriarchal society. The character of Frieda is rebellious as she has an abortion.

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In so doing, she is an exception, which is the theme of this year's conference. The central theme of the novel is women's relationships with men. Black women are oppressed by white women, coloured women are oppressive as well and they caution the racial and social system. The condition of women characters is very varied and complex. Putting an end to the alienation of discourse and voices opens the way to the construction of an identity (Wicomb, 1987).

In *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, Frieda's attachment to the English language and literature opens up the world particularly Great Britain, where she lived from 1972 to 1984, far away from apartheid struggles (Wicomb, 1987). Another coloured writer, Bessie Head, became famous in the middle of the 20th century. Her work reveals a feminist position through the abuse of power suffered by women. She recalls how women have been systematically excluded from history and she endeavours to include them. Head-writing was a way of solving her inner conflict, i.e. how is it possible to live as an "other," isolated and stigmatised? In *The Collector of Treasures*, she reveals the realities of traditional societies. In her other works (Head, 1987), she studies the processes of change of former realities in contact with foreign influence. She starts from her own painful experience of rejection and exile and she struggles to assert herself as an artist. Her works have a cathartic role and allow her to build an identity and lessen her anguish. Her approach is not political as she is afraid of politics, which makes her an exception in this period.

She was traumatized by politics in Cape Town during her childhood when she was marginalized and a victim of discrimination as coloured. For her, women develop inside and then socially. "Bessie Head's female protagonists are often stronger and more resilient than their male counterparts." In *Maru*, Margaret Cadmore Senior "is one of the clearest examples of a woman who possesses remarkably stronger and more refined qualities than her male counterpart, her husband George." In *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth "regains her sanity after two nervous breakdowns from which she emerges as a stronger person who finds roots and the ability to relate to other people." Bessie Head "struggled for almost all her mature life to achieve 'a sense of belonging,' to transform the hearts of the people to accept racial and sexual equality." (Head,1990).

CONCLUSION

In 'The Uncompromising Zoë Wicomb,' Meg Samuelson was referenced as saying that (Culture, South Africa, March 3, 2017): Wicomb is among the most significant and widely-read literary interpreters of South Africa and reading her work from a gender script is special.

Wicomb brings… the Western Cape into a world literary frame - engaging in an uncompromising yet intimate interrogation of its local textures and histories while entangling

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it in wider worlds. Wicomb is increasingly receiving international recognition, and deserves to be honoured in her home country - and home region - not least because of her sustained yet nuanced challenges to nationalism, Western Cape exceptionalism and the politics of home. Black womanhood is the political subject position from which she writes. Yet, while her fictional and critical oeuvre pricks holes in the pretensions of patriarchy and intervenes in structures of racialization, it simultaneously refuses to retreat into identity politics, resisting, in turn, the complacencies or violence such politics can spawn.

Outside South Africa, Wicomb has been described as “an extraordinary writer” who “mined pure gold from that place [South Africa]. According to The New Press, Toni Morrison described Wicomb’s first novel, *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town*, as “… seductive, brilliant, and precious, her talent glitters.” (2013)

Her fiction has been nominated and shortlisted for or awarded the following prizes: shortlisted for the Barry Ronge Fiction Prize in 2015, nominated for the Neustadt International Prize of Literature (for her oeuvre) in 2012, shortlisted for the Commonwealth Prize (‘for *The One That Got Away*’) in 2009, and was the winner of the M-Net Prize (for *David’s Story*) in 2001.

In 2013, Wicomb was awarded the Windham Campbell Literature Prize for Fiction. She was an inaugural winner of this prestigious new global writer’s prize - housed at Yale University - for an oeuvre rather than a single work. The prize citation noted that: “Zoe Wicomb’s subtle, lively language and beautifully crafted narratives explore the complex entanglements of home and the continuing challenges of being in the world.”
(https://windhamcampbell.org/festival/2013/recipients/wicomb-zo%C3%AB)
(https://www.jstor.org/stable/26420591)

Wicomb has had the unusual distinction for a living South African writer of her fiction being the sole focus of three international conferences, each of 2 to 3 days in duration and hosted, respectively, by the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London; the University of Stellenbosch; and York University. Special issues devoted to her work have been published in the Journal of Southern African Studies, Safundi (double issue) and Current Writing. Her fiction is widely taught, both in South Africa and internationally, and is the subject of numerous completed and in-progress theses, articles and book chapters. There are more than one hundred critical studies that engage with each of her first two works, *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town* and *David’s Story*. Currently in preparation are an edited collection of her essays and a collection of articles on her fiction. Wicomb is sought after as a reader and speaker at international literary events and has held several fellowships and writer residencies, including at the University of Cape Town, the University of Macau and the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study. She was the 2015 Chair of Judges of the Caine Prize for African Fiction (the most prestigious and influential Africa-wide literary prize) and has

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been selected by Nobel Laureate J.M. Coetzee as one of two South African writers to participate in the "Literatures of the South" program launched at the Universitad San Martin in Buenos Aires in 2016. The famous French philosopher Hélène Cixous once wrote in The Laugh of the Medusa: "Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs." (Cixous, 1976)

Her extraordinary texts reflect on gender scripts, postcolonialism and racial identity. According to Wicomb (2011), the "shame and identity" of being the Other in a troubled South Africa is the source and impetus for her textual reflections (p.123).

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