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'Once I Was White, Now I Am Coloured': The Burden Of The Play-White Women In Zoe Wicomb's Playing In The Light

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Abstract

Post-apartheid literature in South Africa is ripe with discussions on feminist discourse that tends to obliterate the plight of the women hailing from play-white families with lost identities and instead upholds the insular narratives that stem from the fixation of writers to encapsulate the tale of the stereotypical picture of the distressed, victimized and tormented black woman. This argument does not necessarily rule out that play-whites are purportedly unrepresented in the context of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. However, there is a serious dearth of genuine representations of the women whose lives are subject to the tribulations of the 'metamorphosed' race, - the play-white. What is the condition of a play-white? What compels the necessity of playing a white? These are relevant questions that need to be considered. The paper is an attempt to bring to light the shattered identity constructs of such women and their journey prompted by delimiting possibilities of freedom that invite us to question the very notion of freedom in a post-apartheid South Africa.

Key Words: Post-apartheid Literature, play-white, gender, South Africa

Zoe Wicomb's protagonist in *Playing in the Light*, Marion, finds herself in an utterly problematic set of circumstances as she uncovers a ghastly truth about her family and goes out to reconstruct her wrecked identity in an attempt that runs in parallel with, and is part of, a new South Africa struggling to break the shackles of decades of oppression, violence and misleading ignorance. The novel is about how apartheid has

dismantled relationships from personal to political**.** This sense of disorientation extends to Marion's own quest while it becomes apparent that her troubled family history has left her with no sense of identity. We find the protagonist of the novel, Marion Campbell living independently in an apartment in post-apartheid Cape Town and running a travel agency named MCTravel. It is interesting to note that she has pale skin and light-coloured hair, much like a white South African. Her childhood is characterised by "oppressive silence" and her parents' "bitter bickering" (6). While she was growing up, she imagined herself to be trapped in an "air of restraint, as if the very plaster were giving its all to prevent the house from exploding" (47). Marion shares her experiences of nightmares and panic attacks with her employees, hoping to be helped in some way. She dreams of "an old woman sitting on a low stool" that reminds her of Tokkie, their black maid who passed away when she was very young (31). Marion is also shaken to the core when she comes across a face on the cover of the Cape Times magazine in an article that discusses the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearing of Patricia Williams, a coloured woman that begins to haunt her. This incident develops a spark of intrigue and curiosity in her, and she begins to investigate the life of Tokkie. This makes Marion realize that "there is something secret, something ugly, monstrous, at the heart of their paltry little family" (58). With the help of Brenda, Marion finds out that she is "the spitting image of Mrs Karelse", Mrs Karelse being Tokkie's real identity (97). To her utter shock and dismay, she finds that Tokkie's is her grandmother, and her parents are play-whites. She finds a wedding photograph, a Sunday School religious card and Helen's identity card on which her fake identity of being a "WHITE" is written. John eventually bares his soul to Marion and tells her how a stray incident of a Traffic Superintendent mistaking him for a Boer made Helen and him anxious to try to pass off as a white and they were forced to end ties with his family to continue the pretence. Marion meets her father's sister, Elsie in a bid to know more about her family only to realise that they have had a fair share of struggle while living as coloured people in South Africa. She was ashamed and disgusted to know that Tokkie, her grandmother had to pretend to be a servant to visit them. The readers are told that Helen had to face sexual harassment by Councillor Carter during collecting his signed affidavit that was required to prove their whiteness in the Population Registration Act of 1950. She is informed of the various ways her parents kept up the social image of being a white- they changed their churches adapting to new religious practices, most of the times hiding in their homes to escape attention and even changing their names and accents. Eventually, Marion decides to leave home and takes a sabbatical to visit Europe. During her much-needed personal journey in London, she spends her time reading, travelling and reassessing the deeper meaning of her life and the events that have unfolded in the recent past. As she comes to terms with her newly found identity, she prepares herself to make a homebound journey. Back home, she learns that her colleague Brenda has been in touch regularly with her father, spending time with the old man and allowing him to explain his side of the story. Marion is upset and claims to know her father's lifelong secret, to which Brenda replies: "Actually […] I suspect you don't" (218), which reminds the reader that life keeps unfolding revelations that individuals must come to terms with.

Contestations over coloured identity, both in the public and private sphere lead to a dichotomy in terms of nationality and who may be considered truly South African. *Playing in the Light*, just as Wicomb's other works, explores these themes of false dichotomies and political complexities in personal life. It demonstrates the futility of racial identity in a country like South Africa where silence and shame construct the identity of the coloured. She explores and attempts to reconstruct the discourses of the coloured identity and their archival erasures through characters like Marion:

I was white, now I will have to cross over; but if those places are no longer the same, have lost their meaning, there can be no question of returning to a place where my parents once were. Perhaps I can now keep crossing to and fro, to different places, perhaps that is what the new is all about—an era of unremitted crossings. (107)

Marion recognizes her father John Campbell's insecurity, the "hesitation" of a Boer living in a city. In Afrikaans, a Boer denotes a farmer, descendent of the Dutch-speaking settlers of the Eastern Cape frontier who had left the cape colony and set up homes in Transvaal and the surrounding places from the 19th to the early 20th primarily to escape British rule. Interestingly, John Campbell, Marion's father, too, in his childhood, had questions lurking in his mind:

"Why do we have an English name? Why, why, why? his father mimicked. Is that all you can say? Ask no questions and you'll hear no lies."

Marion is haunted by distressing childhood memories of door paintings that distinguished families from each other. Her light hair, pale skin and relatively privileged upbringing have never led her to enquire her race. She was torn between her unaffectionate mother obsessed with 'keeping oneself to oneself' and a secretive but loving father. Her mother insisted her to avoid the sun, so she does not turn like Mr. Moolman "burnt pitch black like a coloured". Helen taunted her husband with harsh words:

"What's the point of working hard, of building a new life, if your husband is determined to be backward, a poor white?"

Marion senses within her an unexplained prejudice against Brenda Mackay, the first black woman who is employed by her in MCTravel. She has a tantalizing urge to check Brenda's drawers but stops herself, she will not burden herself with the prejudices her parents were prone to. Brenda is sincere and reliable; she lied to Marion in her application but soon after made a confession. Marion feels a sense of guilt in not completely trusting her. Independent and self-reliant Marion takes pride in single-handedly building MCTravel and appreciates the hard-working middle class. She understands the policies of the Nationalist Party are unreasonable; in fact, she does not support Apartheid but votes in its favour. How can she betray her own people? Much to her father's dismay, Marion is suddenly reminded of their former family servant, Tokkie, who visited the Campbell's once a week and showered much love on Marion. Soon after, Tokkie dies, and Helen does not attend her funeral amidst bitter arguments with her husband. Marion finds an old wedding

photograph of John and Helen, Helen's green identity card that marks her 'WHITE', but nothing of Tokkie. Embittered and frustrated, Marion tries to find out Tokkie's background. While on the way to find Tokkie's relations, Brenda amuses herself with thoughts of holidaying in Europe. Marion is quick to realize how whites are generalized- they are imagined to be all lazy with loads of inherited wealth with a "bottomless supply of money". Brenda, on the other hand, finds the term "dirt poor" offensive as it blindly allies poverty with dirt.

The narrative is consistently interjected by episodes of Marion's angst-ridden cries with no one to share her trauma. The visit to Mrs. Murray at Wuppertal reveals the unnerving revelations of the novel. Marion is a "spitting image of Mrs. Karelse"; she is her granddaughter; her parents are play-whites. To Brenda, it is not as devastating a revelation, as tragic as a white might feel:

"You need no longer speak in hushed tones- you're free to be noisy, free to eat a peach, a juicy ripe one, and free of the burdens of nation and tradition."

Thus, Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* is more of a post-apartheid Bildungsroman of a racially ambiguous protagonist set in the mother city of Cape Town that has been a historical witness to bloodshed and violent encounters between racist groups. In the Wicombian world, the protagonists seek to rise above social marginalisation and isolation to find their identity and subjectivity in society. They seek to leave behind their social and personal trauma for a more enriched life and socio-cultural experience in South Africa. This also means that they must rebuild and reinvent their personal space to accommodate the rapid changes that comes with post-apartheid reformation. Bhabha talks about the 'in-between' spaces that have the potential to redefine society:

These 'in between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself**.** (Bhabha 1)

Marion is shocked and world-weary; it is difficult to verbalize the emptiness, which, for a coloured like Brenda, is understandable through "race" and through race alone. Race being the only yardstick through which the human condition may be judged, upheld, and put to test. The plight of the play-whites was terrible in South Africa. They were forced to draw a veil on their private selves and uphold the identity of 'public selves' even in their homes. "Playing- as others would call it- in the light left no space, no time for interiority, for reflecting on what they had done." 'Playing in the light' is a phrase used here to symbolically describe the acts of coloured people who were pale enough to be 'generally accepted as a white person' and so dared to tread the rigid racial boundaries to find a place in the privileged world of white South Africa. For Helen it was an opportunity to be remade:

"She read his triumph at the traffic department as an epiphany. It was a gift, a sign from above that they should set about the task of building new selves, start from scratch and not be contented with what happened accidentally."

Helen Karelse was quick to adapt the city lifestyle; she soon broke the shackles of being a slave of some 'Karel' and changed her name to Helen Charles. She lavished in their new found freedom and luxury, dreamt of having a big garden and a 'coloured boy' to mow the lawn. Tokkie would conveniently play the role of the servant. When Marion was born, Helen feared her hair would turn curly, that she would be mentally retarded and become a kaffirboetie. Yet she could foresee the success of her project- Marion would grow up fearless, secured and assured of the privileges of her whiteness. For Marion it was more of a hiding in the light. The lives of the protagonists of *You Can't Get Lost In Cape Town*, another novel by Wicomb, are shaped by their roles as daughters and by their fathers' expectations also struggle for their own identity, freedom from being defined as daughters, and their political or ideological positions are very different from their fathers' views on political oppression and war. Frieda's dislike of apartheid and of her country contrasts with her father's perception of apartheid's racial system. The pertinent question that the text asks is – What is whiteness? The quest for whiteness has proven to be correct as each law is passed in South Africa. To the apartheid South Africa,

"Whiteness is without restrictions. It has the fluidity of milk; its glow is far-reaching"

Yet there are stories of upwardly mobile families like that of Elsie who question the futility of such a quest- 'Elsie, for all her black husband and children, had risen in the world…So what was the use of Helen and John's whiteness after all?' John and Helen's 'whiteness' was the absence of colour perhaps. Her own story is the tale of every ordinary Black south African- a dull monotonous life, albeit lamentable, need not be heard. It is the narrative of the pale skin that needs representation – a tale that traverses boundaries of domestic and political life and appropriates marginality in terms of nation, history and gender identity.

Apartheid was a harsh government policy that established rigid sanctions and rules while governing the tightened and sensitive relations between South Africa's white minority and non-white majority. The ulterior motive was to create a rift and divide between the two groups by sanctioning racial segregation along with social and economic discrimination against non-whites. Government-determined "racial" and ethnic classification, embodied in the Population Registration Act in effect from 1950 to 1991, was crucial in determining the status of all South Africans under apartheid. The Group Areas Act of 1950 established residential and business segregated areas for members of each race where people from other races were banned, setting aside the largest portion of South African land for the whites. In such conditions, many light-skinned blacks attempted to legally showcase themselves as whites to enjoy the privileges that came with it, even if it meant navigating through complex screening process and meticulous paper work.

Zoe Wicomb in her essay 'Shame and Identity' highlights the case of the coloured in South Africa while harshly critiquing the "self-fashioning of a totalising colouredness", describing it as "a shameful excess, an exorbitance of identity currently expressed in the construction of coloured nationhood". She prescribes a more inclusive perspective on colouredness and 'multiple belongings':

"Instead of denying history and fabricating a totalizing colouredness, 'multiple belongings' could be seen as an alternative way of viewing culture where participation in a number of coloured micro-communities whose interests conflict and overlap could become a rehearsal of cultural life in the larger South African community where we learn to perform the same kind of negotiations in terms of identity within a lived culture characterized by difference."

Wicomb is born in Cape Province in South Africa in the year 1948. Author and academic, she has excelled in writings on South African life and culture, particularly that of the mixed-race and coloureds. On her stories featured in the collection *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, Bharati Mukherjee wrote in the *New York Times Book Review* that the characters "do not condone the system of racial classification, even if some of them go along with the segregated seating in buses and the segregated waiting rooms in doctors' offices." In her stories, the readers find that some characters attempt to speak English for a better and acceptable position in society. It this context, it is interesting to note that even Wicomb's own parents spoke Afrikaans and insisted their children to speak English. In the title story of the *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, a maid shares her way of getting retribution of the injustices caused to her community by stealing chicken legs from the family she works for. She also shows many of her characters moving out of South Africa like Frieda in her story "When the Train Comes." Even though Frieda is shown to be the first non-white student to enter a white school, she later shifts to England after having an interracial affair. "Ms. Wicomb's subject isn't—as American readers might expect—simple apartheid," wrote Mukherjee. Mukherjee appreciates the simplicity of Wicomb's story telling technique: "This is a sophisticated storyteller who combines the open-endedness of contemporary fiction with the … simplicity of family stories." Likewise, Wicomb's first novel set in 1991, *David's Story*, shows the coloured anti-apartheid protagonist David Dirkse marrying a fellow protester named Sally while leaving his wife and children behind. Later, he is also shown to be involved with a woman named Dulcie who is a victim of rape and torture during apartheid.

Most of Wicomb's protagonists go through this reformation of identity and belonging:

After all, when one gives an account of oneself one is not merely relaying information through an indifferent medium. The account is an act—situated within a larger practice of acts—that one performs for, to, even on another, an allocutory deed, an acting for, and in the face of, the other, and sometimes by virtue of the language provided by the other. This account does not have as its goal the establishment of a definitive narrative but constitutes a linguistic and social occasion for self-transformation. (Butler 130)

In terms of the law, mixed-race South Africans came into existence only since 1985, after the nullification of the South African apartheid laws. The 'coloured' population comprised of these mixed-race South Africans, mostly belonging from the Western Cape and strictly categorized as the 'in-between' racial identity. First enacted in 1927, the Immorality Act prohibited the extramarital sex between whites and non-whites while The The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949 continued the racial segregation and discrimination by banning interracial marriages. The history and the social dynamics of the mixed-race community have been complex and intricately woven into colonialism and slavery. The term 'coloured' earlier lacked a strict legal designation, and mostly defined a position between white and black, but during the apartheid era it became a legally defined racial group. These people were subjected to myriad forms of discrimination such as restrictions on housing, education and even employment. The Population Registration Act of 1950 inadvertently created a mixed-race category in this process where they lumped together the native population of the Western Cape and other non-white people as 'coloured'. In 1983, the first lady Marike de Klerk, speaks on the categorization of the coloured population:

…The definition of a Coloured in the population register is of someone who is not a Black, and not an Indian, in other words a nonperson. … They're leftovers. They're people who were left over after the nations were sorted out. They're the rest.

Political and cultural factors have significantly contributed to the victimisation and consequent erasure of mixed-race individuals, their opinions and eventually their identity. Some of these racial subgroups have also assimilated into other dominant groups while some have been pushed into segregation and marginalisation through recurrent incidents of shame and harassment. Much of South African literature has shown this historical erasure of mixed-race groups through its stories and reflected in text by way of its characters or even tropes like that of the traffic mulatto. Post-apartheid South African literature represents the complexity that began to be identified with people's lives where the personal was irrevocably linked with the political. The South African subject began to explore the dynamics between politics and culture as well as the renewed relationship between blacks and whites, albeit complex. The past and the present were inextricably woven into a delicate subject matter, and contemporary writers felt the need to represent this new found racial identity and subjectivity. Thus, the identity of the coloured individual was positioned as a border identity between white and black races, and they enjoyed comparatively better privileges than the blacks. This relative privilege due to a lighter skin colour ensured a certain buffer or protection to this non-white population thus bringing about a desire to tread this boundary, if possible. This assimilation of political and cultural order brought about a desire in the coloureds to enact the whites and their mannerisms. Precisely, this impulse to assimilate and comprehend the socio-cultural elements beyond their bona fide identity leads to racially categorized hierarchies and the domination of white culture. Eventually, these dominant cultural norms and practices found a more respectable position in society than the blacks way of identity must bear, whether they chose to embrace it like Helen or carry its weight forever like Marion.

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