



Fat, Female and So-called Colored : Zoe Wicomb's Way Out

Marijke van Vuuren

► To cite this version:

Marijke van Vuuren. Fat, Female and So-called Colored : Zoe Wicomb's Way Out. *Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 1997, Women in Multicultural South Africa, GRAS International Seminar 1996, 14, pp.113-128. hal-02348366

HAL Id: hal-02348366

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02348366>

Submitted on 5 Nov 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Fat, Female and So-called Coloured: Zoe Wicomb's Way Out

This paper will examine Zoe Wicomb's short story cycle, *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987) with regard to her particular use of the genre, her depiction of the life of a Coloured community in apartheid South Africa, and the path to liberation of her narrator-protagonist from constrictive forces of race, class and gender, before discussing Wicomb's contribution to the feminism/womanism debate with reference to the writing of Black women in South Africa.

Wicomb's narrator-protagonist, Frieda Shenton, grows from childhood to womanhood as a member of the community still known as "so-called Coloured." This non-appellation is a rejection of the term "coloured," a construct spawned by South African apartheid policies. The so-called Coloureds, people of racially mixed descent, were classified "racially" on the grounds not of culture, but of skin colour and appearance — a policy which effectively divided whole families. Wicomb herself elsewhere rejects the term "race" as a construct which is imbedded not in reality but in language. Ethnicity, however, she sees as referring to community, "the lived expression of a people who interact with each other, as in a speech community that shares a common language" (Wicomb: 1992 18-19). The coloured community, then, its fluid bounds fixed by the arbitrary application of inhuman laws, disenfranchised, excluded from the privileges reserved for whites and relegated to an inferior social status, found itself caught between conflicting nationalisms in the struggle for land, power and freedom. In terms of language, culture and political affiliation they are perennially "in between" larger, relatively more cohesive groups. The issue of class, as portrayed by Wicomb, is a particularly sensitive one, as apartheid ghettoised the coloureds. It is from the repression of the ghetto and the intersection of race, class and gender stereotypes, that Frieda gradually extricates herself at the cost of both internal and external exile.

The genre Wicomb has chosen, the short story cycle, is itself "between" genres, as Sue Marais has shown: lacking the coherence of the novel, yet more unified than a collection of autonomous short stories (22). For this reason it is seen by Marais as "especially apposite to the South African context," reflecting the tension between centripetal (centring) and centrifugal (scattering) forces. Some exponents of the genre have connected their stories by a unity of place: Bessie Head, for example, as well as Njabulo Ndebele, Ahmed Essop, and Miriam Tlali.¹ Their story cycles celebrate community in defiance of the regional and group identities imposed by apartheid, the so-called "master narrative" for so long in South African fiction. Others (chiefly white writers) have emphasised its divisive force in narratives imbued with fragmentation, both social and psychological, to reflect displacement, dislocation, and disconnectedness.²

Besides these responses, the assertion of (a fictional) unity and solidarity on the one hand, and the emphasis on fragmentation the other, Marais sees a third, meta-fictional strand emerging in the use of the short story cycle genre, and in this she includes Wicomb's stories:

These works . . . not only set out to expose the fictionality of the grand myth of apartheid as a "master narrative," but also self-consciously meditate on their *own* (re-)presentations of South African reality as discursive constructs. They therefore both install *and* contest, in typically postmodernist fashion, the narrative conventions of continuity and coherence in order to project the contemporary situation in South Africa as a state not only of political and existential but also of aesthetic breakdown, similar though not identical to the post-modern crisis (Marais 32).

¹ The titles of these collections are: Head, *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales* (1977); Essop, *The Hajji and Other Stories* (1978); Ndebele, *Fools and Other Stories* (1983); Tlali, *Footprints in the Quag: Stories and Dialogues from Soweto* (1989).

² As Marais notes, the titles of some of these collections are themselves telling: Denis Hirson's *The House Next Door to Africa* and Peter Wilhelm's *Some Place in Africa*, for example. She quotes Marcia Leveson's description of the psychic fragmentation evident in such fictions emphasising the divisions between people and communities, as the "iconography and sensibility of alienation" (Marais 31).

Wicomb's stories are connected by the use of a single narrator-protagonist, Frieda Shenton, and a circle of relatives and friends who recur in the stories, as well as by chronological sequence. In the first story Frieda is a young child living in Namaqualand with her parents. By the time the family has moved to an urban township, her mother has disappeared from the scene and is mentioned only in the past tense, and so is presumed dead. After school and university, Frieda leaves the hated country. Then, in an about-turn that completely undermines the apparent realism of the stories, she makes a second return trip in the last story and visits her mother, fictionally resurrected and furious at having been «killed» in the first place. Their discussion of what the mother calls Frieda's «terrible stories» provides a metafictional comment on the fictionality of the stories — “[T]hey’re only stories,” Frieda says. ‘Made up. Everyone knows it’s not real...’” (172) — and conflates the figures of protagonist, narrator, and the writer herself. As the reader's assumptions are called into question, the text calls attention to itself and the society it presents as fictional constructs.

Another convention of textual reception that Wicomb undermines — and here I am still indebted to Marais — is in fact a prejudice: that is, in Wicomb's words, “the reception of our work (i. e. black women's writing) as autobiography, or artless record” (Wicomb: 1990 42; see also Marais). This is achieved by creating an almost documentary impression of verisimilitude and using historical markers (like the assassination of Dr Verwoerd, the creation of the tricameral parliament — even passing fashions) before turning the text reflexively on itself to display its textuality. The writer therefore exposes and contests assumptions in the politics of textual reception, particularly where black woman writers are concerned: “the structure of the black text has been repressed and treated as if it were transparent” (Wicomb: 1990 42). Within the scope of this paper I cannot do justice to Wicomb's insistence on an examination of representation “*how* issues are inscribed in texts”(ibid.).

The stories of *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* are set in the context of the marginalisation of the coloureds under apartheid and

reveal its effects, indelibly imprinted on the culture and psyche of their characters. Images of dust and aridity recur in descriptions of the environments to which Frieda's people are constantly banished, the green and fertile land being claimed, by implication, by the whites. Her childhood is spent in the semi-desert of Namaqualand, before a forced removal to an urban coloured township. An uncle, forced from his land under the Group Areas Act, goes insane, but is quite clear on some matters: he will not drink *rooibos* tea from a packet bearing the picture of an oxwagon, symbol of Afrikaner nationalism. When Frieda leaves the township to go to a private school in Cape Town, she waits on what she calls the "inaccurate platform," a dusty area adjacent to the "actual platform," which is paved, reserved for whites, and patrolled by a policeman in an apt metaphor of the apartheid state. She receives her tertiary education at the university created and set aside for coloureds (Dr Verwoerd, the so-called architect of apartheid, is innocently said to have been the architect of the new buildings). After a two-year love affair with a white man, she falls pregnant and undergoes an abortion — marriage is not an option in this country, and she has examinations to complete. Her friend Moira comes to live in one of many identical houses in a new suburb on the Cape Flats, created outside Cape Town after the razing of District Six. Sand laps at the houses and streets.

The humiliation imposed by racist custom is most poignantly evoked in a memory of Frieda's mother's visit to the local white doctor. Though the doctor makes his house calls in shorts and sandals, proud Mrs Shenton wears her "best dress" for the visit. The waiting room is reserved for whites; coloureds and Africans wait outside in the dusty yard. Too weak to stand, Mrs Shenton sinks to the ground and lies in the dust, spoiling her dress.

Frieda's gradual extrication and alienation from this society as well as from her family and its values, is charted throughout the stories. Journeys and departures are highlighted: the train trips to high school, the agonising wait for the train that will take her out of the circumscribed existence of a coloured township, to a private school for whites. The story describing Frieda's abortion gives a lengthy account of the bus trip to her fateful destination, detailing Frieda's fear of "getting lost in Cape Town" and evoking the condition of lostness in its deepest sense.

Frieda feels separated from her lover, from her father and his values, as well as from God; she has no existential home. References to rootlessness and straying begin to occur. The following story, ironically entitled "Home, Sweet Home," describes the eve of her departure for England and confirms her decision to go into exile, as it ends with Frieda watching a mule — to which she has been likened: "Like you they always have somewhere to go" (95) — sinking in quicksand. The stories do not detail the protagonist's experience at the "white" school, or her stay in England, but keep as their setting the community she has left, describing subsequent visits home. Only in the last story is there a suggestion that both her internal and external exile from her country and people may be ended, and that her journey may prove to be a cyclical one.

One of the reasons for Frieda's estrangement from her family is her gradual liberation from their internalisation of apartheid ideology, together with their consequent dishonesty. While they loathe the "Boers," as the Afrikaners, perhaps more correctly the Nationalists, are called,³ some of the premises and prejudices of Afrikaner nationalism and racism are unwittingly assimilated. Struggling with a university assignment on Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Frieda muses, "Can you be seduced by someone you hate?" (41) The stories suggest that you can: "So we've sent you to college," her uncle says, "your very own college that the government's given you..." Aunt Cissy falls prey to government disinformation, believing that the riots in England are far worse than uprisings at home.

There is a constant denial of a hurtful reality. Frieda's father says, "It's no good being so touchy. Just shut yourself off against things around you, against everything..." (93) He tells her, before her visit to

³ While it was Afrikaner nationalism that disenfranchised the coloured people who shared a language and culture with the Afrikaners, the English-speakers are not without culpability. A comic portrayal of the wealthy Mr Weedon in the first story satirises the capitalist who is "not like the uncouth boers" — far more courteous, insisting on being called "Sir" instead of "Master" — but whose annual chauffeur-driven visits to check his books do nothing to improve the miserable lives of the miners he employs.

the white doctor, that things have changed: Frieda can expect to sit in a nice new waiting room - she sits in the dusty yard with the black patients. "Their stories," Frieda concludes, "whole as the watermelon that grows out of this arid earth, have come to replace the world. . . . I would like to bring down my fist on that wholeness . . . I would like to reveal myself" (87, 88) She cannot. Safe in their own complete interpretation of their world, her family will not understand. For Frieda, the result is her unspoken estrangement: "Why do I find it so hard to speak to those who claim me as their own?" (94)

The internalisation of racism is also in evidence. The Shentons' English/Scottish progenitor (different versions are offered) is revered; his photograph is displayed and his name often mentioned, while the Khoi (also ancestors) are mentioned only in derogatory terms, like "pack of Hottentots" (30), "Griqua meid" (165) or "tame Griqua" (9). It is nowhere more evident than in the family's obsession with Caucasian features, which, in women in particular, are a ticket to upward mobility. Aunt Nettie never loses sight of "those attributes that lifted her out of the madam's kitchen, the pale skin and smooth wavy hair that won her a teacher for a husband" (102). Aunt Truida, on the other hand, confirms their suspicions about her dark-skinned family when curly hair is seen under her "nylonish" hairstyle; it is decided that her husband has married beneath his station (14).

That the young Frieda has absorbed her family's sensitivities is shown in her efforts, mentioned in all the earlier stories, to straighten her hair, before she decides, as an adult, to leave it in what her mother calls a "bush" (178). Denying the love-letters she has exchanged with a dark-skinned boy at school, she exclaims, "Would I be writing to a native?" (124). This attitude is instilled by her father: "Henry Hendrikse, I had heard him say many times, was almost pure kaffir. We, the Shentons, had an ancestor, an Englishman whose memory must always be kept sacred, must not be defiled by associating with those beneath us. We were respectable Coloureds." (116)

The concern for appearance is imposed on girls in particular. Men can improve their station through education, but girls do so through marriage - and for this prettiness is required: "Poor child," says

her mother of Frieda. "What can a girl do without good looks? Who'll marry you? We'll have to put a peg on your nose" (164). Frieda is not only an "ugly child," but a fat one. In her teenage years, children in the township run after her, calling her "Fatty." Acutely conscious of the eyes of boys, she concludes, "I am not the kind of girl whom boys look at" (21). Feeding her constant anxiety on Eetsumor biscuits, she is not helped by her father's credo: "Don't leave anything on your plate. You must grow up to be big and strong. We are not paupers with nothing to eat. . . . You don't want cheekbones that jut out like a Hottentot's. Fill them out until they're shiny and plump as pumpkins" (24). Embarking alone on her trip to a white school, Frieda thinks of white boys as fairy-tale princes — her own role is not even Cinderella, but the pumpkin.

It has been said that fat is a feminist issue. What Wicomb exposes is the tyranny of the ideal of slimness for women. Internalised, it engenders self-consciousness, even self-loathing, in one who feels fat, lumpy, and even stupid, as if a "notion must travel through folds of fat" (27). Walking across a student cafeteria becomes an ordeal, as lumbering thighs brush together and male whistles could mean anything.

The Shenton aunts subscribe to the belief that women should be thin, or at least appear to be so. "I'll get you a nice step-in," says Aunt Cissy, unasked, to her niece who is approaching middle age, "gives you a nice firm hip-line. You must look after yourself man; you won't get a husband if you let yourself go like this" (167). She herself is "packed into corsets" (168), the constrictive garments symbolising the suppression, imposed by society and adopted by women themselves, of social mores on gender and the ideal of beauty.

Frieda is also subjected to platitudes about the behaviour of "nice girls" — a favoured term that embodies all the Shenton family wisdom on class, gender and morality. "A girl who drinks is nothing other than a prostitute," Father says. "And there's no such thing as a little tot because girls get drunk instantly. . . . A nice girl's reputation would shatter with a single mouthful of liquor" (151). Being a "nice girl," of course, also improves one's chances of marriage to a "nice

man” and the perpetuation of stereotyped gender roles: “A girl should help to keep the house tidy” [Aunt Nettie]. And when you meet a nice man you’ll have the experience of housework” (101).

The cliché-ridden language of the Shentons has another attribute worth mentioning: the use of diminutives. Derived from Afrikaans usage, they translate awkwardly into English. Often used as endearments, they are addressed to women more often than to men. So Frieda is called “my girlie,” and “Friedatjie,” and a drunken traveller even calls her a “bridey.” Her aunts keep childish names like Nettie and Cissy. Such words which make women little and childlike are just a small sign, inscribed in language, of the tender trap of an affection which nevertheless diminishes its object.

The social aspirations of the Shentons sometimes set them at odds with their community. They pride themselves on speaking English, but the little Frieda has no friends as a result, as all the other children speak Afrikaans, and as a teenager she is painfully aware that others mock what seems to them an affectation. The liberal sprinkling of the family’s conversation with words like “decent,” “respectable,” and, of course, “nice,” reveals their *petit-bourgeois* mind-set. With searing irony, Wicomb places these words in the mouth of the woman who performs Frieda’s abortion: “this is a respectable concern and I try to help decent women, educated, you know. No, you can trust me. No Coloured girl’s ever been on this sofa” (79). Here “trustworthy,” “respectable” and “decent” translate into “racist” — one of the many reminders in the stories of the indeterminacy of language.

Wicomb not only disentangles her protagonist from class-consciousness; she inscribes a repudiation of class divisions in her narratives by including the lives of humble people. In the story dealing with Frieda’s university experience, the point of view is shared between Frieda and the uneducated woman who manages the cafeteria, so that as Frieda’s education separates her increasingly from the “common people,” the narrative implicitly corrects this. Another story is devoted to the lives of farm labourers.

In religion, the reception and interpretation of the divine is shown to be mediated by the mother and father principles. Frieda's father is a deacon, which places him in a Calvinist church, probably the Dutch Reformed Church. When she guiltily approaches her abortion, she feels that she is offending God, but believes that God will not understand her: "God is not a good listener. Like Father, he expects obedience and withdraws peevishly if his demands are not met" (75). The simile "God . . . like Father" springs from the representation of God as male, the heavenly Father confused with an earthly father, so that the face of God is obscured by the face of the father — after her father's death Frieda can remember only the "stern Sunday face of the deacon" (176). A patriarchal religion, then, projects human patriarchy into the realm of the divine. Since Frieda's predicament is a woman's problem, she feels that she cannot explain herself to her lover, her father, or her God. All three seem to be included in her conclusion, "I find it quite easy to ignore these men" (75).

Jesus, however, is different, mediated not by the patriarchy of the church, but by the mother: "the head of Jesus lolls sadly, his lovely feet anointed by sad hands, folded together under the driven nail. Look, Mamma says, look at those eyes, molten with love and pain, the body curved with suffering for our sins, and together we weep for the beauty and sadness of Jesus in his white loincloth" (71-72). Where the religion of the father is cerebral and centred in a stern morality (or law), religious experience mediated by the mother is more visual ("Look, Mamma says..."), emotive and aesthetic (one might say more Catholic). The suffering Christ, unlike the patriarchal projection of God, is difficult to ignore, though Frieda tries to "harden her heart" (72). She sees herself as Judas, fingering the purse which must pay for the abortion, betraying a relationship, crucifying Christ anew. Wicomb does not valorise abortion, or gloss over the woman's sense of guilt. She implies that some of the guilt stems from a patriarchal religion (which one can lose, as Frieda is able to ignore God and He is said to withdraw from her). But she cannot dismiss all faith or assuage all guilt.

Frieda's liberation from false pressures, through individuation and her differentiation of herself from her family and their views,

provides a feminist manifesto which is presented ironically, just as the alternative lifestyle she shapes for herself in England is labelled "alternative bourgeois, European style" — still conforming to a pattern. And there is a cost to being isolated from one's community, as an epigraph from a poem by Arthur Nortje, another exile, shows:

Origins trouble the voyager much, those roots
that have sipped the waters of another continent

...
it is solitude that mutilates
the night bulb that reveals ash on my sleeve.

In both her stories and her critical writing, Wicomb has entered the fray in the feminism-womanism debate with regard to South African women's writing. Here I shall need to reduce a multi-faceted debate, expounded by Cecily Lockett and respondents in a 1990 issue of *Current Writing*. Womanism is a term used by Alice Walker and the Nigerian critic Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi as an alternative to feminism.⁴ Western feminism is regarded by a number of black woman writers and critics as culturally alien, and also as the preserve of middle-class white women whose experience of oppression is limited to gender discrimination, while in relation to black women, who suffer racial and class discrimination as well, these same women are in a position of power and privilege. In South Africa, as in colonial or post-colonial societies, solidarity with and support for men, "emasculated" by oppression, have often subsumed women's issues in the national liberation struggle, or deferred them. Ogunyemi states, for example:

The intelligent black women writer, conscious of black impotence in the context of white patriarchal culture, empowers the black man. She believes in him; hence her books end in integrative images of the male and female worlds. Given this commitment, she can hardly become a strong ally of the white feminist until (perhaps) the social and economic fortunes of the black race improve (quoted in Lockett, b 16).

Wicomb finds this statement "alarming" and responds, "If white patriarchal culture is about unequal power relations, how can we fail to infer that empowering black men will advocate the mimicking of white

⁴ (Lockett 16) My discussion of womanism is largely derived from this study.

patriarchy.” (Wicomb: 1990 36). She criticises Ogunyemi’s “failure to examine the categories of race and gender in terms of their discourses”:

If we think of these categories . . . as social constructs created through language, then it is a puzzling omission. . . . we need to look at the prohibitions that govern a black women’s discourse. Black patriarchy, deciding on legitimate portrayals of black gender relations, does so in the name of racial solidarity. Those who control discourse, whom a culture authorises to speak, will not tolerate exposure and, indeed, will construct it as treacherous and politically unsound. (36-37)

It is interesting to note that in Wicomb’s stories, it is the women, more often than not, who are active in the liberation movement: Frieda’s friend Moira, for example, is both a feminist and a political activist, while her husband succumbs to middle-class comfort and whiskey, and, as a shareholder in a hotel (a euphemistic front for a bottle-store) profits from the woes of his community. The notion that men should be empowered for the struggle is therefore shown in her fiction to be based on a false premise. In her response to Lockett’s paper, Wicomb quotes Beall, Hassim and Todes, who “look at the ways in which women participate in the struggle and conclude that, like men, they do not fight issues as natural subjects, but as gendered beings. For instance, many are drawn into the conflict as mothers defending their homes and their children.” (Wicomb 37)⁵

On the question of motherhood, another difference between womanism and feminism may be noted: womanism, with its emphasis on communalism, reveres motherhood, while Western feminism has identified motherhood and the family as the site of women’s oppression. (Wicomb argues persuasively that white women in South Africa have been liberated from the home at the expense of the black women who work there, for whom home, motherhood and family become tropes not of oppression, but of desire.) (Wicomb: 1990 36-39)

Womanism aligns itself with the traditional African view of women’s role and significance as mothers. Eva Hunter quotes Miriam

⁵ quoting from Beall et al, “‘A Bit on the Side?’: Gender Struggles in the Politics of Transformation in South Africa,” in *Feminist Review*, 33.

Tlali: "Women, irrespective of whether they have children of their own or not, are always 'mothers.'" Ellen Kuzwayo is also cited, proclaiming that she belongs to a "nation" in which "every mother is every child's mother" (Hunter 62).⁶ This is an attractive tradition inscribed in language and custom: in several ethnic groups women are addressed with the prefix "Mma-" (mother) before their names. The concept of the Mother of the Nation is its heroic figure, dissolving the dichotomy between the public and private realms. This trope of the woman/"mother", as Dorothy Driver has called her (Hunter 62),⁷ is prominent in black women's writing. It appeals to a tradition that invites respect for women — but only in their role as mothers or "mothers" (and, some argue, as mothers of sons).

In feminist writing the mother figure is far more problematic. Hunter, noting that in Victorian fictions by women the mother is "silenced, denigrated, simply eliminated or written out of the story," (Hunter 73)⁸ writes that much twentieth-century feminist theory and fiction is characterised by "maternal absence and the refusal of maternity" — what she describes as a "matrophobia" in Western feminism (Hunter 73). This is, however, not the whole story. Victorian fiction also mourns the loss of the mother, without whom daughters are delivered over to patriarchy. Nor is contemporary feminist writing wholly "matrophobic," Julia Kristeva, for example, has developed a psychoanalytic theory concerned with the recovery of that site in the self which "is" the mother.

Wicomb, however, initially appears in her fiction to fall into the matrophobic group. Her narrator-writer dispenses with the mother early in the collection. Moreover, the mother is not eliminated before distinguishing herself as the least nurturing adult in these fictions, a figure closer to the "wicked mother" than to the woman/"mother" trope

⁶ The quotation from Ellen Kuzwayo's work is from *Call Me Woman* (1985).

⁷ from Driver, M'a-Ngoane O Tsoare Thipa ka Bohaleng — the Child's Mother Grabs the Sharp End of the Knife: Women as Mothers, Women as Writers, in Trump (ed.), *Rendering Things Visible: Essays on South African Literary Culture*, 1990.

⁸ quoting Marianne Hirsch, "The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis," *Feminism*, 1989.

of womanism. It is she who drags the little Frieda from under the kitchen table, where she is curled up in the foetal position of the insecure child, by her hair, with threats of thrashings (4). Unlike Father, who brings gifts, "Mamma" scolds and denigrates, telling her child she is ugly and clumsy, and isolating her socially. And then she is pictured in the opening story presiding over a milk separator — an image which resonates very unfavourably in our context — and feeding into it the milk intended for the calf.

Maternity, too, is given short shrift. Frieda and her two primary-school friends swear to each other that they will never have babies, a resolution that seems to be confirmed by the adult Frieda's abortion. Moira, who chooses marriage and a family, is defeated not in the public sphere, but at home.

The stories nevertheless celebrate the recovery of the mother, when Frieda's mother is unexpectedly revived after her daughter's literary matricide. "Mamma" is as imperious and acerbic as ever. But enough information is provided to foster understanding of the young Hannah who married a teacher, but was looked down on by her in-laws as a "Griqua girl" (167) and seems to have earned approval by being, in the words of her sister-in-law, "shy," «sweet" and "nice." Small wonder that she breaks off contact with them after her husband's death. For the narratives this is a modest recovery not only of the mother, but of the mother's story, no longer silenced.

Now it is she who provides Frieda with a way back from her self-imposed exile. For Frieda's arrival, she has made a single elaborate gesture, hauling a heavy chair from her *stoep* so that Frieda finds her seated uncomfortably but majestically before the sweep of mountains in the background: "Behind her the Matsikamma Range is interrupted by two swollen peaks so that her head rests in the cleavage" (164). This maternal image of the mountains anticipates Frieda's reconciliation with and reclamation of her motherland.

The prickly pears Hannah has carefully saved for her daughter's visit are an appropriate metaphor for her mothering. Frieda comes

to taste the sweetness of the flesh, the "colour of burnt earth" (172), but not before hurting her fingers on the thorns.

A trip into the mountains — a dream Hannah Shenton has been unable to fulfil for years — provides a tentative reconciliation. She has already angrily reminded her educated daughter of her ignorance: "What do you know about things, about people, about your ancestors who roamed these hills? You left. Remember?" (172) Up to this point Frieda's journey has taken her further and further from these roots. When her white lover takes her hand before her abortion, she thinks hysterically: "Perhaps he thinks I will bolt, run off into the mountain, revert to savagery" (78). Now her mother's evident love for the mountains moves her, as Hannah shows her plants and tells her what she can remember of the wisdom of earlier generations. And significantly, the protea, adopted as the national flower by the Nationalist government, is reclaimed. Frieda is repulsed by the flowers and associates them sarcastically with the South African flag and the Afrikaans anthem, "Die Stem." Her mother replies:

Don't be silly; it's not the same thing at all. You who're so clever ought to know that proteas belong to the veld. Only fools and cowards would hand them over to the Boers. Those who put their stamp on things may see in it their own histories and hopes. But a bush is a bush; it doesn't become what people think they inject into it. We know who lived in these mountains when the Europeans were still shivering in their own country. What they think of the veld and its flowers is of no interest to me (181).

This is, firstly, a recovery of Frieda's previously despised roots in Africa. Her mother connects her to the proud Griquas, a branch of the original, indigenous Khoi-San who refused to be pressed into service by the settlers, or assimilated with the rest of the Khoi, and instead established their own republic.

More significantly, it is through the mother's mediation that Frieda can reclaim the land, the *veld*, freeing it from the stamp of white usurpation, domination and interpretation. This act of reclaiming possession occurs within Frieda; she takes back that part of herself which was "handed over." This liberation of the self is a transcendence

of the apartheid state and its effects, a psychological emancipation without which any victory over colonialism and apartheid, any post-apartheid state, will be empty.

In the story, *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, Frieda thought: "In the veld you can always find your way home" (73). Homecoming is the antithesis of exile, but also of lostness and "straying." It is after the trip into the mountains that the last story ends with Frieda's tentative mooting of her return to South Africa ("I wouldn't be surprised if I came back to live in Cape Town again"). Her mother betrays the barest gleam of interest but gives what is for her an affirmative reply: "with something to do here at home perhaps you won't need to make up those terrible stories hey?" (182)

The statement with which the stories are concluded is presented as a question and left open, as is the interpretation of the stories themselves. Frieda's journey may prove to be cyclical, but it is not complete.

While Wicomb rejects that brand of womanism which she regards as "crude" or naive, she also looks for common ground between feminism and womanism. In examining the intersection of the discourses of race, class and gender, and in the recovery of the health of the mother principle in her fiction, she has provided directions for a feminist writing that is at home in Africa. She has also transcended reactive protest writing to anticipate a post-apartheid State and heralds it in the psychological act of repossessing the land.

*Marijke van Vuuren*⁹



⁹ University of Pretoria, 0002, Pretoria (South Africa).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Eva Hunter, "A Mother is Nothing but a Backbone': Women, Tradition and Change in Miriam Tlali's *Footprints in the Quag*," in *Current Writing*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1993.

Lockett, Cecily (a). "Feminism(s) and Writing in English in South Africa." *Current Writing*, vol. 2, 1990.

----- (b). "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English." *Signs*, 11.

Marais, Sue. "Getting Lost in Cape Town: Spatial and Temporal Dislocation in the South African Short Fiction Cycle." *English in Africa*, no. 2, October 1995.

Wicomb, Zoe. *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (London: Virago, 1987).

----- "To Hear the Variety of Discourses." *Current Writing*, vol. 2, 1990.

----- "Nation, Race and Ethnicity." *Current Writing*, October 1992, vol. 4.

