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"THE IDEA OF HOME IS OVERVALUED": A CASE STUDY OF THE MURRAYS

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Zoë Wicomb's penultimate novel *October* (2014) tells the story of fifty-two-year-old Mercia Murray, a woman who has lived in Scotland for twenty-five years. *October* mainly evolves around the concepts of homemaking, exile and return and (non)belonging. While in other Wicomb works the characters come from different families or backgrounds, most of *October*'s relationships are intra-familial, so it is class inequality what marks the difference among characters. In this sense, Wicomb proves in *October* how the opportunities the characters are given throughout their lives can shape almost opposite outcomes, even if they come from the same, or a very similar, background. Through theories such as Samuelson's and Scully's idea of home and cosmopolitanism (2017 and 2011 respectively), Stock's notions of home and memory, or Spivak's analyses of nation, belonging and social class (1988; 2007), this article aims to explore the classist attitudes displayed by the different characters, especially considering Mercia Murray. Mercia's classism contrasts the "understandable national obsession with race" (Seekings 2003, 55) in post-Apartheid South Africa, as well as it proves that class is an essential factor in the increase for

upward mobility – a concept that has not been properly studied in postcolonial literature (which has been fundamentally focused on how race determines the individual position in society). Through the small sample of South African society Wicomb presents, this paper will focus on the concept of class as it will also explore the inferiority complex and mimicry attitudes attached to less socio-economically developed individuals.

Keywords: postcolonial literature; South Africa; class; colouredness; Zoë Wicomb.

1. Introduction

The Zoë Wicomb's *October* (2014) tells the story of fifty-two-year-old Mercia Murray, a woman who has lived in Scotland for twenty-five years "who has been left" (1) by Craig, her Scottish partner. Following her separation from Craig, Mercia receives a letter from her brother Jake, writing from Kliprand, South Africa, asking her to go back home (13-14), which is, in fact, the trigger of the whole story. *October* mainly evolves around the concepts of homemaking, exile and return and (non)belonging despite other subtle topics that shape the whole oeuvre of Wicomb such as secrecy and social (de)constructions. However, what differentiates this work from previous ones is the number of classist allusions that invade the whole novel. Although the reasons for this shift will be analyzed throughout this article, the rationale behind this seems to be the relation between characters. While in other Wicomb works the characters come from different families, places or backgrounds – which allow racist attitudes to be glimpsed – most of *October*'s relationships are intra-familial and, so it is class inequality what marks the difference among characters.

This novel is dedicated to the most recent years in South Africa, when there was an evident socio-political development but also when the aftermath of Apartheid was still affecting the population. In this sense, Wicomb proves in *October* how the opportunities the characters are given throughout their lives can shape almost opposite outcomes, even if they come from the same, or a very similar, background. The siblings Mercia and Jake

accurately represent this class inequality derived from their eagerness to embrace social upgrading, Mercia being the representation of the strong character who leaves her family behind for a brighter future, and Jake being the portrayal of the negative consequences of Apartheid: alcoholism, poverty and slackness. As Mercia notices:

> Strangely familiar, this story of siblings, brother and sister, that turns out also to be one of father and son. But theirs – Mercia and Jake's story – is from a different continent, a different hemisphere, a different kind of people, a kind so lacking in what is known as western gentility. Theirs is a harsh land that makes its own demands on civility (12).

Building upon the analysis of class dynamics within the Murrays, a different outlook arises with the other main character, Sylvie Willemse – Jake's wife. The Murray and the Willemse families were neighbours in the past but, despite sharing space, the Murrays were considered to be better educated, to have better hair and better blood (92). This means that the classist attitudes seen within the Murray family members can also be found outside the familial space.

In a very inventive way, Wicomb uses *October* to raise immigrants' concerns of home and displacing, and "conveys the unhomeliness of home and simultaneously dethrones the privileged perspective assigned to the exile" (Samuelson 2017, 1). These being recurrent topics in postcolonial theory, Wicomb's protagonist challenges the issues of home, diaspora and belonging which critics such as Brah, Hall or Gilroy have extensively dealt with, giving a completely different perspective of how exile affects the individual. Postcolonial researchers and writers have also focused their works on the complex relation between cosmopolitanism and nationalism, a dichotomy very present in Mercia's story. At the beginning of the story, the reader finds Mercia wondering about "the small town in Klein Namaqualand, Kliprand. Hardly more than a village. *How could anyone want to live there?* (14; her emphasis); and, while thinking about Glasgow, Mercia "insists on the distinction between living and staying; she is only there temporarily; it cannot be her home" (14). Again, Mercia serves as an example of how nationalism and belonging are not always felt the same way for every individual, giving a very distinct view from what the reader is used to gather in

postcolonial writing. As regards home and exile, Wicomb is able to question these two topics deeply studied in postcolonial literature, as she presents Mercia as the antithesis of the usual perception of home and exile in postcolonial text. As an example of this there is Edward Said's *Reflections on Exile* (2000) where he notes that "the achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever" (173). However, Wicomb's *October* revisits this interpretation through the character of Mercia. The novel does so by, firstly, relocating Mercia in her homeplace, surmounting then the permanent loss Said describes (2000). Secondly, the novel declines Said's suggestion of achievements being undermined by the loss of home through Mercia's belittling perspective of Kliprand, as, for her, staying there "would allow the soul to die rather than to live" (15).

2. Analysis

Delving into the story itself, Mercia Murray comes from a respectable coloured family in Kliprand thanks to her father, Nicholas Theophilus Murray, a "decent coloured man […] of civilized Scottish stock" (9) who arrived in Kliprand to become the Meester – an Afrikaans term used to name the schoolteacher and, in historical contexts, a resident tutor hired by rural families; an itinerant schoolmaster. Her mother, Antoinette Murray was "raised in the respectable mission station of Elim" (136). For her husband Nicholas, she "was of good stock" (138). In fact, it is Nicholas himself who validates what already seems to be a classist character by describing his family background:

> The Murrays were of old Scottish stock, people who had settled before the Europeans were corrupted by Africa. A good old colored family, evenly mixed, who having attained genetic stability could rely on good hair and healthy dark skin, not pitch-black like Africans […] The important thing was that that father was visibly of European stock (138-139).

In this quotation, Nicholas' disregard for other coloureds seems conspicuous. Rather than treating this as a mere expression of prejudice, it can be read through Wicomb's own theorization of

"coloured shame" (1998), where coloured subjectivity emerges from a conflicted negotiation between internalized colonial hierarchies and the desire for recognition. Nicholas's sense of superiority stems not only from class pride but from an ingrained colonial logic that measures worth through proximity to whiteness. This becomes an instance of what Homi Bhabha calls "mimicry," the ambivalent process by which the colonized subject internalizes and reproduces colonial values while never fully attaining the status of the colonizer (Bhabha, 1984). Nicholas mimics the racial and social distinctions of colonial discourse in order to sustain a fragile sense of belonging within the hierarchies of Apartheid and its aftermath. This recurrent prototypical character is again used by Wicomb to prove that, even after Apartheid, the complexity of the coloured issue is still latent within the population. Nicholas, despite sharing skin colour with almost nine percent of the South African population (Seekings, 2003, 53), considers himself and his family not only superior to other coloureds but even to Europeans "corrupted by Africa" (138). Nicholas then suggests that, the older the family tree is, the better your heritage is.

Having grown up with Nicholas, Mercia has acknowledged and internalized the social superiority her father has taught her. This inherited attitude challenges Wicomb's theory on coloured shame (1998) and Bhabha's mimicry by questioning that such structures of power exist (1984). Usually, both theories can be combined for the relation they have for unpacking coloured identity. While Wicomb's notion of coloured shame underscores the affective dimension of racial hierarchy—embarrassment and denial stemming from historical illegitimacy—Bhabha's mimicry provides the performative mechanism through which such shame is both enacted and concealed. Coloureds have been constantly diminished for not belonging to the main racial categories, developing a weak sense of identity that has been following them for decades (1984). Because of this, middle-class coloureds tried to resemble as much as possible the white – and socially superior – part of the population, to achieve the identity stability they have been awaiting (1984). However, the sense of superiority the Murrays display makes me wonder about the extent to which Mercia and Nicholas try to imitate whites. Mercia's position becomes theoretically productive: she inhabits

what Bhabha terms the "Third Space," a site of negotiation where identity is neither purely colonial nor purely resistant. Her diasporic existence later in the novel continues this pattern, as she attempts to articulate belonging beyond racial binaries. This novel presents a different attitude towards colouredness, an approach not necessarily related to social progress but to the ongoing struggle to redefine identity beyond colonial genealogies of purity and mixture.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, and related to the aforementioned identity construction, there are the issues of home and belonging, presented through the diasporic character of Mercia. From the very beginning, Wicomb explores the diasporic mind to show the social misconception that usually exists between diaspora and cosmopolitanism:

> How far you have travelled. You should write your story. Mercia has met this with embarrassed silence. They are mistaken, also about the source of her embarrassment. Yes, she has come a long way geographically, crossing a continent, but what people really are alluding to is what they believe to be a cultural gap, a self-improvement implied in the distance between then and now, the here of Europe seen as destination. In that sense, Mercia is not conscious of having traveled any great distance. As she once deigned to explain to Craig, her humble origins left little improvement (9).

By referring to Mercia's own opinion on self-experience, the reader discovers that migration does not entail the cultural adaptation of immigrants that is somehow demanded. It shows how they manage to adjust to different conditions, even if the individual retains his/her higher social status upon arrival. In theoretical terms, Wicomb distinguishes between physical displacement and what Avtar Brah (1996) calls "the homing desire," the yearning not for a literal homeland but for a condition of belonging. Mercia's embarrassed silence reveals that her diasporic condition exposes the persistent asymmetry between the postcolonial subject and the imagined metropole. In Guarducci's words: "Mercia Murray's diasporic standpoint makes way for a series of sharp comments on exile, belonging and affiliation that once again stress the uneasiness of the relationship between the individual and her space" (2015, 30). In

fact, Mercia refers to this uneasiness throughout the whole novel, displaying a sense of discomfort while thinking about home:

> How effortlessly the word comes: home, the place she has not lived in for more than twenty-six years. […] 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 (18).

This semantic hollowness of "home" foregrounds the instability of belonging in diasporic discourse. In Brah's formulation, home is not a fixed geographic site but a "mythic place of desire" that exists in the imagination of the diasporic subject (1996, 192). Mercia's description of home as a "shell" evokes this imaginative, residual attachment. Mercia's unfavorable perspective of home derives from Nicholas who, despite seeing no distinction between living and staying (15), he did see it between living and belonging, and accordingly instilled that idea in his children:

> Then where did they belong? they wanted to know.
> […] Why belong to any place or any people in particular? They simply belonged, a word that need not be followed by where or to. […] Yes, their home was there, but the Murrays couldn't possibly think of belonging there. […] By which, of course, he meant English-speaking coloreds with straight hair, skin color being less important than hair, the crucial marker of blackness. […] Thus, the notion of home was revised (81).

For Nicholas, Kliprand was "his place of domicile, but saw no need to abandon his position as an outsider, [a place where] he could not very well belong" (137). While his perspective can be considered understandable and licit, the reasons he conveys to argue his not-entire feeling of belonging spoil his opinion. His view, which I cannot completely agree with precisely for the classist attitudes attached to the concept of home, actually relates to Brah's question of home, which differentiates between feeling at home and calling a place home (1996, 197):

> Home is neither permanent nor set but a place or feeling that is variable and malleable. [Home] is intrinsically linked with the way in which processes of inclusion or exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances. It is centrally about our political and personal struggles over the social regulation of 'belonging' (1996, 192).

Nicholas's belief that belonging is unnecessary mirrors the ambivalence that Brah identifies: belonging is not a universal condition but a product of social regulation. Building on the influence Nicholas had on Mercia's and Jake's perception of home and belonging, he also makes reference to the connection that exists between coloureds and belonging. For instance, when Nicholas explains to his children that, because of their colouredness, and since they do not belong to South Africa because it belongs to white people (145), they "are free, above geography. [They] are free to belong anywhere. The children snort at his distorted idea of freedom" (145). This assertion of "freedom above geography" is deeply ironic. What Nicholas imagines as transcendence is in fact a manifestation of what Paul Gilroy terms the "black Atlantic," a transnational space of identity formation where mobility and displacement coexist with alienation (1993). Nicholas' statement about colouredness and belonging agrees with Wicomb's idea of racialized contemporary South Africa: "the New South Africa is too much like the old and is therefore necessarily a racial affair. […] Moreover, we have all become rather perversely attached to apartheid" (1993, 28). In his *Native Nostalgia*, Dlamini argues that black South Africans could also live contented lives under Apartheid, due to their sense of community bond that bounded them together. For those people were not directly involved in the struggle, the racial affair was not that hateful. It is probably this continuous racialization of colouredness what generates Nicholas' refusal of belonging, instilled in his children's minds:

> If Kliprand is not home to Nicholas, it cannot be home to his children. They were born there, raised in Namaqualand, but no, they should not think of it as home. Physical geography is not everything; it is important, in the interest of self-improvement, to dispense with the notion of home. […] Thus his children should not think of this place of their birth, burdened as it is with the arcane complexities of belonging, as their home (144).

Despite Nicholas' confusing message about home, and Mercia's recurrent rejection of Kliprand as home, her perspective of home fluctuates throughout the story. Once she arrives in Cape Town, she "knows that this is home. There is a part of her, perhaps no more than insensate buttocks, that sink into the comfortable familiarity of

an old sofa" (127). This shows that belonging is not a metaphysical ideal but a sensory, temporary state. In diaspora theory, this instability is central: home becomes performative, a practice rather than a place (Clifford 1994). The reason for this might be because Mercia's rejection towards South Africa does not only derive from Apartheid but from the loss of her mother: "The twelve-year-old child felt the thrall of placelessness. Ghostly and vague as it was, it whispered the promise of escape from the dreariness of Kliprand and the vulgarity of Apartheid" (162). This sentence demonstrates that Mercia's decision to move was primarily triggered by her mother's death, rather than by Apartheid. However, the reader will never know what would have happened if Mercia's mother had not died. In fact, during her visit to Kliprand she recurrently recognizes South Africa as home although "everything is topsy-turvy" (168), and despite the cultural gap that has been growing since her departure: "what is happening to Mercia, the carnivore, here in Kliprand? Is this the measure of her distance from the place, from her home, her people?" (168). Within Mercia's fluctuant opinion on the concept of home, she resists admitting that Kliprand is her actual home: "how else is she to get through the days in this place called home? […] This home where Jake snores and Sylvie squeals is not a place to yearn for a dubious past" (171-172). Despite all the instances where Mercia finds herself thinking about Kliprand as home, by the time of her return, she is aware of the fact that "she has to keep moving, get away from this place called home. […] And she, Mercia, must live, will live, as long as she can get away. Out of Kliprand. Out of the country" (198). Mercia's flight becomes emblematic of what Safran (1991) describes as the "myth of return" in diasporic consciousness—a longing for home that is perpetually deferred. While this might literally refer to moving away from a country devastated by the Apartheid regime, it also refers to escaping from problems. Familiar problems such as Jake's alcoholism or her role in Nicky's (Jake and Sylvie's son) development, as well as the social problems her country was living even after Apartheid. This assumption comes after her return to Scotland, where she wonders: "is this where she lives? Is this her home? […] If this home away from Kliprand and her family feels strange, it is only a question of time, a matter of half an hour at most, for the emptiness to be filled with what soon will be familiar

routines" (222-223). But Mercia gives no chance to these routines in "a place that no longer carries meaning for her" (228) and finally decides that "when [she] put[s] the flat on the market, it will no longer be [her] home" (228). After her return, both Mercia and the reader realize that there is no place where she feels the homeliness she has been searching for throughout the whole story. She has not been attached to a place or to people in either country, demonstrating the diasporic dilemma of belonging. Dealing with diaspora, Cohen states that "a diaspora meant "dispersion" and if people were dispersed, some point of origin − more concretely a homeland − was necessarily implied" (2007, 2). Mercia embodies these features but subverts their typical trajectory: her memories of home are not idealized but ambivalent; her relationship with both host and homeland is equally estranged; and her desire for return oscillates between nostalgia and rejection. This inversion of the diasporic paradigm situates *October* within a broader postcolonial revision of diaspora as a space of critical hybridity rather than of longing for origins. However, Mercia does not seem to follow the diasporic pattern Cohen conveys, but that of Stock, who asserts that home is a compelling notion for those who live in the diaspora (2010, 25). Safran's theory on diaspora also relates to Mercia's attitude:

> Some diasporas persist – and their members do not go "home" – because there is no homeland to which to return; because, although a homeland may exist, it is not a welcoming place with which they can identify politically, ideologically or socially; or because it would be too inconvenient and disruptive, if not traumatic, to leave the diaspora. (1991, 91).

This accurately indicates what happens to Mercia Murray. Despite her former apparent eagerness to come back home after Apartheid, the socio-political context of the time prevents Mercia from perceiving South Africa as the place she imagined the country would be after the regime. On the other hand, and despite the years Mercia has lived in Scotland, Glasgow has not become her home either. Through her flat in Scotland, which she decides to sell, the notion of home as a safe space is discussed: "but a flat, says Smithy, is not the same as a city, or a country" (231). Here, Mercia's Scottish friend, Smithy, conveys the different levels of home the individual can create. It is not clear then whether the flat contributes to Mercia

feeling out of place or if that is the reason why she is selling it. Smithy's reflection proves the importance of recognizing the safe space, which is not measured according to size but according to familiarity and comfortability. All these examples develop her concern for the "unreliable status of origins and originals" (Coetzee 2010, 559) and the difficulty of untangling the question of home and belonging from a theoretical point of view. However, by the end of the novel the reader is not provided with Mercia's final decision, whether she stays in Scotland or in South Africa. Interestingly, when Mercia goes back to Kliprand to bury Jake and considers taking Nicky with her, Sylvie explains to the child "that one day he will visit Auntie Mercy in England" (239). This can mean that Mercia is moving to England or it can show Sylvie's unawareness of British geography. In terms of home, Wicomb's introduction of England at the very end adds ambiguity and confusion to Mercia's untold decision. By refusing closure, the novel critiques the nation's premature optimism about transformation and exposes the enduring entanglement of race, class, and gender in defining who can belong. Through Mercia's divided consciousness, Wicomb dramatizes the tension between mobility and rootedness, silence and speech, home and exile—tensions that continue to structure South Africa's cultural and moral landscape.

An intriguing moment in Mercia's perception of home comes with the language issue and, specifically, with the speaking agency, something striking considering the little space coloureds had to speak for themselves in South Africa: "this place, home, is a place for doing and thinking at an angle, a place where speech, triumphantly over genteel silence, has many different functions" (39). While speech actually has different functions is undoubtedly true, the specific functions Mercia refers to – self-expression, negotiation, etc. – must be analyzed. Despite this initial statement at the beginning of the novel, the story later reveals that Mercia does not take advantage of these multiple speech functions. In fact, Desiree Lewis considers "interruptive languages" as part of the diasporic identity formation (2001, 155); an idea that supports Mercia's inability to benefit from these functions. As will be seen later, she does not say anything to Sylvie, her sister-in-law who Mercia cannot really stand, neither does she talk about the rape

episode between her father and Sylvie. Moreover, she does not tell Jake all her thoughts about him and the family he has created. So, Mercia is definitely not using this agency she claims to have in South Africa. To exemplify this idea, when Mercia receives Jake's letter, she wonders about the child, Nicky, who she barely knows but she thinks that "it was so much easier not to ask questions" (14). Furthermore, Mercia, who does not understand Jake's letter, admits that "people seldom say what they mean" (14). Later in the story Mercia accepts that "she would like to take [Sylvie] firmly by the shoulders and say loud and clear: it's over; save yourself, go away and leave him to his drink" (51). But Mercia never tells Sylvie her opinion on the latter's family situation; and this reluctance to speak ratifies the complexities of Marion's relationships. These examples prove that, even with the agency required, she prefers not to use it, dismantling then her former assertion of South Africa as a place where speech triumphs over silence. Besides, Mercia's silence contradicts her position as university lecturer, which should allow her to embrace that agency so desired by the subaltern individuals (Spivak, 1988). On the one hand, Mercia would actually fit in the subaltern figure for her colouredness and gender, two social factors that usually relegate the individual to a subordinate position, unless they belong to a high class. But on the other hand, Mercia is precisely the representation of determination and willpower, having moved abroad at a young age and making her own decisions without a superior voice talking on her behalf. In this sense, Mercia remains in an in-between position in which she genuinely has agency but chooses not to use it.

Still in the same line that connects home and language, this sense of belonging Mercia seems to be looking for is glimpsed in Scotland, where "Mercia loved being called pal. […] There you are, pal, or, Got the time, pal? she was named, felt the warmth of an embrace, a welcome that came close to a sense of belonging" (67). Here, speech does actually have a function, that of being in the already mentioned safe space. However, and despite the apparent connectedness between Mercia and her new 'home', this is one of the few instances where Mercia actually feels at home in Glasgow, what leads to the conclusion that, despite these kinds of moments, Mercia did not find Glasgow her home. On the other hand, the

language gap seems more evident in South Africa, where Mercia admits that her "Afrikaans is rusty; her ability to make small talk rudimentary […] It is of course not only a matter of language. Everything in her dealings with Sylvie is uncomfortable, creaking with embarrassment" (51). This does not only dismantle again Mercia's aforementioned assertion on speaking agency – as she is not able to properly communicate with non-English speakers – but also proves again the superiority Mercia exerts over Sylvie. This is shown by the discomfort Mercia feels when dealing with Sylvie when, in this particular case at least, the understanding is impossible due to Mercia's weakened ability to speak Afrikaans.

The fact that Mercia feels uncomfortable with Afrikaans does not solely derive from being taught to speak in English, but also, once again, from her father's animosity towards Afrikaans: "we may not have in English different verbs for animals' eating and drinking, it is too civilized a language" (140-141). Language – and specifically lesser taught languages – is directly attached to other social factors such as race and class, race being one of the main reasons for the linguistic gap that exists in South Africa even before colonization. Notwithstanding this, racism does not prevail in *October*, as mentioned before, due to the fact that the novel is based on family relations, so it is challenging to find racist attitudes amongst family members. The very first reference to this racism comes when Wicomb describes Jake through the prototypical racist description of non-whites: "he is a drunk, and wears his drunkenness on his sleeve, which is to say that there are bags under his eyes, that his face is a flushed mass of veins barely concealed by his dark brown coloring" (3). While this is an accurate representation of Jake, what he represents is precisely the sometimes-mistaken quintessential prejudices against non-whites in South Africa. Furthermore, dealing with racial stereotypes it is Nicholas – the figure from whom both Mercia and Jake inherited their condescending nature – who, despite his colouredness, still wonders about Craig (Mercia's ex-partner) and whether there were "any problems with this man. […] Why has Craig not managed to get a woman of his own kind? What was wrong with him?" (19). Not only does Nicholas distrust Craig for choosing a coloured woman but he also congratulates Mercia for choosing a man from Europe, but he

hoped that she would be careful, vigilant against anything shameful (20).

The issues of home, language and race – the three topics that have already arisen in this article – are wittily combined in Mercia's thoughts about living and staying in both Kliprand and Glasgow:

> South Africans, having inherited the language from the Scots, speak of staying in a place when they mean living there. Which is to say that natives are not expected to move away from what is called home. Except, of course, in the case of the old apartheid policy for Africans, the natives who were given citizenship of new Homelands where they were to live. […] *Come stay with me and be my slave…* (14, her emphasis).

This intriguing passage summarizes South African history of colonization and Apartheid at the same time that it explains the current situation of the country derived precisely from the unfair requirements to fit in the national archetype. Butler & Spivak summarize this idea of qualifying for national belonging where they assert that nation is singular and homogeneous, expressing a certain national identity to comply with the requirements of the state. This means that "those national minorities who do not qualify for "national belonging" are regarded as "illegitimate" inhabitants" (2007, 30-31).

In fact, symbolically, Mercia discovers that her name, despite the Christian meaning of 'mercy' her parents gave to the name, "was a place, an English region, the name for border people, which she supposes has its own resonance for certain South Africans like them, or for that matter her own liminal self" (27). Her name represents her diasporic identity, at the same time that her diasporic identity represents the coloureds' dilemma both abroad and within the national structure for belonging neither to whites nor to blacks.

Being, in the words of Butler & Spivak, "illegitimate inhabitants" in South Africa was directly attached to townships. To some extent, this can relate to the issue of home I have been dealing with above. When Sylvie announces that they are moving to one of the government's RDP houses, Mercia's first concern is what people will think about her family:

> How strange that the architects of these townships, living as they no doubt do in comfortable houses lost in large gardens, and well out of sight of their neighbors, should image that the poor want to huddle together in cramped conditions. […] The state of the country, with nothing working! The blacks now wanting to kill all the coloureds, even swarming into Kliprand, into the RDP houses. Who knows what will happen to them in such a place? (44).

Aside from the classism displayed in this quotation according to the RDP architects, Sylvie's racism against blacks is dismantled by Mercia's resulting answer. Mercia's denial of Sylvie's anti-blackness raises several questions. Considering the classism Mercia displays throughout the novel, it seems hypocritical to judge Sylvie for her racist comment against blacks living in Kliprand when Mercia judges Sylvie, Jake and other characters for their economic status.

Another recurrent resource in Wicomb's novels is the use of metaphors through fauna and flora. In *October*, the salmon are used to explain not only the biological imperative to reproduce, but "the need to return to origins, to the very same stream, to make their babies back home. […] the gravel redds murky with spawn and the self-satisfied rumbling parents, turned into shallow graves where, exhausted by the business of reproduction, the salmon must lie down and die" (124-125).

The conversation about salmon starts before this quotation, when Craig offers to take Mercia to see whether the salmon are already back from the Atlantic trip (120). This quotation does not only refer to reproduction – which may refer to Mercia's rejection of pregnancy – but to the diasporic identity. In this sense, Mercia fits in the metaphor of traveling overseas, but always returning home. Furthermore, Samuelson agrees with the fact that Mercia "has the additional phobia of becoming a mother" (2017, 5). This can derive from her homelessness. Because the mother, historically seen as the original home, precisely represents the feeling of homeliness Mercia seems to despise. Freud formulates this idea of the mother as "the place where everyone once lived" (1999, 151) and, despite the male approach Freud gives to his theory on the uncanny, it accurately depicts Mercia's feeling of unhomely where "the uncanny is what was once familiar. The negative prefix *un-* is the

indicator of repression" (1999, 151; his emphasis). Mercia's constraint at home can then relate to Freud's contradictory belief of the uncanny as familiar, positioning her in an in-between position between feeling unhomely (due to the loss of her mother) and feeling at home (Kliprand being her original home) at the same time.

3. Conclusions

After considering the main topics in this novel, where the concept of home resonates throughout the whole writing, Mercia's perspective should be highlighted. For Singh:

> Most of [Wicomb's] characters are incessantly in search of a stable home; they fluctuate between the different locations, seminally the "original" home and the "diasporic" home; though finally they find their "desired" or pertinent location of home, whether it is their native place or it is the place of settlement (Singh, 2018, 382).

However, Wicomb navigates Mercia's continuous uncertainty about her home place to the extent that, even at the end of the novel, the reader is not provided with a definitive answer. While this leaves the question of belonging open, Wicomb makes clear how descendants of diasporic migrants react differently to the concepts of "home" and "belonging". It is more complex for them to singularly identify themselves with any home (Stock 2010, 26-27). Stock's theory on second and third-generation migrants does indeed relate to the character of Mercia, who finds it challenging to settle in a place where she never feels completely comfortable. Her final departure from both Scotland and South Africa signifies not failure but recognition: that belonging, for the postcolonial subject, may consist precisely in the awareness of displacement.

Both Mercia's uncertainty and her open ending are reflected in Pamela Scully's vision on Wicomb's characters:

> I argue that Wicomb's work rejects the notion of a cosmopolitanism of urban spaces, of negotiation; in fact, rejects the dominant notions of cosmopolitanism altogether. Wicomb rejects the injunctions of our era to affirm the possibilities of tidy tolerance and reconciliation, instead writing in the spaces of ongoing uncertainty, brutalities large and small, and refuses us easy closure (2011, 300).

Although I agree with Scully in the sense that Wicomb does not portray through her characters a utopian cosmopolitanism, I argue that the main characters (the ones supposed to convey the main topics) are not the ones who display this cosmopolitanism Scully misses, but instead the secondary characters that assist the protagonists in their *bildungsroman* do so. However, it is interesting how, Mercia Murray being a character that could be considered cosmopolitan in the literal sense of the word, actually does not fit in the idealized cosmopolitanism that "underestimates the inherent tensions that pertain in the creation of any solidified "we" that gets to speak for a point of view [and that] underestimates the structural inequalities that prevent individuals and groups from even participating in a conversation" (Scully 2011, 302). Contrarily, she would fit in what Attridge calls "idioculture", which signals the "continual evolution of a person's unique (indeed singular) cluster of attributes, preferences, habits, and knowledges, not all in harmony with one another" (Attridge 2015, 61). Attridge's "idioculture" idea relates to the concept of *bildungsroman* in the sense of constant evolution, but it considers the external and sometimes colliding factors that shape the individual. Mercia Murray, the character who could have represented a transnational social development, eventually becomes another failure for cosmopolitanism.

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