Universidade de Aveiro Departamento de Línguas e Culturas
2012

Dina Maria Ferreira Lourenço Amorim

Sociedade e Cultura na África do Sul: Textos Contemporâneos

Society and Culture in South Africa: Contemporary texts

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Society and Culture in South Africa: Contemporary texts

Dissertação apresentada à Universidade de Aveiro para cumprimento dos requisitos necessários à obtenção do grau de Mestre em Estudos Ingleses, realizada sob a orientação científica do Dr. Kenneth David Callahan, Professor Associado do Departamento de Línguas e Culturas da Universidade de Aveiro.

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agradecimentos

Ao professor David Callahan, pela sua disponibilidade, pelo seu apoio, atenção e orientação, sem os quais este trabalho não teria sido possível.

Ao meu marido e filhos, pela sua paciência e confiança e pelo seu apoio incondicional.

palavras-chave

África do Sul, pós-apartheid, multiculturalismo, etnia, identidade, pertença, reconhecimento, autenticidade, moral.

resumo

O presente trabalho propõe-se apresentar uma análise da imagem da sociedade e cultura na África do Sul contemporânea, a partir de três textos escritos entre 2006 e 2008 por três escritoras sul-africanas de diferentes idades e/ou etnias/grupos socioculturais: Kopano Matlwa (*Coconut*), Zoe Wicomb (*Playing in the Light*) e Ceridwen Dovey (*Blood Kin*). Após uma identificação do que se afigura como ideias-chave em cada um dos textos, tecem-se algumas considerações relativas à existência de pontos comuns, apesar das expectáveis diferenças resultantes das experiências vivenciadas pelas escritoras.

keywords

South Africa, postapartheid, multiculturalism, ethnicity, identity, belonging, recognition, authenticity, morals.

abstract

This dissertation aims at analyzing the image of society and culture in contemporary South Africa conveyed in three texts written between 2006 and 2008 by three South African writers who were either born in a different decade or who belong to a different ethnicity, thus having different backgrounds: Kopano Matlwa (*Coconut*), Zoe Wicomb (*Playing in the Light*), and Ceridwen Dovey (*Blood Kin*). After the identification of some key ideas in each of the texts, some considerations are made in relation to possible common points despite the many expected differences derived from the three writers' life experiences.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

"After climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb."

Nelson Mandela, *The Long Way to Freedom*

"I have come to realise that many things are seldom as they seem".

Kopano Matlwa, *Coconut* (191)

With all the current technological changes and their effects at all levels of life, the world has greatly changed and concepts such as those of globalization and multiculturalism have become a new and pressing reality for many governments and societies. With the increasing pace of globalization, distance and time have greatly lessened and the world has progressively and inexorably witnessed unprecedented waves of migration, thus contributing to an exceptional encounter of ethnicities, cultures and lifestyles. If on the one hand, there are optimistic expectations of peaceful sharing, of cultural enrichment, of praised diversity, different realities portrayed in the everyday news seem to show the actual situations are often far from the desirable image, as many aspects at different levels have to be taken into consideration. Therefore, along with the idea of multiculturalism, there come the negative concepts of segregation and discrimination, or of forced integration into a group one does not feel one belongs to, or else, the attempted integration into a group felt as more powerful, but into which one does not exactly fit. These ideas, which in a superficial analysis might appear to be simple, give rise to complex feelings and questions, which have to do with minorities, identity, rights, duties, power, and many other inevitable and difficult to deal with current issues.

South Africa, a country whose history has witnessed the encounter of different ethnicities and cultures, and has involved many and different conflicts for power and dominance, may be seen as a microcosm of the world's current diversity. The earliest inhabitants of what is today South Africa, hunting and herding societies, were first subjugated by the Bantu-speaking peoples; by the time the Europeans first arrived in the country, the two major historic groups among these were Xhosa and Zulu peoples. They would witness the arrival of

different European colonists, mainly Dutch, and British, but also others, such as the French, the Germans, or the Portuguese, and also the coming of slaves from different origins, as far away as India or Indonesia. Accordingly, South Africa has gradually become a place where different cultures have met, inhabited, fought for power and dominance, become interconnected or kept apart, influenced each other, or strove to avoid influence. Furthermore, not only have the peoples inhabiting the territory had to deal with multiple cultures, they also had to deal with being a colony, and with the regime of apartheid, a system of legally institutionalized racial and ethnic segregation, which lasted for too many years, even after the country got its independence. In the last decade of the 20th century, South Africa finally had its first democratic elections, thus reaching a crucial moment in its history, a moment many people had been awaiting for too long with great expectation. The final clause of the Interim Constitution summarizes the hope of many South Africans:

> This Constitution provides a historic bridge between the past of a deeply divided society characterised by strife, conflict, untold suffering and injustice, and a future founded on the recognition of human rights, democracy and peaceful co-existence and development opportunities for all South Africans, irrespective of colour, race, class, belief or sex. (147)

As Anthony Butler states, if in 1994, when the first non-racial election took place and the African National Congress (ANC) got to power, there were pessimists who saw the moment as the beginning of South African decline and ethnic division, there were many who saw it as a dream come true, and in that sense the expression "rainbow nation", first used by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, was to convey all the richness and the diversity of the country (1). Similarly, Singumbe Muyeba and Jeremy Seekings point out that "[t]he discourse of the 'rainbow nation' held out the possibility and hope that South Africans would overcome historic divisions and build a common identity and solidarity whilst acknowledging cultural diversity" (1), for the image was, as Daniel Herwitz states, "of a society where, finally, each band of color would chromatically harmonize with all others while retaining its own distinctiveness" (47). This image was therefore to convey a great and by many long-cherished dream, and the idea that it had come true, the enthusiasm over the end of apartheid, as Ulrike Auga notes, "carried South Africans through the first years of transition" (217),

especially because of "[t]he charisma of Nelson Mandela [who] made it possible to a certain extent, for South Africans to identify collectively with the imagined nation" (217). For years Nelson Mandela had been the symbol of the fight against apartheid and, as Anthony Butler puts it, his presidency "helped to calm" the pessimists (1), for that was the time when the first steps towards reconciliation took place. The same idea is stressed by Luc Renders when he says that "[Mandela] strove tirelessly for reconciliation and he extended a hand of friendship to the white community" (128). Indeed, surprisingly for many, after having been kept in prison for twenty-seven years, Nelson Mandela's aims went on being peace, freedom and compromise. Bearing them in mind, he stood for the principles of mutual respect, understanding and forgiveness, for the ideals of equal treatment and equal opportunities. That may explain many of his achievements. As Hein Marais notes, "[h]is success lay in his ability to transverse many of the contradictions at play in South African society" (299). His lifetime struggle can probably be summarised in his statement in court during the Rivonia trial (20th April 1964), when he said:

> During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against White domination, and I have fought against Black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. (189)

Nonetheless, when it comes to human beings and their feelings, reality is always complex and South Africa has had to deal with many different realities and sensibilities, derived from many diverse factors which have determined people's lives. Actually, if on the one hand there were the apartheid laws which defined for too long the place where people were to live or the education they were to get or the jobs they were to have; on the other hand, there were the psychological effects of having been a colony, of belonging to the group that used to dominate or to the group that used to be dominated, or of having had all the power or very little power, and of ultimately having to deal with those facts under the new and still unfamiliar lights of freedom and democracy. When it comes to actual developments, as Anthony Butler points out, if after 1994, "the wealthiest one fifth of black South Africans [achieved] substantial gains and created a sizeable black middle class for the first time" (1), it is also an

undeniable reality that the lasting "lack of employment opportunities and the high levels of crime have led to a growing dissatisfaction for South Africans of all classes" (2-3). Referring to whites in particular, Luc Renders states that

> Frustration with the inefficiency of the black government, the lack of stability, the corruption, the poor economic prospects, the endemic violence, affirmative action programmes and the aids epidemic force the whites to re-examine their relationship with their country. (135)

On the other hand, not every South African was willing to share Nelson Mandela's desire for peace, forgiveness and reconciliation. Luc Renders goes on to mention the fact that in December 2000 Carl Niehaus[1] launched

> the "Home for All" campaign. All white South Africans were asked to sign a declaration in which they recognise the damage which was done by apartheid and its lasting consequences. According to the organizing committee the whites have the moral duty to try and do away with inequalities …. The campaign was not successful. Most whites did not see the need for self-humiliation, self-blame or redress. (128)

Time has therefore shown that social, political, economic or other problems cannot be expected to simply vanish by changing the law, especially when one realises that "the wealthiest" go on being "predominantly white whereas the poorest and the unemployed are overwhelming black" (Anthony Butler:45). In this respect, Luc Renders states that "South Africa has not overnight turned into a non-racial paradise. In some ways the country has not changed at all. There still is a wide gulf between the lives whites lead and those of blacks" (134). The achieved freedom, the new realities that in a way have not been able to change the spectrum of the past, have also brought vital and previously inexperienced questions related to identity, belonging, origin, significance, and purpose.

South African society is ethnically, culturally, religiously and linguistically extremely complex. As far as religion is concerned, for example, statistics have shown that there is a variety of different beliefs and practices; linguistically, it is remarkable that there are eleven official languages recognised in its democratic constitution as having equal status. According to Census 2011,

[1] Former spokesman for the ANC (African National Congress).

79.5% of the South African population is black African, whereas the white population and the coloured[2] population are both estimated at 9.0% and the Indian/Asian population at 2.5% (SouthAfrica.Info). In short, as Albie Sachs puts it, South Africa is "a multi-lingual … multi-faith and multi-cultural" country (135), and as with all societies, history has shaped South African contrasts in terms of rights and importance; first colonialism, and then apartheid, strongly determined "the oppression of the country's non-white population" (Anthony Butler:1). Quoting Singumbe Muyeba and Jeremy Seekings

> "Apartheid" in South Africa entailed systematic racial segregation between racial groups and discrimination against non-white groups. The Group Areas Act defined residential areas for the use of one or other racial group, and school as well as social spaces were strictly segregated. (1)

Hence, one's supposed colour, one's apparent ethnicity, one's social group have long defined one's place in society, one's neighbourhood, one's lifestyle. As Liz Johanson Botha puts it,

> [t]he South African apartheid worldview – a rigid and legalized version of a more general colonial worldview – defined one's life and identity according to whether one was 'white', 'black' or some 'colour' in between. This 'identity' determined where one lived, worked, went to school, and with whom one socialized and married. (463)

To a certain extent, the situation seems to be the one Charles Taylor describes in *The Politics of Recognition*, when referring to hierarchical societies,

> what we would now call identity was largely fixed by one's social position. That is, the background that explained what people recognised as important to themselves was to a great extent determined by their place in society, and whatever roles or activities attached to this position. (31)

Throughout South African history, power and privilege had always been associated with white people, with the colonizers, with the descendants of the Dutch and the British in particular, and thus their lifestyle had come to be understood as desirable. Furthermore, for centuries the dominated had seen the world through the eyes of the dominant, people were born and died in a

[2] The term "coloured" is not to be considered a scientific category, but rather a social label which has long structured South African society and identification practices.

world organized around a specific principle, which came to be subliminally understood as representing some sort of order of reality. Charles Taylor summarizes the idea by saying that "dominant groups tend to entrench their hegemony by inculcating an image of inferiority in the subjugated" (66). So, when the dominating culture was removed, the dominated culture tended to go on perpetuating some of the values established by the one which had been inculcated as superior; and when deprived of this role, there also came the emptiness of the previously dominated culture having to rediscover itself, of having to learn how to deal with the new realities. That is probably why many South Africans still view themselves according to the categories of apartheid, although those categories have been abolished for almost two decades now. The past is still inexorably present in people's minds, lives, and feelings; and the need for a new country or at least a new beginning somehow requires the act of leaving the traumatic past behind, which cannot be easily or fully achieved. Albie Sachs refers to the fact that "everything is obsessed by the oppressors and the trauma they have imposed" (133), and wondering about the emerging new South Africa, he questions "Can we say that we have begun to grasp the full dimensions of the new country and new people that is struggling to give birth to itself, or are we still trapped in the multiple ghettoes of the apartheid imagination?" (132). As Zoe Wicomb states in her article "Cultural Beyond Color? A South African Dilemna", South Africa's "new society remains umbilically linked to the matrix of apartheid so that parturition is a slow affair" (179). Moreover, she approaches the question of South African culture, by pointing out the close relationship between race and the process of disconnection from the past: "Since we are shaped by race-specific conditions, the protracted and bewildering weaning from the old is radically different for different racial groups" (179).

Racial segregation was an ever-present reality for most of 20th century South Africa. During the whole process of colonisation, as Anthony Butler puts it, the British settlers were "far less numerous", but the "final narrative is that of the imperial power, Britain, which increasingly but unevenly predominated over the economy and politics of the coastal regions" (8). With the help of successive restrictive regulations in the 20th century, they strengthened their dominance over the other ethnicities. People were not only to be classified according to

four strict racial categories (white, coloured, Indian/Asiatic and native), but whites were also expected not to mix with other Africans. Different laws were issued to enforce those policies so that, as stated by Anthony Butler, the "systematic racism of 1950s legislation combined with population classification made possible the conception of quite distinct social lives being created for distinct racial and ethnic groups" (18). During the 1960s, "Africans and others should reside and enjoy citizenship rights in distinct ethnic homelands" (19), with many of them having been displaced from their houses and neighbourhoods. For a long time, being black in South Africa meant being denied fundamental rights. It is therefore not surprising that black people often came to depreciate their own value to some extent.

By becoming a democratic country in 1994, South Africa, a "highly unequal society bequeathed by history", as Anthony Butler puts it (5), gave to the world an image of success and triumph in the path towards freedom and development. Neil Southern says "the multi-racial elections in 1994 signified" a new era in South Africa (397) and as Luc Renders says,

> the general mood was one of incredulity, relief and happiness. A new dawn had broken. Apartheid and white domination had come to an abrupt end. … A fully and truly multiracial and multicultural nation seemed to be in the making. (120)

Nevertheless, the country's inequalities could not have been expected to simply disappear overnight and, as Luc Renders says,

> the euphoria surrounding the election did not last long … There was a growing sense that little progress toward a more egalitarian society had been made and even that history was repeating itself. … The slow pace of change, the crime and the violence, the corruption, the dire state of the economy and a new form of racism, this time in the guise of affirmative action, all conspired to make the initial optimism suddenly look very naïve. (120-121)

With democracy there came the notion of equality, to be achieved at all levels. One of the most important in a country where so many rights had been denied to a large amount of the population for so long was equal dignity for all, but that also means the need for equal recognition. Diversity being the key word, all South Africans were expected to be entitled to equal rights, equal

dignity, and equal treatment, and so the demand to guarantee equal status to the different cultures became therefore imperative. However, a problem arises with the emergence of the ideal of authenticity. Charles Taylor clearly states this idea when he says that although in a democratic society, people can still define themselves by their social roles,

> [w]hat does decisively undermine this socially derived identification … is the ideal of authenticity itself … it calls on me to discover my own original way of being. By definition, this way of being cannot be socially derived, but must be inwardly generated. (31/32)

One might therefore say that if, in a hierarchical society, one's identity, where one comes from, what is expected of one, is basically defined by one's social class; in a multicultural democratic society, in which dignity and rights are to be expected for all, things are not supposed to work that way, and the problem may end up being the lack of recognition by others of one's distinctiveness and authenticity, for having equal rights is usually related to equal treatment, in which possible differences are overlooked for the sake of equal dignity and respect. On the other hand, the need for recognition and the ideal of authenticity work in the opposite way, in the sense that one feels one's uniqueness has to be valued and praised.

In a multicultural society, in which one is to be given equal opportunities and, at the same time, be valued and recognised for what is unique in one's identity, in which one feels one's traditional values have long been underestimated to the point that one has started to depreciate them too, defining one's role, one's sense of belonging, may appear as a arduous task, especially because it is usually an unconscious process. Furthermore, there is the issue of the natural mixing of ethnicities, which has given place to new colours and patterns, often difficult to insert in the traditional divisions. As Luc Renders states, "[u]nder white rule the coloureds were considered too dark to be white, now they are seen as too white to be black" (134). Accordingly, questions arise with respect to what is real or not, or to what is authentic or not. Francis B. Nyamnjoh refers to the fact that "[t]oday in Africa as elsewhere there is a growing preoccupation with belonging, bringing with it the questioning of previous assumptions about nationality and citizenship" (3). Using the metaphor of the house, Meg Samuelson states that

> the question of who gets to inhabit the house remains an incredibly vexed one continually testing the bounds of what the nation has become as debates around access to housing are articulated in and through the racial categories and divisions of the past, while forced removals and segregation remain notable features of the South African landscape. At the same time, the shantytowns surrounding South African cities grow ever more gargantuan as the new nation continues to house the aspirations of those from the hinterland and beyond the border that its urban structures do not in turn accommodate. How does the metaphor of the national home resonate for those who live within corrugated iron, between cardboard, or huddled under bridges or on doorsteps? (130)

Despite all the wishes and natural expectations, South Africa is experiencing previously unknown realities, and that requires a constant process of relearning and readapting. To a certain extent, and quoting Luc Renders, the country "is still experiencing a post-apartheid trauma" (137). Also meaningful is Albie Sachs's statement that "We all know where South Africa is, but we do not yet know what it is" (132), which comes to summarize one of the most important issues in South Africa: the need for its peoples to rediscover themselves as part of a united country. And that seems to be a difficult road to travel for, as Albie Sachs recognises, "we bring in with us our complexes and ways of seeing the world, our jealousies and preconceptions" (134). Furthermore there is the need to communicate, to acknowledge differences, and as Daniel Herwitz points out, South Africa is "a society beset … by significant problems in communication" (49).

Unfortunately, even without experiencing the reality of such an imposing and restrictive regime as that of apartheid, many other places, in multicultural societies, face somehow similar problems, as far as inequalities, social and economic problems and questions of culture, identity or gender are concerned. There are always those whose life has been easier, who have had better opportunities and there are those neighbourhoods made up of poor people, who have failed to succeed in life, either because they missed the opportunities or because they were not given to them. There are those who share and identify with the mainstream dominant culture and those who feel their values are overlooked. In this extremely complex tapestry of feelings, it is

perhaps not surprising to witness the emergence of the idea of fragmentation associated with the building of identity. In this respect, Stuart Hall says that

> Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematises the very authority and authenticity to which the term, 'cultural identity', lays claim. (222)

Still facing deeply engraved inequalities, social and economic problems, in the democratic route already travelled, South Africa does not seem to have been able to stop problems such as that of xenophobia. On the contrary, as stated by Steven L. Gordon, "The majority of South Africans do not welcome foreigners, especially those from other African countries" (4). He goes on to say that not only "economic deprivations following the political transition" are to explain this hostility, as many eminent politicians and academics have stated. Indeed he adds that

> There is little doubt that the racialised nature of contemporary South African xenophobia and the identification of 'black' foreigners from 'black' Africa (typified as primarily sub-Saharan Africa) is constructed and has been shaped by the former apartheid system with its enormous emphasis on racial discrimination. (7)

South African ethnic and cultural diversity has shaped the country's path throughout history, and inevitably today's reality, but the experiences of colonialism and apartheid seem to have had the major role in South African society for all they have meant in terms of social and cultural issues, values, ideas and feelings. Accordingly, the encounter with Europe has also deeply influenced South African literature; Simon Gikandi refers to South African writers as "products of the institutions that colonialism had introduced and developed in the continent" (54). He goes on to say that "[f]rom the eighteenth century onwards, the colonial situation shaped what it meant to be an African writer, shaped the language of African writing, and overdetermined the culture of letters in Africa" (54). After decolonisation, there has been the urge to understand the extent of the situation, to assert a new nationalism, to

rediscover identities, which somehow could no longer be dissociated from the consequences of having been a colony. Colonisation has therefore had a strong, determining and undeniable influence in literature, even long after the country achieved its independence. And if colonisation has had an enduring repercussion in literature, so has apartheid, for everything it has represented in South African people's minds and lives; for its cultural, social and political effects. As Simon Gikandi also says, literature is however a powerful weapon of cultural resistance (57), and therefore it comes to represent ways of dealing with many of the conflicts, problems and doubts to be found within society.

Dealing with three novels by three South African women writers, along with race and cultural issues, the question of gender cannot be left out either. Ronit Frenkel refers to the fact previously mentioned by Albie Sachs that "[h]istorically, huge differences have shaped the lives of South African women from different racial backgrounds, but patriarchy has been the one constant 'profoundly non-racial institution' across all communities" (1). In this respect, Ketu H Katrak states that

> before colonialism women played an active part in the socio-political life of their community. Today, despite the external advantages of education and modernization, women's actual participation in the political sphere has been marginalized. (70)

The author is careful in stressing that the pre-colonial era was not perfect for women, that before colonisation there was not perfect equality between the sexes, but she points out that there were some traditions that protected women's rights and that ensured power-sharing between the sexes, and those "were often misunderstood by British colonizers who brought their own legal systems. Colonialism and capitalism worked together to women's detriment" (69). As in many other societies, after colonialism, South African women tended to be increasingly excluded from decisions, a situation also addressed by Ronit Frenkel when she states that:

> In most histories of colonial conquest, the colonising power refused to negotiate with women or acknowledge women as leaders in a public context. The collusion between colonial powers and indigenous male leaders led to female exclusion from higher structures of power across colonial sites. (3)

Women's value was only acknowledged in respect to what Marilyn Frye notes as their function as far as "the service of men and men's interests as men define them, which includes the bearing and rearing of children" (87) are concerned. Being deprived of an equal social value, the situation must have been particularly difficult for women belonging to those social groups that were not recognised as having full rights.

As far as literature is concerned, as Juliana Makuchi points out, "[a] number of reasons have been offered to justify why African women writers have generally been ignored, excluded, and/or forgotten" (2), namely the African family organisation itself, tradition, and "the system of formal education that for a long time was the preserve of men" (2-3). So attention was almost fully given to male writers, who gave a "subservient image" "of African women. They are portrayed as passive, as always prepared to do the bidding of their husbands and family, as having no status of their own and therefore completely dependent on their husbands" (4). Besides, there is the key point, mentioned by Margaret Daymond in *Women Writing Africa, the Southern Region*, that "gender must always be defined through race, class, ethnicity, culture, and other coordinates in order to achieve any meaning" (1) and that "[p]olitical repressions in South Africa (…), the realities of poverty, and the limited access to education across the entire Southern African region produced an environment particularly inhospitable to black women's voices" (41). As in many other countries in the world, women's role in society is changing, and the fact that the three novels under analysis have been written by women may be a clear indicator of that: as said by Daymond in *Women Writing Africa, the Southern Region*, "writing signifies both empowerment and entrapment to women" (2). In turn, Juliana Makuchi states that "the plight of the African woman writer has begun to change drastically" (4). Nonetheless, just like the question of ethnicity, the gender issue also needs time to redefine itself. Indeed women's role has for years been defined by men, and women may need to free themselves from an image which is deeply inscribed, before starting to assert their changed place in society.

South Africa has overcome many obstacles in the course of history, and its long-dreamt achievement in becoming a democratic country was a key point in its struggle for freedom and justice, but it could not be expected to

miraculously remove all obstacles in people's lives or relationships, for many result from everyday life, daily difficulties that are still present today, from unconscious and long-rooted prejudice along with complex inner and usually unconscious feelings. In the process of readapting to a new society, with new values, in which one feels the need to look for the best way to deal with all the new realities, and to question one's role and purpose, even one's identity (even if unconsciously), one inevitably comes to a somehow undermined field in which many things are no longer exactly what they seem. Accordingly, South Africans tend therefore to react and deal with the new realities in specific ways, derived from their origin, ethnicity, or gender.

Coconut, *Playing in the Light* and *Blood Kin* are novels published in the first decade of the twenty-first century, by South African writers whose experiences have been very different. While Kopano Matlwa, the author of *Coconut*, is a young coloured writer, Zoe Wicomb, also coloured, having been born in the mid-20th century, had to "live" the regime of apartheid. As for Ceridwen Dovey, her experience is expectedly not the same, for she is a young white writer. Thus striking questions arise related to the way these three writers see and relate to South African society at the beginning of the new century.

CHAPTER ONE: IDENTITY AND RECOGNITION IN *COCONUT*

Kopano Matlwa is a young South African coloured writer, born in the mid-1980s, and therefore still a child when apartheid came to an end. *Coconut*, her first novel, was first published in 2007. The questions it raises, and the depictions of South Africa it articulates are deeply rooted in South African history and social reality, although they also appear to be intrinsic to many other realities nowadays, as they have become issues in most multiethnic and multicultural societies.

Coconut is divided into two parts, with two different main characters, who eventually interact with each other but who belong to different realities, despite being both coloured. In the first part, the first person narrator is Ofilwe (Fifi) Tlou, whose family is able to give her and her brother Tshepo new opportunities as they have enough money to lead a lifestyle previously connected with the privileged white groups of society. Overriding questions however are whether they fit in, and how they react or feel to the changes in their life. In the second part, the first person narrator is Fikile, a poor coloured girl whose experiences and reality seem to have nothing to do with Fifi's, but whose search for a new definition of herself also faces obstacles, as she pursues the dream of escaping from an underprivileged life of poverty. Thus, one comes to what could be classified as one of the main issues in *Coconut* – the quest for one's identity in interconnection with the search for power and wellbeing. From the moment one is born, one starts to build up one's identity, which, according to Charles Taylor, in *The Politics of Recognition*, "designates something like a person's understanding of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics as a human being" (25). In that usually unconscious process, one feels the need to belong to a group of people one identifies with, and by extension to a culture. Moreover, there is the call for recognition: not only does one need to draw the lines which one identifies with, but one also needs one's identity to be confirmed by others so that the person can perceive their identity as solid. As Charles Taylor states,

> our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror

> back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. (25)

Related to the central question of identity, there is the question of power and dominance. It seems to be part of human nature to crave power and privileges. No one likes to be relegated to a lower position and one somehow tends to feel reassured when realizing there are those who are in a worse situation; as Ofilwe says, "Perhaps it is consoling for us that there is always some who are worse off" (52), for "[e]ven amongst the poor there are those who are poor and even amongst the lower class there are those who are lower class" (52). Indeed in no society, independently of its degree of democracy, do all people have the same rights and opportunities. There are always those who seem to dominate and those who are underprivileged, mirroring what happens in any relation that involves power.

In *Coconut*, Fifi and her family moved from Mabopane (a blacks only area during the 1970s) to Little Valley County Estate (formerly a white area), by the time Fifi was to begin nursery school and her elder brother was in preparatory school. From there, brother and sister would follow different paths in their search for definition and belonging, and through constant flashbacks and flash-forwards one realises their difficulties, their doubts, and their disappointments in their struggle to fit into a group and define themselves, both ending in isolation and loneliness. In Little Valley County Estate, Fifi's parents could show they could live in a grand house in a rich area and were entitled to enjoy a lifestyle of brand-name clothes, expensive food, bankcards, electronic entertainment, a pool, horse-riding trails, brightly lit sealed roads, security guard protection instead of humble shelters, self-made toilets, cheap garments, wet dirt, dusty streets, and gunshots drawing ever closer. Their moving was seen as an opportunity to start a new life; however, this physical displacement, even if complemented by a change in some routines or external behaviours, does not unsurprisingly mean that they have achieved a new identity and that they naturally become part of the new neighbourhood. Indeed, there are old intrinsic habits that set them apart:

> But after a while it's agony playing a role you would never dream of auditioning for. You fall ill from explaining why Mama does not shave. You run out of excuses why Daddy refuses to go fishing with the rest of the

> dads, and why Koko won't help out at the tuckshop like everybody else's grandmother does. (48)

Their physical translocation does not and could hardly correspond to a cultural change in any seamless way. Cultural identity is not determined by one's physical location in a narrow sense. It is the result of the surrounding environment, of upbringing, but also of one's feelings and reactions to the events that occur in one's life, including one's history before translocation. Ofilwe ends up believing her family's life is not real, feeling that they are living a lie. Watching her father standing in the heart of their garden in his Sunday suit, she thinks he seems a character in a fictitious story: "I see Daddy in the garden. … Standing in the heart of it in his Sunday suit, … Daddy resembles a character in a world of pretend" (78).

Significantly both Ofilwe and Tshepo, regardless of the different paths they opt for, choose the "middle" of their house as their favourite place. From Ofilwe's favourite room, "right in the centre of the house, you have a view of every nook that matters" (78), and "[i]n the middle … Tshepo started hiding out on the second floor" (82). This represents well their feeling of being in the middle, stuck between two worlds, the world of their former origin and traditions and the newly-experienced world of cosmopolitan white privileges, being confused and amazed by both. This situation is plainly described by Tshepo, when he tells Ofilwe:

> You will find … that the people you strive so hard to be like will one day reject you because as much as you may pretend, you are not one of their own. Then you will turn back, but there too you will find no acceptance, for those you once rejected will no longer recognise the thing you have become. So far, too far to return. So much, too much you have changed. Stuck between two worlds, shunned by both. (93; italics in original[3])

In Little Valley County Estate, the Tlous are protected from the outside, they have the main gatehouse for dwellers and the Estate Admissions Gate; they have security guards and strict control over who may come in or not. There they are assured a "24-hour a day maximum security mandatory for survival in Johannesburg" (74-75). There is therefore an image of extreme

[3] Italics are used in *Coconut* whenever there is a flashback. So as not to have an overly distracting effect in this dissertation, the italics will not be reproduced or referenced again.

violence: you can get shot for example when giving a lift to someone: "Mama tells me in the car, on our way home yesterday, that a former Headmaster of Thuto Pele Primary School in Atteridgeville was shot last weekend by two men he gave a lift to" (7). But there is also a different type of violence inside, the inner "violence" of having to define oneself between two worlds: the world of one's ancestors, with its language, lifestyle and traditions, that is increasingly and inexorably being blurred as it has come to be associated with an underprivileged status in society, and a new world of comfort and dominance, which one desires to identify with, but which one cannot either easily or automatically fit into.

As far as her ancestry is concerned, Ofilwe recognises her lack of information "I am afraid my history only goes as far back as lessons on the Dutch East India Company in grade two at Laerskool Valley Primary School" (18). This can be related to what Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins refer to when they point out that

> a colony's history frequently 'began' when the whites arrived: any events prior to contact with Europeans were irrelevant to the official record which became the history, a closed narrative designed to remove traces of alternative histories. (106)

In her protected neighbourhood, there is a whole South Africa Ofilwe does not have contact with and which makes her feel curious: the "vintage jet-black lady who sells ready-to-eat Maotoana at the notorious Schubert intersection" (16) every Sunday with her posture and behaviour makes her secretly believe she is of royal blood. And that leads to the information that her paternal grandmother knows everything about the British royal family, having suffered and mourned Princess Diana's death as if she were very close, appearing more devastated than when her own husband had died. But that also seems a reality as far away from Fifi as the jet-black lady. Fifi wonders about her own ancestry: "Does my royal family still exist, some place out there in "barren, rural South Africa? … Were they once a grand people, ruling over a mighty nation, audaciously fighting off the advance of the colourless ones?" (18). She cannot believe they did not have any privileges at all, but she knows nothing of life outside her immediate family. Not knowing the past, not fully understanding who she is, where she comes from or where she belongs, Ofilwe's picture of the

future is blurred: "I wonder what my own family will be like. Unlike some of my female friends, I do not have a picture of an ideal husband in mind nor am I certain whether I even fancy one" (19). Although she thinks about her future children quite a bit, she does not know the meaning of what she imagines and she is afraid of what it might mean.

Gemina, Ofilwe's mother, shops at Little Square Shopping Centre, as all important neighbours do. Fifi does not understand her mother's need to shop daily, which she sees as "another one of Mama's peculiar indulgences" (19); she does not understand the necessity her mother seems to have to show that she is part of the neighbourhood. Moreover, she does not seem to understand her mother's dislike of being touched:

> I personally have never seen it happen but she tells me that her skin is sensitive and breaks out in rashes if it is in contact with human flesh for a prolonged period of time. Children's hands are especially lethal and cause her a ghastly amount of discomfort when and after she comes into contact with them. Mama suspects it is because children by nature are filthy and thus exacerbate her fussy skin's response to touch. (65)

Her mother seems to be obsessed about cleanliness: she does not want Fifi to get her floor wet, just as she does not want her to bring "filth home" (39). She is determined to stay beautiful: "Like the fact that Mama's money is her own to be used on herself and nothing else because she is beautiful and it costs money to remain so" (79). This obsession with cleanliness may be related to her need to define her position in society, which seems to contrast with what her skin-colour represents to her. Fifi says her mother is a beautiful soft-skinned, "metallic blue-black in colour" (52) forty-six-year-old woman. She walks proudly despite coming from lowly origins, indeed from the lower class of the lower class.

Fifi's mother's father was only mentioned once in Fifi's life and all that was said about him is that he was "Irrelevant": "He was only spoken of once in my life. I remember the way the teacup fell from Koko's hand, the way she let it fall, when he was mentioned. 'Irrelevant' is all she had said in response to my question" (52). Fifi imagines that he was a foreigner, from somewhere close to the Equator, probably because of her mother's skin colour. Besides, being an immigrant might explain his being called "Irrelevant" and Fifi's mother's lowly origins. In fact, as Jonathan Crush states, in South Africa "migrants from

neighbouring countries enjoyed few rights and little legal protection during the apartheid era" (105), and in the post-apartheid period, "there is a growing consensus amongst independent observers that South Africans are highly antagonistic to foreigners and that intolerance is widespread" (105). Furthermore, it is claimed that "South Africans of all races display a distinct aversion to Africans from elsewhere on the continent" (112); this may possibly be explained by the fact that unemployment and poverty have never stopped being a widespread reality among disadvantaged South Africans, who therefore tend to see foreigners as "scapegoats. This is because they are interpreted as a threat to jobs, housing, education and health care", as stated by Bronwyn Harris (171). That is the same point made by Francis B. Nyamnjoh, when he says that

> in situations like post-apartheid South Africa, where the majority of nationals are yet to graduate into meaningful citizenship, the competition with migrants for the lowest-level jobs is keen. Claims of belonging are aggressive, and feelings of hostility to migrants excessive. (2)

Fifi's father "sought controversy" marrying her mother, "a metallic blue-black nothing girl of a nothing woman and a man we know only as 'Irrelevant'" (52). Fifi would like to walk as high as her mother, to be proud: "I want to hold her hand so that they may see that she is mine, confirm that her blood … runs through my veins and that someday perhaps I will look somewhat familiar" (53). However, she is embarrassed and "ashamed" of her mother's reactions in relation to her white friends, her need to please them, despite clearly showing her ignorance of the whites' ways: "The next morning Mama ran baths for the girls. Did she not know that white people only bathe at night? I am so embarrassed. Mama is dumb. I told her that after they had left" (53).

When Fifi unintentionally listens to her mother crying on the phone, Koko, her maternal grandmother, tells her not to act "like a spoilt child", that John, Fifi's father,

> was a man and that men do these things with other women, but that it does not mean he does not care for Mama. Koko said that Mama lives a life that many women from where she comes from can only dream of and that she cannot jeopardise that by 'this crazy talk of divorce' … Have you

> forgotten your responsibilities, Gemina? You have two young children … Without him, my girl, you is nothing. (12/13)

Her father was the one who decided her mother, who used to be a nurse, should stop working and would be better at home raising their children. He decided to give her a weekly allowance for her daily expenses, but then there is the suggestion that Fifi should "spy" on her "spendthrift mother" (50). This summarises well the role usually assigned to women in South African society: dependent on men, responsible for taking care of the children and for harmony in the family, having to put up with men's infidelity. Fifi wonders who she is, how different she would have been if her mother had chosen love, which implies her mother had searched above all for wellbeing and status in society. Her maternal grandmother's house, food and lifestyle have nothing to do with her own, thus establishing a contrast between those who have very little or nothing and those who can afford material comfort:

> Instead of waking up to my cubed fruit, muesli and mixed nuts on a bed of low-fat granadilla yoghurt, would I begin my day by polishing the red stoep that juts out at the front of Koko's two-roomed house? When bored, would I pass the time naming stones and creating homes for them in the wet dirt that surrounds Koko's self-made outside toilet instead of playing Solitaire on Mama's laptop, as I do now? … Would it matter to me who my clothes were named after? (13-14)

Belinda, Ofilwe's friend as a child, lives in a farm; therefore she is not what her mother wants to identify with. She does not want Fifi to accept any kind of food from Belinda's parents, for they might poison her, revealing Fifi's mother as suspicious of those who are different. However, even though Fifi is curious about their different food and lifestyle, she also hates "being indoors at Belinda's" (39). They had been best friends since their teacher seated them together in grade three. But as they grew older, they separated, thus confirming what Tshepo had predicted: "one's circle of friends will become smaller" (41), as one becomes aware of the differences, which inevitably leads to prejudice:

> However, like the two glasses of water forgotten on a tray in the reading room, we start to collect bits. Bits of fluff, bits of a broken beetle wing, bits of bread, bits of pollen, bits of shed epithelial cells, bits of hair … All sorts of bits. No two combinations the same. Just like with the glasses of water,

> Environment, jealous of out fundamentality, bombards our basic minds with complexity. So we become frighteningly dissimilar, until there is very little that holds us together. (41)

Throughout Ofilwe's account, one realises that she starts by defining her identity as speaking English with the right accent, straightening her hair, and going to St Francis Anglican Church. She is trying to be part and to be recognised as part of a specific group that has historically established their superiority, by "inculcating an image of inferiority in the subjugated" (66), as Charles Taylor states. Nonetheless, in her developing her identity, her belonging, and no matter how strong and defined Fifi's ideas might seem at first, she has to deal with many doubts and difficulties as her account develops. From an early age, she concluded that Sepedi, her maternal grandmother and her mother's native language, would not take her far, that she had to speak perfect English to be seen differently, to be entitled to have the possibility of having new opportunities in life, those opportunities that only English-speaking people had:

> I observed my surroundings and noted that all those who were lawyers, doctors and accountants, all the movie stars that wore beautiful dresses, all the singers that drove fancy cars and all my friends who owned the latest clothing, did not speak the language that bounced berserkly from Koko to Tshepo to Malome Arthur to Mama and back to Koko again. I did not care if I could not catch it. (54)

She can now speak the TV language, the language of success. She believes that she is special, as she is not like her poor Sepedi-speaking cousins, who seem to be "serving" her when they dish up for her: "Even the old people know I am special. At family reunions they do not allow me to dish up for myself. 'Hayi!' they shout. 'Sit down, Ofilwe.' They scold my cousins for being so thoughtless. 'Get up and dish out for Ofilwe, Lebogang!'" (54). But at school they do not believe she speaks mainly English at home and she is punished for insisting she does. For the teachers and for the school governing board writing down the pupils' different languages in the class, she is pre-conceived as speaking a Bantu language, whether Zulu or another, it is not important.

Ofilwe wonders whether South Africans think in English, the language of power and dominance. She knows her mother thinks in Sepedi, which is her first language, the language she prefers for communication. They might have

moved their residence, but that does not mean they could change the way they structure their thoughts, their inner feelings and reactions. By deciding not to speak her family's traditional language, Ofilwe was also refusing her family history and, in some sense, cutting with her family's past. Therefore, on her sixteenth birthday, she realises she has nothing to share with the other boys and girls at her party, as they speak of their traditional languages, homes, clan names and past histories. That is the moment when she decides to reverse her life and to relearn and gradually speak and improve her knowledge of Sepedi, which she eventually realises is much more difficult than she thought: "Could it all possibly be flushed away? My own tongue escaped from me completely? That cannot be. Mama and Daddy speak it all the time, although not to me nor to each other" (57). Once lost, it is difficult to regain tradition. She pities herself, for not knowing where she is going, and thus feeling purposeless.

In contrast, her brother Tshepo follows a completely different route in his growing up and definition of identity. Tshepo is different from Fifi and she knows that. He takes after his mother, but has "daddy's fair skin" (66), and he questions the importance of speaking English with the right accent, or even the importance of speaking English at all. When they moved to the new neighbourhood, he "was held back a year" at school, "because he did not speak English as well as his new, elite, all-boys' school would have liked" (6). Tshepo is embarrassed by Fifi's speaking English, for her not praising their traditional languages and customs, and he says she is "an Aunty Jemima … a sell-out" (60).

Tshepo stopped joining the family in the religious service and questions Christianity, which he says "is like advertising. You market a product well enough and anybody will buy it" (5). He believes it has nothing to do with him, referring to his skin colour as an argument: "All I am saying is that my skin is black" (5). He revolts against the loss of traditions, ancient black traditions, those Fifi does not know anything about: "Mama, what did we believe in before the missionaries came?" (9). She sees Christianity as the basis of the whole social system and of their upbringing: "Christianity, a product? Lord, are you listening to this? Are you crazy, Tshepo? Our whole social system is built on Christianity: our calendar, holidays, laws. Our upbringing. Now you want to tell me that it is all one big scam?" (5). The traditions of the (Anglican) church are

her own although she admits she knows nothing about its origin or meaning, either: "I do not know what the word 'Anglican' means nor can I explain to you how the church came to arise" (9). On the other hand, it seems the family does not really make up part of the religious community. In fact, they never stay for juice or biscuits after the service, as Fifi would have liked:

> After the 9.30am Family Service, all members of our church are invited to juice and biscuits in the hall-cum-school-cum-gymnasium across from the chapel. Even though it is seldom both juice and biscuits that the tea ladies provide, I often wish that we could stay. (11)

Instead they head up to the Silver Spoon Coffee Shop, and Fifi is also willing to go there on Sundays, as it is fashionable and except for Tshepo, the "family worships Silver Spoon's Traditional English Breakfast" (20).

Ofilwe likes to feel her family fits in at the Silver Spoon, just like all the white customers going there; she likes to think she is part of that community. Nevertheless, it is easy to conclude they do not really fit in. They are not as friendly with the owner as the other customers and nor do they have a "relationship" with them:

> We are regulars here at Silver Spoon, but are not chummy with Miss Becky, the owner, like the other regulars are. I am familiar with most of the beaming faces in here today, but do not jump up excitedly when I see any of them enter nor do I blow darling kisses across tables as they often do when they see each other. (30)

Fifi pretends to believe that it is her family's fault that, they "have not tried to assimilate … into the Silver Spoon Coffee Shop family tree" (30). However, she knows the truth, that her family is "out of place", pretending to be people they are not: "Daddy believes he enjoys this food. Poor Mama, she still struggles with this fork and knife thing. Poor us. Poor, poor, poor, pathetic us. It is pitiful. What are we doing here? Why did we come? We do not belong" (31). Accordingly *Coconut* raises the unavoidable question as to what extent the different aspects of one's identity can be changed. There seems to be a direct relation between one's behaviour, one's attitude in a particular situation and one's upbringing, which is deeply rooted in one's social class and ethnicity. Apartheid was put to an end, but in people's hearts and minds there remains the

connection between white people's behaviour, language and manners and status in society:

> We dare not eat with our naked fingertips, walk in generous groups, speak merrily in booming voices and laugh our mqombothi laughs. They will scold us if we dare, not with their lips, Lord, because the laws prevent them from doing so, but with their eyes. … The old rules remain and the old sentiments are unchanged. (31-32)

There is a feeling that you must have "white manners", behave as the whites do, so as not to feel the criticism "Stop acting black!" in the whites' eyes (31). All this perception, however, also seems to be related to the inculcated image of black people Charles Taylor refers to: "white society has for generations projected a demeaning image of [black people], which some of them have been unable to resist adopting" (26). In other words, not only have white people considered themselves superior for years and their lifestyle as the only acceptable one, they have also projected that idea in such an effective way that other ethnicities have tended to end up believing and echoing the same belief. Ofilwe wonders, however, about the situation, about its possible meaning and its contradictions: "And we will pause, perplexed, unsure of what that means, for are we not black, Father?" (31). By trying to move up in society, there are reactions and attitudes one may have difficulties in changing, as one may be denying one's own identity, or at least part of it.

The novel is constantly questioning the existence of traditions within the family and their different ways of articulating the past with the present. The Tlous are the only black customers at the Silver Spoon. Besides them, only the kitchen staff and the waiters are black, which clearly reveals the lack of interaction between people from different backgrounds or ethnicities in many present-day scenarios. The situation is the one Singumbe Muyeba and Jeremy Seekings refer to:

> Residential and educational segregation persist, in practice, for most South Africans: Most South Africans live in mono-racial neighbourhoods and their children attend mono-racial schools. Moreover, few South Africans have friends from other racial groups and inter-racial marriages are rare. … Even in social spaces that appear to be integrated, there is limited inter-racial interaction. (1-2)

Tshepo does not share the need of the other members of the family to mingle with privileged white people; he seems to wish to preserve what he believes are his traditions. He is strong-minded and he does not mind "cleaning after people" (25), so he is able to apply for a waitering job at Instant Fried Chicken. He seems to need to prove something to himself and to his family, something Fifi cannot understand at all at first. He defies the reality and identity he feels is being imposed on him. He is looking for his own identity, for his own place in the world, and in the process discovers that he does not fit with the Instant Fried Chicken staff either. According to Fifi, "he is by nature the type whose mere existence depends on being intellectually stimulated" (25); and as she finds out in what she thinks may have been an entry in his journal, he knows he does not belong there:

> I am afraid of them. I know I am different. I reek of KTV, IEB, MTV and ICC, although I have tried to mask it behind All Stars sneakers and a free Youth League election T-shirt. I am certain they will catch me out as soon as I open my mouth. (26)

Yet, as he concludes, if they did, it was of no significance to them. Tshepo feels offended when Isabella, the black woman who hired him, criticises the staff's work, mentioning their lack of formal education. He is different for he graduated from junior school, was awarded different prizes as a promising student, honours at his current High School, and is actively involved in a wide range of activities, having been offered a scholarship to further his education at any tertiary institution in the country. He believes in due time he will be able to "educate this woman" (28). She insists he is fortunate for having been hired, and praises his politeness; he may teach the lazy, ungrateful employees some manners; but then she immediately puts him in his place as a waiter: "However, my hallelujahs are cut short by a sharp 'Enough talking. This restaurant does not run itself'" (28). There he also experiences the feeling of being ignored by the white customers:

> That look, or rather lack thereof, sticks with me throughout the day, maybe because it is foreign or maybe because it is one I get over and over again as I move from one table of milky faces to another. Do these people not see me, hear me, when I speak to them? Why do they look through me as

> if I do not exist, click their fingers at me as if it is the only language I understand? (29)

He is enraged by the feeling that not much has changed in South Africa, stressing the idea that "it is now, not then" (29); however, people go on not seeing, not looking at those who are serving. He wants to be respected and seen not for his knowledge of the language or of the Constitution, not for his intellectual development, but for himself and his identity as a South African person. In that sense, he is looking for recognition as a human being, as a person with an identity to be respected. He is asking for the recognition of distinctness Charles Taylor refers to when he deals with the politics of difference: "[t]he idea is that it is precisely this distinctness that has been ignored, glossed over, assimilated to a dominant or majority identity. And this assimilation is the cardinal sin against the ideal of authenticity" (38). The staff, however, do not seem to share his feelings, thus underlining the novel's exploration of the multiple ways of not belonging that the new South Africa provides. The staff believe that he has no idea of the real world, and that, as he got his education in the post-apartheid period, he is still shocked by white people's attitudes:

> The staff, however, do not share my passion; instead they ridicule it. "It is true!" they chuckle …. "These Model C children know nothing of the real world. They are shocked by the ways of Umlungu. It is good you have come to work, boy. There is much you must learn" (29).

To a certain extent the staff's reaction can be related to one of the notions of "ignorance" Melissa Stein refers to: the one which is needed for survival, when people simply accept their destiny, protecting themselves from "painful consciousness" (19). Accordingly Tshepo feels ashamed and wonders what he is doing there, given that he has little connection to the staff, the employer or the customers:

> I do not need the money nor will the experience be of use to me in any of my desired career paths. I deplore the customers. I despise Isabella. I detest what the kitchen represents. I do not know what I am trying to prove, why I must prove it and to whom. (30)

In the end it is to himself he has to prove something, as a person in the quest of his identity, and its recognition by those who surround him.

In this context the story old Virginia, the Tlous' domestic worker, used to tell Tshepo and which he told Ofilwe – the story of the great Green Apples and the unfortunate Pears – becomes relevant. All fruit, once growing on the same tree, was similar but different at the same time. The Apples grew bold, proud, evil thoughts while the Pears were unaware and only very late did the Pears awake, many had been smashed and their stems bent and broken, many had been bruised and had had their flesh ruptured, but many had not been allowed to grow, to ripen, for "they had been yanked off the tree" (34) by the Apples. But worse than the apples was the traitor pear which showed no scruples in attacking one of its own, or in pretending to be an apple. That pear was unaware of its identity, of its real belonging with the Pears, of its growing characteristics as a pear. And then there was the day it was thought better that Pears and Green Apples should grow on separate trees (apartheid), and the following day the traitor Pear was seen as a Pear and ended up as all the other Pears – yanked off the tree and thrown against a rock. Fifi thinks Fikile, one of the waiters at the Silver Spoon, should have been told this story, as she believes that Fikile is behaving like the traitor Pear. She does not seem to realise however she is behaving like the traitor Pear too.

"Who are you, Ofilwe? You do not know who you are" (42), says Tshepo. He does not want her to pretend she is part of a group that he feels is not hers, but Fifi implies he is not authentic either as he pretends not to know much that he does and that has nothing to do with their origins. They are both in search of a group, a reality they can feel as their own, with all the difficulties defining one's identity implies, especially when one has contact with different realities. Tshepo believes that her white so-called friends' families only allow her in for it is cute or socially fashionable; and that is not real belonging. He says she does not share the same tastes, the same pastimes, the same reality and he wants her to open her eyes. He thinks that real friends accept you for who you really are:

> Friends ask where you come from and are curious about what language you and yours speak. Friends get to know your family, all of them, those with and those without. Friends do not scoff at your beliefs, friends appreciate your customs, friends accept you for who you really are. (43)

This inevitably leads to the question of what is real about one's identity: "Oh, and to make it really authentic, maybe I should pretend that I cannot swim, Tshepo. Like you do. What a marvellous idea! That, right there would make me real: prove to you, dear brother, and the whole wide world that I know who I am" (42).

While playing the "kissing game spin-the-bottle" (44), among her white friends, Fifi says she "knew from the way it had been mocking [her] with its sarcastic swirls all night that it would point at" (45) her next. Therefore she shows she does not exactly feel welcome there. Her brother's words seem to have cut deep inside her. She feels mockery and sarcasm among the group, proven to her shockingly when the boy she is paired with refuses to kiss her, not because she is inexperienced, but just because "her lips are too dark" (45), which makes the others laugh. That is the point Fifi realises she does not fit in there. That is why she stops being "friends" with them: "I told myself I was throwing out all the garbage in my life when I rejected their invitations" (48). Moreover she also stops being friends with Belinda, who wanted to teach her "to speak properly" (49), so as not to be laughed at again. Fifi feels sorry for them but for herself too, all struggling to come to terms with the changed realities of the country. As Singumbe Muyeba and Jeremy Seekings point out, "when Ofilwe does have contact with white people, in the neighbourhood and at school, the interactions are infused with persistent racism" (3).

Fifi senses that Fikile does not like her the same way she does not like Fikile either: "Fikile usually serves the other customers because they ask for her, and Ayanda serves us. I personally prefer it that way, and I am confident she does too" (20). It appears they identify with each other to some extent, not only in terms of colour, but also in their aim of leaving behind their past and they do not like what they see: someone pretending to be what they are not. They may be doing it for different reasons for they live in different realities, but their purposes are similar. The easiest way to deal with this realisation is to criticise each other. At school, the other brown children, those of black African descent also criticise – they treat each other badly – they do not want to identify with each other: "Even if Felicity, the only other girl of African descent in your grade, and the three other brown kids in the younger years, treat you like the scum they believe they are, at least you are all the same" (49). Each person wants to

identify with those who are seen as more powerful, those who had been distinguished for their proclaimed superiority for years. Ofilwe feels Fikile resents her, and she does not understand Fikile's need to flirt with white customers, no matter their age or appearance: "Fikile can't be much older than me. Is she not embarrassed? Does she not wonder what the rest of us will think of her Hanky-Pankies with that *Oupa*? … Is a lack of melanin her only criterion?" (22).

Ofilwe's grade seven Maths teacher used to rearrange the room each time they had a test so that the stronger pupils could help those who were not so strong, and in that way all of them would be at the same level. The aim was for equality and success for all, but Fifi considers that the teacher was "perhaps a little naïve" (23) for the system only stimulated fierce competition among the top students, while the not so strong students remained the same, a metaphor for society, in which some have privileges and there is little use expecting them to help those with no privileges, or that the underprivileged will all rise in life one day. Indeed the privileged will go on competing to maintain their status; while there will always be those not lucky enough to succeed. When Fifi finally got a place in the top six, she reacted as if it were as "inconsequential as the sentiments of the not-so-strong pupils" (23) she was leaving behind. She says being in the top six had never been a key priority for hers, but she fought for it as she knew that was the only way to get Junior P. Mokoena, a boy always with the highest marks, to recognise her. You can only be seen by those who are "superior" if you go up the scale. But once again Fifi realises she does not fit in. To her love letter, she just gets the arrogant "Tell her that I only date white girls" (24). He is privileged now, much more privileged than her, as he has his own driver, an Olympic size swimming pool, a first black female neurosurgeon mother and a successful business father. Deep down, her attitude towards Fikile is similar to Mokoena's attitude towards her. And that just leads to resentment, anger, contempt and suspicion.

With respect to the neighbourhood, and despite all their efforts, it is debatable how far the Tlous integrate themselves, not to mention how much they are accepted as equal. Ofilwe's mother does not even know about "the parents' evenings" (51) at school, an event for parents to be able to assess their children's scholastic development, at least in theory, according to Fifi, who really sees it as "an exhibition night" (51). She pretends she is protecting her

mother for, as she did not go to High School, she will not understand it and she wishes to spare her mother embarrassment. However, she is probably trying to protect herself from being embarrassed at her mother's speaking very bad English and not fitting in either in manners or colour. When Ofilwe's father fulfils his dream of a new Mercedes-Benz and Fifi is looking forward to showing it to her schoolmates, as he picks her up late, the only white boy watching asks "Nice wheels, Ofilwe, who did your father hijack it from?" (16). When asked about her birthplace, the other students say Ofilwe must have been "born in a stinky shack" (14). This kind of prejudiced assumption seems to be deeply rooted in people's minds, and clearly mirrors the picture that white society have had and have conveyed of black people for generations. As Charles Taylor points out, this view of self-depreciation has been adopted by black people themselves, thus becoming "one of the most potent instruments of their own oppression" (26), and that is clear when Fikile, in the second part of the novel, makes a similar supposition in relation to a black man with an expensive leather briefcase:

> I notice the name 'K.J. Fishwick' engraved into the corner of the briefcase. A thief! I think to myself. Typical, I should have known better than to think some garrulous train-riding black man would walk around with a V&CX briefcase he bought for himself. (132)

Moving to the new residential estate meant a new degree of previously unknown safety and material progress, but it also meant a feeling of being somehow displaced, of not recognizing the new lifestyles, as they deeply contrast with the ones previously known:

> No toddlers with snotty noses and grubby hands play in the streets in Little Valley County Estate. Groups of teenage girls in bright t-shirts, old torn jeans and peak caps do not sit on the front lawn pointing and gossiping about the guys that walk past the gates of their homes. (89)

As Singumbe Muyeba and Jeremy Seekings state, "[r]acial 'integration' in such suburbs (formerly 'white' or new, desegregated suburbs) rarely entails much interaction, as residents live behind high walls" (3). Those high walls mean greater isolation for the family and gradually for each of its members in

particular. Fifi senses that her house is somehow different from the others, for a house is not just the physical element; it is also the mirror of those inhabiting it:

> Driving into the estate … I look into these Seventh Heaven like homes, I smell their food and catch a glimpse of the portraits on their walls as we drive by. Now back home, outside our orange brick villa, I peer into our own windows and wonder what others see. … inside my home it is not the smell of sautéed prawns and ricotta stuffed pasta with mushroom sauce that wafts into the garden, but rather the sharp smell of mala le mogodu. (75)

She ends up feeling strange, in a strange world, locked in, surrounded by barbed wire, uncertain whether she likes her cage. There is a lack of unity or dialogue in the neighbourhood, just like there is a lack of unity and dialogue in her family. Her father "spends all his weekends at Golf City" (20); her mother seems to talk without noticing she is not being listened to. Her parents do not exactly share a life: they only speak to each other by arguing, preferably about impersonal things. Fifi says her house is empty, referring to the lack of dialogue between her parents, which contrasts with her mind full of thoughts and doubts. Her father opposes Tshepo's application for a degree in "Bachelor of Arts Majoring in African Literature and Languages" (79) but defends the importance of a relationship between Fifi and Belinda, while her mother defends Tshepo's decision, for he has got talent and can be anything he likes, and opposes any relation with Belinda's family. Her mother supports respect for the elderly and insists on the importance of the use of Sepedi, but at the same time belongs to a group of thirteen women friends who, according to Ofilwe, have nothing in common, except the wish to leave the past behind. Both Ofilwe's parents are contradictions, representing people who are caught in the middle of a changing society, who have difficulties in defining who they really are.

In the struggle to progress materially, family relations and ancient traditions are often lost. After the thanksgiving ceremony, Koko, Ofilwe's maternal grandmother, insisted on having to thank their ancestors for the good fortune that had fallen on their family (Fifi's father had been successful in helping his company to win a tender and had therefore been rewarded). Nonetheless, the Tlous (her father's family) and the Ledwabas (her mother's family) have never got together again. The ceremony implied among other

things the blood of a cow, but Ofilwe's father, not having been able to bring a cow, brought a chicken instead and a bag with cow's blood from the butcher's. The blood dirtied her mother's carpet and so did the cut chicken's neck the soil. That led to neighbours' complaints about their sacrificing animals and the subsequent letter of warning from the security guards for they were breaching the Estate rules. Fifi's mother blames her own mother for her embarrassment in front of her husband's family and neighbours, for her bringing those "backward ways" (74) to her house.

As for Tshepo's application, their father sees it as a disgrace, believing Tshepo is just afraid of the challenge of taking a degree in Actuarial Science: "You are a lazy little bugger, Tshepo. That is what you are, bloody lazy" (80). But Tshepo says it is an opportunity to speak, to make people understand, which is ironic as there is a growing silence in Tshepo. Tshepo pretends not to hear his mother and she pretends not to understand that he does: "of course Tshepo can hear Mama. … Tshepo is choosing not to hear her. Mama is choosing not to know" (76-77). Ofilwe senses that Tshepo is drifting farther and farther from the family: "I can still hear Mama from two floors down. … Persisting consoles her. 'I never did stop trying,' she will say to her friends when he is gone for good" (77). Tshepo seems to plunge into his inner thoughts and gradually stops talking, arguing, or involving himself in the family: "It is not the first time Tshepo has feigned absenteeism. In fact he does it all the time. It is something that developed discreetly. First he lacked an opinion about anything and then months later he ceased speaking altogether" (83). His trip to his inner self ends up in his wanting to write and speak: "I want to say those things that people are afraid to hear. Those things that they do not want to face" (80). He seems to become "extremely busy with all sorts of projects and assignments" (83) that slowly seem to erase him from his family. That particularly affects Ofilwe, as they used to have a very close relationship: "Tshepo was my best friend and I his" (90). Their different chosen paths have determined their current situation: "I now wander around the house aimlessly, Tshepo has again vaporised" (90). Bearing in mind Charles Taylor's remarks on identity and recognition, Tshepo seems to be looking inwardly for his particular way of being, for his originality, for his authenticity. However, as Charles Taylor emphasizes, "We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our

identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression", which we learn "through exchanges with others" (32). In search of his originality inside, Tshepo seems to be drifting apart from those essential exchanges.

Ofilwe feels she is living in "an empty house" (89). She can no longer count on her brother's company and she does not identify with her mother, either, as they do not have a close relationship: "But Mama and I do not hold hands. It is not something we do" (53). It seems things used to be a bit different in the past, but as each member in the family develops his/her search for an identity to be recognised by others, trying to develop new behaviours or leave behind old ones, they have tended to drift apart; all that is left in Ofilwe's relationship with her mother seems to be silence: "Mama and I return to the car in a silence similar to the one that accompanied us to the Banking centre" (55). Ofilwe ends up feeling completely lost, full of uncertainties. The only things she considers certain are the answers to the questions at the back of the book of past matric examination papers. She concludes that, as a child, she was more foolish but happier for she did not know or at least she pretends she did not. She says colour was not on her mind when she stuck magazine cut-outs of the people she admired on her bedroom walls; she says she did not notice the posters were all of white people until the moment her brother demanded she take all of them down. She says she believes it was a coincidence and that, only many years later did she see Tshepo's point of view. Now she regrets her chosen path, clearly different from Tshepo's path. She ends up questioning her whole life and concluding she has been living an illusion: "how can I trust you – you mother, you father, you preacher, you teacher, you friend – when everything around me is a lie and all mercilessly trick me" (89).

Fikile, the first person narrator in the second part of the novel, lives with her uncle, and even though she represents a totally different reality in terms of family, economic means, residence and lifestyle, in her struggle for a better life, she also faces serious problems as far as defining herself is concerned. She is an ambitious and determined girl, who has set up her aims, her "Project Infinity" (109), which seems to symbolize all her dreams and plans for the future, and she is eager to grab any "opportunity that may come" (109) her way. Thus, she views each day as a new prospect: "Waking up is always a thrilling time for me

because it presents a new and fresh chance at life filled with endless opportunities" (109). As any other human being, she dreams about improving her life:

> when I am rich and famous living in Project Infinity and laugh and shake my head and take a sip of a frozen martini and think to myself, 'Did you ever imagine it would be like this?' I have not a cent in the bank nor very much of an education, but a heart so heavy with ambition that it may just fall to the depths of my stomach if Project Infinity is not realised. (109-110)

Having defined her aims and being determined to do everything to achieve them, she cannot understand those whom she believes have had all the opportunities and have not taken hold of them; not only does she criticise them but she cannot stand their complaints about life, either. That is one of the points that have determined her relationship with her uncle. She does not understand his laments about his life for she believes he has been responsible for his own fate. Her uncle, Silas Nyoni, is a security guard at Lentso Communications, but he is often used by the firm to give the appearance of a cosmopolitan advanced company:

> We drove in Mr. Dix's car and I sat in the front seat. … I always sit in the front seat on the way to the meetings and in the back seat when I am sent home … But then when we arrived … he took me aside and said that it would probably be better if I did not speak at the meeting that day. … they would once again introduce me as Silas Nyoni, their Black Economic Empowerment partner, and newly appointed Operations manager of Lentso Communications. Today's plan was that Laurie, Mr. Dix's personal assistant, would rush in during the meeting with Borman-Nkosinathi and say that I was urgently needed at the offices. … I imagine they were afraid I would say something senseless that would give them away. (104-106)

This situation portrays current South African society as based on "perjury" and "forgery" (122): her uncle has been hired under the Economic Empowerment Act of 2003, which determined that a certain proportion of jobs had to be reserved for the disadvantaged, but he is used as window-dressing by the company where he works, as only in theory does he have a management role. Therefore many things have only changed on the outside.

Fikile hates her uncle and the life she leads. She is sure that he is aware that "[t]his whole thing of using nameless black faces as pawns for striking black economic empowerment deals was nothing new" (108); she believes he really enjoys "those moments when he'd be wearing striped suits and sit in the front seat while Laurie sat in the back. Uncle was just another hungry black man, hungry for a piece of the pie just like the rest of us" (108). She thinks that "[h]e is pathetic as a security guard and probably would have been fired by now if they hadn't found out that he spoke English so well" (109), but her uncle states that "If it wasn't for me, Fikile – me, Silas Nyoni – they would never be making the deals I am making for them. Those white men don't realise that I am compromising my moral beliefs to make them millions" (107).

Fikile and her uncle live in a "one-bedroom hovel at the end of the Tshabalala's garden" (110), that is to say, at the end of another family's backyard, and Fikile is happy every day when it is time to "leave" that "hole" (109), which represents the life that she would like to leave behind. Having to share her bed with her uncle meant that she used to be abused by him. At first Fikile liked her uncle, because she had a background of mistreatment at home. She never knew her father, who had disappeared before she was born, and when her mother cut her wrists, her uncle was the only one who would take her in. As her grandmother worked for white families, she "had too many of her own white children to take care of" (114). Only when Fikile was in grade seven, and "Childline Ousies had come to our school and talked to us about rape" (115), did she understand that her uncle had been abusing her. From then on, things changed, for she started to sleep "on the hard cement floor … without the protection of any covers" (115). Her uncle "never said a word about the new sleeping arrangement" (116) and she started to dream about having her own king-sized bed.

Fikile insists on the need to distinguish herself from the other employees at the Silver Spoon so as to somehow assert herself as not identifying with the staff: "I have come to know the great importance of presentation (117). Thanks to her "emerald-green coloured lenses" (117) and all the make-up, she can be a completely different person at the Silver Spoon Coffee Shop. All her treasures are kept in a box under the bed, and they remind her of how far she has already come in the pursuit of her dream, in her path towards "Project Infinity".

The conditions she lives in, or else the lack of comfortable conditions, seem to function as the best stimulus to fight for her dreams. If in her goals, there is what one may perceive as an understandable desire of improving one's living conditions, it also seems she is aiming at denying her own identity as a black person, for she associates being black with poverty and dirt. All she aims at is to be "white, rich and happy" (118). Fikile will not let anything get between her and her "Project Infinity".

Fikile envies the opportunities that her uncle has had in life and criticises him for not having grabbed them. She resents her uncle's childhood, all the things he had and which she does not have:

> White children everywhere … Smiling for Uncle. I remember being filled with such wild envy and rage that I was unable to understand why that couldn't be me in the photo, why the Kinsleys hadn't thrown such a party for me, why nobody had ever thrown any kind of party for me. (123)

She believes her uncle has jeopardized all the opportunities that he has been given. He went to medical school thanks to the Kinsleys, a white family for whom her grandmother had worked, who treated "him like he was one of their own" (124). They had invested money in "tuition, school uniforms, piano lessons and expensive encyclopaedias" (124) for her uncle, but after the first semester in medical school, he came back "with a letter of exclusion" (126). Possibly there was the question of his having difficulties in being accepted and recognised as belonging there, but Fikile believes "[u]ncle failed … because he was an idiot" (127). Unfortunately the Kinsleys only paid for Fikile's uncle's studies, not doing anything for Fikile's mother, which is directly related to the role played by men and women in society. As Ketu H. Katrak points out, "girls were to be educated to be good wives and mothers" (73). Therefore it is not surprising that "[f]ewer women than men had access to education and since English language abilities were required for most jobs, women were increasingly marginalized from a public sphere" (73). Gogo, Fikile's grandmother, considered that their paying only for her son's studies had to do with the fact that "white people enjoyed breaking up black families" (124).

Fikile shows a lot of prejudice against those of her own ethnicity, and she does not fit and / or does not want to fit into her neighbourhood; she does not want to make friends there, because she has long decided she will leave that

township behind: "I came into this world alone and I am going to leave it alone, so what is the point?" (130). Her grandmother would like her to integrate herself, to play, to make friends with the other girls, but Fikile is adamant in stating that she does not share the other girls' interests and she always invents an excuse not to be with them. Her grandmother blames fashion magazines for her not fitting into with the other girls: "I thought they would be a fine way for you to practise your reading but they have taught you nothing but to be a snob" (131). Once again the idea is the one mentioned by Charles Taylor:

> it is held that since 1492 Europeans have projected an image of such people [indigenous and colonized people] as somehow inferior, 'uncivilized,' and through the force of conquest have often been able to impose this image on the conquered. (26)

This image is echoed by Fikile recurrently. She believes black people are the only ones responsible for the state of the townships where they live,

> Black people! Why must they always be so damn destructive? And to think, they have never invented a thing in their squalid lives and yet they insist on destroying the little we have. Just look on how scummy the townships are. Have you ever seen any white suburb looking so despicable? (134-135)

Fikile's prejudice is particularly strong in relation to men, whom she tends to connect with crime, rape, alcohol and disrespect:

> The men disgust me. All of them are a bunch of criminals. A bunch of uneducated criminals. They look at me like they want to rape me … I hate them and they know it. They have no respect for women … as a general rule I try not to mix with any black men at all. (129-130)

From the moment she was a child, Fikile has always wished to be white, for she connects being white with the kind of lifestyle she dreams of. As a child she truly believed she could be whatever she wanted: "I will be white if I want to be white. I don't care what anybody thinks" (135). The man on the train who starts talking to her seems to clearly see what type of person Fikile is: "'Oh so you're one of those,' … 'You know, those abo mabhebeza who are always wishing to be something that they ain't never gonna be" (133).

The importance of speaking English, but especially the importance of speaking English with what might be seen as the correct accent, is also stated by Fikile. She has decided to design her own future and recently she has become more confident as her knowledge of English has improved:

> Nothing intimidates me. … There is this new drive that has taken charge of me: it urges me to take command and create my own destiny. I am certain of where I am going and I know exactly what it is I want out of life. I have worked hard to be where I am and have little tolerance for those who get in my way. (137)

All Fikile worries about is having money for cosmetics and clothes. She has drawn her Project Infinity, her future out of a fantasy:

> I am not one of you, I want to tell them. Some day you will see me drive past here in a sleek air-conditioned car, and I will roll up my windows if you try to come near me, because I am not one of you. You are poor and black and I am rich and brown. (140)

She does not seem to understand that her dream only seems to exist in her mind and would mean the denial of her ethnic identity. Fikile fantasises the importance of the Silver Spoon as a place where all the significant people go. She feels important there, where she is called Fiks, and she likes to think that means she is a different person and that they give importance to her there. Ayanda, the other waiter at the Silver Spoon tries to explain to her that she is mistaken, that the customers she tries to please so hard do not pay attention to her, do not recognise her as different from the other employees or important. However, Fikile seems to live in a fantasy world, a world she has made up in her mind.

Subservience is required from black employees at the Silver Spoon: "Vincent replies, looking up from the bread pans he is filling with dough, but making sure he does not make direct eye contact" (144). Yet, Fikile feels there is also a kind of hierarchy at the Silver Spoon and she cannot understand why Carolina, the daughter of Miss Becky, the owner of the Silver Spoon, would even think of yelling at her to bake bread together with the kitchen staff:

> It is her dumb daughter who has absolutely no understanding of how vital I am to the functioning of silver Spoon, who has no appreciation for the

> hierarchy of Silver Spoon, that can go and disrespect me in that way in front of the kitchen staff. (145)

Fikile cannot understand either why the kitchen staff pity her for feeling superior to them. She seems to want to reinvent herself, so as to have better chances to achieve her aims: "The pretend stories of my life serve the purpose they are required to fulfil, 'Fake it 'til you make it'" (147); in her mind, she has created a new past, a new background, a new reality for her life, a new name:

> My name is Fiks Twala. … And the part about my name, well, I mean, everybody that matters to me calls me Fiks so it might as well be my first name. And what's the difference anyway? It's my name? Shouldn't I decide what I want to be called? (146-147).

She makes up a new story of what she would like her life to be like

> I grew up in white environments for the most part of my life, from primary school right through the high school. Many people think I am foreigner, from the UK or somewhere there. I think it is because my accent is so perfect … I lived in England for a while, Mummy and Daddy still lecture there. (146)

In her reinvention of herself, she does not lie about her not fitting with her peers, though: "I never could relate to other black South Africans" (146).

All the tension and prejudice left by years of repression, discrimination and segregation are there, in Miss Becky and her daughter's accusations and arguments, and in some of the attitudes and remarks made by costumers at the Silver Spoon: "If it wasn't for us you wouldn't be able to read … You people need to learn how to follow instructions" (150). Whereas white people seem to feel they have given black people enough opportunities for them to be thankful, thus expecting gratitude, those who belong to an ethnic group which has long been denied any privilege cannot agree. Ayanda refers to the still blatant inequalities in South African society when he vents: "They feel nothing. They see nothing, absolutely nothing wrong with the great paradox in this country. Ten per cent of them still living on ninety percent of the land, ninety per cent of us living on ten per cent of the land (152). Fikile however, who does not understand the reason why Ayanda works at the Silver Spoon Coffee Shop because, from her point of view, he has had a dream life, having gone to a

white school and having lived in white neighbourhoods all his life, does not agree with this view, for she wants to believe things have changed and are different at present. In her mind, Ayanda is a proof of how things have changed. She seems to think that interacting with white people, living in a white neighbourhood can by itself redefine a person, change one's identity. That is probably why she seems to think that she has more in common with the white customers at the Silver Spoon than with those of her own blood or ethnicity:

> These are my kind of people. … I can relate to these people, that is why I am so good at this job. We have so much in common, so much to talk about. I understand them. They understand me. Not like the people at home whose minds are still lodged in the past. (161)

So, Fikile does not want to relate to her family or neighbourhood. On the other hand, she also hates the idea of serving black people at the Silver Spoon, as they mean stepping back from her aim of identifying with the white community: "they're just an annoyance and waste of my time" (164). When the Tlous go to Silver Spoon, Ayanda always serves them. Fikile insists she does not understand why they go there, for according to her they do not fit in. To a certain extent, Fikile sees her own reflection in the Tlou family:

> The mother, hair and nails all done up, looks at me as she sits and smiles. I do not smile back. I know her smile is fake. I know when they look at me with those pitying eyes they are all really laughing at me inside. 'Did you see her?' they will whisper as I turn my back. 'Those cheap clothes and those old shoes! Poor thing, we really should give her our leftovers.' I know what they are like, these BEE families. Fake hears and fake lives all dressed up in designer labels bought yesterday. (165)

The township where Fikile lives, her lodging, the means of transport she has to take contrast heavily with the Tlous' reality and living conditions, thus revealing another side of the coin in current South Africa. Poor people need to travel on trains that offer bad conditions: "The carriages stink of labourers' sweat and of urine and soaked sanitary towels that should have been changed days ago" (134) and there are also several references to crime and corruption.

Throughout the story, we come across different references to a western culture connected with the idea of power and dominance, and therefore a

desirable lifestyle for many. In the first part of *Coconut*, Ofilwe dreams about the straight-haired "black American TV girls", and tells us about branded clothes, her father's new Mercedes-Benz, his playing golf, people spending holidays abroad, Instant Fried Chicken, MTV, and classical music "insinuating wealth and stability" (64). There is also Fifi's feeling of having been accepted when she is invited for her first sleep-over party by Tim Browning, who had said she "was not like the other black girls" in their class, that she "was calmer, cuter" and looked a little like "Scary Spice"(8). In the second part of the novel, the western lifestyle is clearly portrayed in the fashion magazines Fikile reads. Her grandmother brought them from the white people's houses where she worked at:

> I lived in those magazines, and the more I read, the more assured I was that the life in those pages was the one I was born to live. From who supermodel Christine Pau was dating to what perfume Gabrielle was wearing to the Grammys, I knew it all. At the age of fifteen I could even advise you what to pack when spending a weekend away in the Bahamas. (167)

Those magazines and the world they portrayed would define Fikile's main interests and dreams and set her apart from the other girls at her school: "now I could never fit back in. I'd seen pictures of another life, a better life, and I wanted it. So I walked out of the school gates and never went back. That was 1999, the beginning of grade ten, the beginning of Project Infinity" (168). Fikile does not seem to know very well what Project Infinity exactly involves, but it comes to be understood as "something limitless. I knew that someday I would achieve Project Infinity. It did not matter that I was not exactly sure what Project Infinity was, because I knew it would be infinitely better than where I was then" (171).

The mixed feelings, the problems of being a South African today, are to a certain extent enunciated by the man Fikile meets on the train back home. His daughter attends "one of the top hundred primary schools in the country. … Compared to other children her age in the township, who go to black schools, she is miles ahead. And she is just so happy" (188-189). At her school, most children are white, but there are already some coloured ones: "Most of them were milky white, but here and there were spots of colour" (187). That is the

image of harmony, the idea of different cultures interacting happily and peacefully. Nonetheless, the father understands that, by attending that school, his daughter will eventually leave behind all her cultural background, for she is assimilating dreams and a lifestyle which are far from what he believes black Africans should praise:

> listening to all those little black faces yelping away in English, unaware that they have a beautiful language at home that they will one day long for, just broke my heart. … Standing at the edge of that playground, I watched little spots of amber and auburn become less of what Africa dreamed of and more of what Europe thought we ought to be. Standing at the edge of that playground I saw tiny pieces of America, born on African soil. I saw a dark-skinned people refusing to be associated with the red soil, the mud huts and the glistening stone beads that they once loved. (189-190)

Just like Ofiwe and Tshepo, Fikile does not seem to fit in anywhere, either. As Charles Taylor explains, "Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being" (25). Despite all of Fikile's make-believe ideas that she is essential to the running of the Silver Spoon, Miss Becky has no problem in sending her home earlier and replacing her by Yvonne, a kitchen maid. She has been dreaming and fighting hard for her Project Infinity, but like her grandmother, who prayed day after day for equality and justice, and never got an answer, so does Fikile start to feel a bit tired: "I am tired. I have tried. I am always trying, but now I am tired. I want it now" (181). However, Fikile has nothing in her own background. For the first time in her life, she goes home as fast as she can: "I have never been so glad to be back" (190), but like the daughter of the man on the train, and like Ofilwe, she has been disassociating herself from her own peers, and she has never seen the place where she lives as her home.

Considering the different characters in *Coconut*, one may draw the conclusion that, in their search for their identity, they have to deal with the contradiction between the exterior and the interior, between some unavoidable points in one's identity and pre-conceived ideas the race to material acquisition has encouraged. It is therefore appropriate to refer to the

title of the novel "*Coconut*", which is one of the terms often "used to designate someone who, due to his or her behaviour, identifications, or because they have been raised by whites, is "black" on the "outside" and "white" on the "inside", as Natasha Distiller points out in the introduction to her book *Shakespeare and the Coconuts On Post-apartheid South African Culture*. That division between what is seen as inner feelings and the way others see a person leads to a very difficult task in defining oneself. In *Coconut* the characters seem to be pretending to be something they are not, and in the process they are lost with respect to finding out who they are. Accordingly Kopano Matlwa is able to depict in this novel an image of contemporary South Africa dealing with what is probably one of the most disturbing issues in multicultural societies, one which in South Africa was worsened by the country's specific history – the issue of being able to value the many different factors that are involved in one's identity, and of having that identity accepted and recognized by others.

CHAPTER TWO: IDENTITY AND REDISCOVERY IN *PLAYING IN THE LIGHT*

Zoë Wicomb was born in 1948, thus having experienced the regime of apartheid during childhood, adolescence and early adulthood. After graduating in 1970, she voluntarily exiled herself for twenty years and only returned to South Africa in the early 1990s to teach at the University of the Western Cape for three years. *Playing in the light*, published in 2006, is her third novel. Set in contemporary Cape Town, it leads to varied questions on the complexity of the human being, examining in depth people's feelings and reactions during and after apartheid. Accordingly, as J U Jacobs states, this is one of Wicomb's novels that deal "with the question of a South African 'coloured' identity both under apartheid with its racialised discourse of black and white, and in the context of the post-apartheid language of multiculturalism" (1).

When asked by Stephan Meyer about her position with respect to the main issues in the South African literary tradition, Zoë Wicomb points out that, strongly focused on social and political conditions, one of her major concerns has been "identity", and that a change in conditions such as the one that occurred in 1994 "introduces new concerns that take centre stage … in the post apartheid period" (188). It seems thus possible to find in *Playing in the Light* some of the central issues also present in *Coconut*, but written in a different style and extending over a broader timeline. It goes beyond *Coconut*, opening up new questions as far as human beings and their reactions to social pressures are concerned.

The novel *Playing in the Light* indicates that people may have come along a certain path, and based on family, social, cultural, and political contexts may have made decisions, sure, at least apparently, of who they are and what their aims are. Nonetheless, as one's knowledge of one's family and ethnicity changes, one gradually accumulates doubts and questions and different feelings about oneself. One's cultural identity is supposed to come as a result of one's history and background. At the same time, it is formed and transformed from the moment one is born till the moment one dies, as a result of one's upbringing, relationship with others, group history, or ethnicity. It is a constant process being built and rebuilt throughout one's life. As already noted,

Stuart Hall believes that identity should not be seen as static, as a definite fact, but rather as a development, a construction, always in progress. At any moment one may question one's identity, where one comes from, where one is heading, why things have happened one way or another, not because there is a real, tangible change to be seen, but just because one's knowledge about something in one's life is found to be different from what one was previously led to believe. *Playing in the Light* is also about regret, about how family ties are sometimes neglected or moved beyond in the name of something which comes to be considered a greater good.

The novel starts with the falling of a dead guinea fowl onto Marion's balcony. The bird's plumage looks fine from a distance but, after the bird falls, Marion realizes it is "by no means as fine a plumage as it appears from a distance" (1). This might be understood as an image of how one may be seen differently according to perspective, or as a foreshadowing of events to come, especially because the same way Marion wraps the guinea fowl in a shroud, there have been times lately in which she "seems to gag on metres of muslin, ensnared in the fabric that wraps itself round and round her into a shroud from which she struggles to escape" (2). However, Marion is not the kind of person who is prone to premonitions. She appears to be a controlled, rational, independent, determined and sensible person, who has an apparently clear idea of who she is, of what she has achieved, of what she wants, and of what she does not like or wish. She does not pay credit to superstition, or to psychology, which she considers despicable: "And Marion has no truck with therapy. She despises those who do: indulgent, effete, English types" (3). Thus,

> Johan [her previous ephemeral relationship] thought that she was simply responding to the name mermaid, that in her unhealthy affiliation with her father she had adopted a second-hand fascination with the sea. That was the kind of nonsense Johan talked. (22)

Marion believes any psychologist would tell her that being the only child of older parents, she had a peculiar childhood and that her parents, who "loathed each other [but especially her mother] like all mothers" (3), were responsible for her insecurity. This comes to be a particularly important word, for Marion's behaviour and decisions in general indicate a secure person. Therefore one wonders how Marion's moments of insecurity intertwine with the

practical person she apparently attempts to be. Brenda, who is one of Marion's employees, and who "hopes one day to be a writer, a poet perhaps" (79), comes to realize that Marion seems not to have, or at least is not used to having, a spiritual or psychological or emotional link to things: "Her frown tells Brenda that this is someone for whom only the material exists" (78). While Brenda is longing to travel, for the feeling of liberty, as she believes travelling means leaving one's self behind, thinking, feeling, doing just as one pleases, Marion is exactly the opposite. She only sees the difficulties, and she believes there is no real experience for it is the car that moves on the land and she does not really notice the differences in the landscape. This acquires a special significance as Marion is to start a journey of self-discovery.

Marion runs MCTravel, one of the few independent travel companies left. She is a successful business woman, in the area of travel, which is ironic, because she is described as a person "free of the illusions of travel and its supposed freedoms" (17). Unlike her clients, who are enthusiastic about travelling and its benefits, she stays down to earth and she believes that that is responsible for her success: "Marion does have an aversion to travel. Why would anyone want to see the world from the discomfort of a suitcase? Let alone the dubious hygiene of hotels" (40). She believes the hype about travelling is "all part of the contemporary fuss about authenticity" (40) and so she does not seem to believe she needs to authenticate herself, especially by leaving the comfort of her place. She argues that she knows as much as those people who have really visited other places: "But otherwise, he [Geoff, her present love affair] proves her theory that there is no need to travel. He has no more to tell than what she has read in brochures" (42).

Marion does not know much about her ancestors, but she has not asked many questions either. In a way she seems to have decided to move forward, by choosing not to know much. As she grew up, she sensed she was kept in the dark about certain secrets: "Secrets, lies and discomfiture – that was what her childhood had been wrapped in. Each day individually wrapped, lived through carefully, as only those with secrets live" (59). She is the only daughter of Helen and John Campbell, but she does not know anything about other relatives. In her family, there seems not to be a past, for there are no other relationships or photographs of ancestors, "something to do with relatives having fallen out with

her father" (26). To Marion's mind, there comes the image of her past as a tray of apples and she loves apples, but she fears for the poison in their core. Thus, Marion appears as a confident person who has apparently defined her route, but deep down she is afraid of any information that may cause uncertainty or may undermine her confidence. She likes to be sure of situations: as doubt and suspicion takes over her, she wants to know, but at the same time, she fears what she may find out and so as not to feel vulnerable, she puts off starting her first journey of discovery, which going to Wuppertal with Brenda comes to embody, perhaps because Brenda would also find out.

Despite all her assertiveness, Marion also appears as a lonely person from the beginning. Whereas for Brenda it is normal and healthy to share life with others, for Marion separating herself from others is a defence mechanism and material comfort replaces that involvement. She cannot imagine others coming and staying in her house, which seems to be related to her upbringing, for her childhood seems to have been characterized by gloom and silence and solitude: "I haven't anyone to play with. I want a sister, please can I have a sister to play with?" (60), she asks her mother, unsuccessfully. Neither could she play freely with other children or tell the others about her life. Everything was to be kept indoors: "Her parents were always meticulous, neurotic really, about curtains: drawing them before switching on the lights, careful about keeping them neatly in place during the day" (10).

Recalling the past she remembers Annie Boshoff, who used to be her best friend but somehow she does not remember why they separated. Annie was sometimes allowed to visit after school, but Helen was suspicious of her: "Marion was cautioned not to hold Annie's hand; she was not to say anything about their family to Annie" (61). Marion felt her parents hid things from her and from the world, and she also sensed their fear; that is why she never felt like investigating her background: "through her mother's enamelled smile the child caught a whiff of fear that warned her against peering into the heart of things" (61). Now as an adult Marion comes to connect family with a burden: "Sometimes she left him [her father] there all week; she had fantasies of leaving him there forever, driving back to town unburdened, free of family" (23). She has chosen to live in a place that allows her to keep some distance from her father: "even if her father does whine about it being so far away. Of course that

is precisely why she has chosen to live here, miles from Observatory" (3). Somehow a feeling of identification and belonging seems to be missing.

John Campbell has humble roots and lacks education. As a Boer who moved from a farm to Cape Town, he had to face mockery and contempt, a context which helps Marion recognise all his guardedness and wariness. He often remembers the old farm where he grew up, the only house with a black wooden door in a neighborhood where all "the farmhouses had woodwork painted in gracht green" (5). He remembers his father as "a man of few words, a man without letters who refused to answer questions" (5). He remembers all his siblings and all their English names. He remembers a family with whom there is no contact now, either because they are dead, or because they "disappeared into the jaws of the city [or] fell out with [him] years ago (4). That marks a difference between Marion and her father. While John has all the memories of a happy childhood spent in the cosiness of family, all of Marion's main memories seem to be of silence and gloom. Coming to the city meant for Marion's father new prospects and that was one of the reasons why he did not correct the officer at the Traffic Department, when he wrote down 'John Kembel', instead of 'Campbell'. A change in spelling did not make "the slightest difference"; if it did, it might "turn him into someone new" (5), especially because Kembel looks more like an Afrikaner and so he would be associated with the group with most power. As a name is part of one's identity, there seems not to have been, in Marion's father, a strong interest in asserting his identity and that contrasts with those situations in history in which people would like to be called by their real name, but do not have the power to assert it. The question of the importance of clarifying one's name is also present when Mrs. Mackay, Brenda's mother, realizes that Marion does not know Tokkie's real name, which makes her feel insulted:

> Coloured people are given funny names by their bosses, you know, but she would have had a good Christian name; even country people all have decent English names. Mrs Mackay is offended. Does Marion not even know the person's surname? (70)

For centuries, and not only in South Africa, the practice of black people having their name changed by white people, one more example of the latter's insensitivity towards black people's feelings or identities, has been documented

and denounced. Maya Angelou clearly portrays the reality in the short story "Names", in *I know why the caged bird sings*.

In the city Marion's father worked as a traffic cop, and for him the city was all about the sound of the traffic and of "people chattering in Afrikaans or English or, in their neighbourhood, switching smartly in mid-sentence between the two" (5). Being in the middle of all the movement and sound, on a gleaming Harley-Davidson, guiding drivers to find their way through the traffic, gave him a sense of power and control. Helen, Marion's mother, on the other hand, was a completely different person. She owned a specialist trousseau shop and she is shown as a person who set her own goals and who would do anything to achieve them. She did everything not to be ignored. She is described as the person who wanted to enforce manners: she constantly urged Marion "to keep out of the sun. Did she want to end up like mad Mr. Moolman across the road, who was burnt pitch black like a coloured" (9). She was the one who always drew Marion's attention to behave what she considered the proper way: "How could she behave like a disgusting native, rolling half naked in the grass?" (60). She imposed rules, and restrictions and fears; the rules, restrictions and fears she sensed were needed for her daughter to have the life she wished for. Not to be considered vulgar, she once decided to have the plastic blooms she used to have in her house removed, just because a "chic customer spoke [to her] of her future mother-in-law's vulgarity, her pride in the plastic bouquets" (6). Marion's mother motto was "never rely on anyone but yourself", and that summarized the life they led, a life that was to be of silence, secrecy and solitude.

As a child, Marion hated that silence just like she hated the street where she lived and her house. She "would have preferred to live above the Main Road"(9), where one could stay in the verandahed stoeps all day even in summer and one could see Table Bay, the ships and the docks. In her house there was only silence and that is why "Marion loved going back to the classroom after a weekend at home" (25). Therefore Monday, the first day of the week, was seen as the chance of restarting. On the other hand, it is difficult for Marion to imagine herself being intimate with her mother:

> Her mother had developed a seafood allergy shortly before she died so unexpectedly, before they could bury their differences, as people say

> mothers and daughters invariably do. But it is hard to imagine any intimacy between them. (49)

Marion's parents, despite being caught in the same situation, are presented as very different, one as the opposite of the other. At home there was nothing but trouble and silence, and in the struggle of their everyday life, the only reason Marion's father did not take to drink was his wife Helen, who rationed the brandy. Helen was strong and determined; in John's words, she was a "woman of strength and principle" (52). She wouldn't allow him to bring shame or misery to the family: "control was what she demanded, control was the key, she said, to being respectable, acceptable people" (52). John could only relate her intolerance of him with her not being at peace with herself. He believes she might have behaved differently in the new South Africa. Unlike Helen, somehow John appears to find some reassurance in imagination, and that is probably why he calls Marion his "meermin, his little mermaid. Because she was a child of the sea, he said" (22). He stands for dream, for fantasy, romanticism, imagination while her mother is for pragmatism and reality, a down-to-earth person. According to her mother, the reality is that it is no "good being half woman and half fish, half this and half that; you have to be fully one thing or another, otherwise you're lost … No one likes creatures that are so different, so mixed up" (47).

According to the laws of apartheid, one had to be racially classified in one category, with all the implications that such division encapsulated. However, many of those who opposed apartheid defended a black identity; in this sense being in the middle would leave a void and mixed-race individuals were generally seen as inferior, allegedly neither one thing nor the other. This idea is expressed by coloured South African sociologist Zimitri Erasmus, in the introduction "Re-imagining coloured identities in post-Apartheid South Africa":

> growing up coloured meant knowing that I was not only not white, but less than white; not only not black, but better than black (as we referred to African people) (…) At the same time, the shape of my nose and texture of my hair placed me in the middle on the continuum of beauty as defined by both men and women in my community. (…) The humiliation of being 'less than white' made being 'better than black' a very fragile

> position to occupy. The pressure to be respectable and to avoid shame created much anxiety. (2)

One can therefore infer how difficult it was to assert one's identity as coloured. As Jacobs states,

> This uneasy self-definition was also an important factor that led to many coloured people allowing themselves to be coopted by – and even adopting – an exclusionary white nationalism, or else identifying themselves with an oppositional black nationalism, while nevertheless remaining marginal to both main groupings. (2)

In *Playing in the Light*, that diversification of chosen paths can be seen in the different routes Marion's father and his sister Elsie choose, which have led to their separation.

Despite all of Marion's apparent assurance, she has had a recurrent dream lately that she feels compelled to tell the others in the office, and that dream triggers the memory of Tokkie, whom she has always thought to have been a family servant, and who used to come "once a week to see them and keep an eye on things in the Observatory house" (31). Marion felt loved by her, who "said that Marion was her darling kleinding, her beauty, her sweetest heart" (32). Tokkie died when Marion was about five years old. She remembers her father insisted on going to the funeral, but Helen was adamant: It "was plain folly to go to the funeral", and they "would have their own private mourning at home" (32-33). In addition to her recent dreams and memories, and unlike what usually happens, Marion's attention is drawn by the *Cape Times*, probably left by Brenda on the coffee table; on the front page there is a large photograph of a young woman, Patricia Williams; even though Marion assumes it is just "another TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) story: that's all the newspapers have to say these days – endless stories of people's suffering in the bad old days" (49), she ends up folding the newspaper and stuffing it into her bag. The face of Patricia Williams also brings about a memory of Tokkie and a sudden need to know more about her. She phones her father and senses he is lying when he says he does not remember Tokkie's surname. Therefore Marion becomes suspicious of what is behind those lies, and reasons "the lies are not new. Her father, no, both her parents, have always kept

something from her; something they did not want her to know" (58). To survive all the lies and the dissembling, her father has drawn the myth of the mermaid.

Determined to know the truth, Marion does not know how to start, and she guesses all the secrets and lies must be related to her birth and concludes she must have been adopted, as she does not much resemble either her father or mother. She also thinks that somehow Tokkie was related to her adoption because she understood her inner feelings, but in Marion's thoughts she cannot envisage any biological relation to Tokkie. Marion could sense her mother's humility when Tokkie was around and Tokkie's devotion to the family, so she can only guess Tokkie must have been her mother's nanny. In her mind, and based on the information she has been given, she cannot anticipate any other plausible explanation, as her "whiteness" is not at all to be questioned.

On her uneven path to find out the truth about the past and all the secrets kept from her, Marion takes Brenda's companionship. At the Clanwilliam Hotel, "a charming old German place, redolent of colonial times" (82), Marion however finds it difficult to establish a conversation with Brenda. Marion feels she should not be affected by Brenda's attitude for she is paying for their lodging, and she guesses Brenda is just an employee. In a way she seems to share the feeling of the superiority of white ethnicity Charles Taylor refers to. Marion praises her country, which she considers to be superior to European ones:

> How could one survive without the light, the heat, the fruit and the wine? How do you breathe in those tiny, cramped countries stuffed with people? That was why Europeans came to Africa in the first place – empty cellars, empty larders, not enough room, and rickets. (83)

Brenda wonders about the United States, where she could have applied for a scholarship to do postgraduate studies; she admits she cannot face it though and uses her mother as an excuse. Brenda thinks this is an interesting time to be in South Africa, a time when the crimes committed during apartheid are being revealed by the TRC and she wonders whether some of Marion's relatives have not been involved in those crimes. In spite of coming to an end, apartheid still makes itself present in everyday relationships as it is embroiled, even if many times unconsciously, in people's feelings, thoughts and behaviours.

Marion and Brenda's journey to Wuppertal seems to resemble a journey into Marion's inner feelings, a rediscovery of her identity. On their journey, they meet a weird "man in harness, dragging behind him a ramshackle cart" (86). Outa Blinkoog seems to represent South Africa and all its diversity on account of all the colours he is transporting. Referring to him, Jacobs says he represents an identity assembled out of various cultural bits and pieces: "This migrant, chaotic figure first appears in the narrative almost as a parody of a creolised cultural identity, one that is performed, flaunted and still further amplified in the telling" (13).

Outa Blinkoog is genuine, talkative, with different coloured eyes (one green and one black), someone who seems to be at least seventy, but who at the same time moves as if he were a boy. He is always travelling from one place to another, collecting the things people do not want. He seems not to fit in any place and no one seems to want him around, thus representing to a certain extent contemporary South Africa with all its different ethnicities, its rich history but new as a democratic country, with its bits of traditional cultures and countless influences from the West, a country in which many people still appear not to fit into any place and are still trying to find their identity and sense of belonging. At that moment, with Outa Blinkoog, both Marion and Brenda "are transported to another world; they eat and talk and laugh and pass the time of day with the man out of a storybook" (90). At the end they are given a lantern as a gift, and that gift seems to symbolize both their relation and that journey they made together, as it is to be shared by both. As Jacobs puts it,

> although Outa Blinkoog first enters the text as an exotic, almost mythical presence – a caricature of a diasporic "coloured" man – the truth of what he represents gradually becomes clearer to Marion in the course of the narrative as she and Brenda become the joint custodians of his gift to them of a home-made coloured lantern, and as Marion comes to understand the full implications of her mother's "playing white". (13)

Moreover, as M. J. Daymond notes in "Shadow Stories and Shadow Selves", Outa Blinkoog's objects are "creations of beauty out of discarded objects" (165), and so his present of the lantern gradually comes to "release a new possibility in each woman. Brenda is released into writing and Marion into a

decision to travel, a journey that is part escape and part quest" (165). Attwell and Easton consider as a particular fascinating aspect Wicomb's

> interest in the visual arts, which in *Playing in the Light* surfaces in the figure of Outa Blinkoog … whose cart is adorned with multicoloured bric-a-brac and whose gifts and stories seem to enact a magically unburdened freedom to narrate. For those positioned in more conventional social networks, this kind of achievement is impossible to emulate but it stands as an ideal for the artist-intellectual who wishes to perform and reflect on the multifaceted narratives of the post-apartheid patchwork. (521)

At first, Wuppertal seems a false lead. Marion does not know Tokkie's real name and Mrs Murray refers to her as being Mrs. Karelse, quite a dark-skinned woman, with good features and a wavy kind of hair, a generous and nice person. She had heard she had gone to Cape Town to work for well-off people, but not as a servant, for they "were decent people, not the sort who went into service for Boers" (95). Her single name was Plaatjie. Yet for Marion, Tokkie was a servant in her family. Marion learns that Mrs. Karelse's husband had died when she was quite young and that they had a son and a daughter, who was really beautiful, "fair with long hair" (95), but Mrs. Murray has no idea of what happened to them. Then, while caring for Marion's swollen foot, Mrs. Murray notices the resemblance between Marion and Mrs. Karelse, which she understands superstitiously.

All the differences and suspicion between Brenda and Marion seem to deepen as they leave Mrs. Murray's house and head to Cape Town. Brenda is concentrating on driving as she does not have a driving license. Marion expects her to react, to comment on what happened at Mrs. Murray's house, but Brenda does not want to be involved in Marion's life and stories. Marion feels she is no longer the same person; she does not recognise herself, but she refuses to break down in the presence of Brenda. Brenda ends up staying at Marion's and, after a nightmare, they lie together on the bed. In the morning, Marion feels like her peeled peach – naked: "She stares at her peach; she cannot bring herself to eat it. Naked, slippery – that's me, that's who I am, she thinks. Hurled into the world fully grown, without a skin" (101). Her world has been turned upside down. In turn, Brenda thinks Marion lied to her, that she knew she was related to Tokkie, that she was just trying to get information about

her family, that she is a play-white, a fraud. Marion tells Brenda about all her suspicion, about her nightmares, about her feeling of emptiness, but Brenda points out the advantages of being coloured, of being black, which is being authentic. She says that many white people "are claiming mixed blood these days" (102). However, Marion thinks that understanding her emptiness only in terms of race is too reductive, and as M J Daymond states in "Shadow Stories and Shadow Selves", "her inner emptiness indicates her difficulty in returning in imagination to her parents' world, for in their history she finds only betrayal and silence. What has remained unspoken in her family still blocks continuity across the generations" (160). Marion, who still has difficulties in admitting aloud the idea that Tokkie might have been her maternal grandmother, shows clear difficulties in putting herself in her parents' shoes, in understanding their decisions. For Brenda, there is "no such thing as the human condition … there are only men and women with different backgrounds, and who therefore behave differently, according to their means" (102-103).

At different moments of the narrative, Marion, who consciously, or at least apparently, does not intend to give importance to colour, has involuntarily let out her feelings of suspicion, which seem to be rooted in her own experiences while growing up. She belongs to a generation who likes to think they are different from their parents, and are no longer liable to prejudice, so she restrains herself in spite of feeling tempted to look in the drawers of Brenda's desk: "Give them a pinkie and they'll grab your whole hand, her mother always said. But that was the kind of prejudiced stuff her parents were prone to, the nonsense with which that generation burdened themselves" (17). She thinks of herself as of someone who is ready to move forward, to look to the future. She does not want to be the kind of person who goes on regretting the past expressing remorse or grief:

> Marion doesn't usually bother with newspapers. The tired old politics of this country does not divert her. She has no interest in its to-ing and fro-ing, and is impatient with people in sackcloth and ashes who flagellate themselves over the so-called misdemeanours of history, or with those who choose not to forget, who harp on about the past and so fail to move forward and look to the future. (48)

Nevertheless, discovering new information about the past of her family inevitably changes the way she sees herself and the world.

Brenda Mackay is the first coloured employee at MCTravel. When Marion first announced she planned to hire a coloured girl, Boetie van Graan was sceptical, which Marion reckons was to be expected for "he was not as enlightened as the rest of them" (19). Marion feels a bit unnerved by Brenda's voice and also irritated by the way she has the tea-girl Tiena serve her immediately after Marion, but she concludes that Brenda is reliable and diligent, and knows how to deal with Boetie. In the development of the story, in all the relations established between the different characters, and despite all the possible intentions there might be, colour seems to be an ever-present issue. Without wanting it, Marion, who is determined to face the future, wonders whether the client on the phone realizes Brenda is coloured: "Would the client know that she is coloured? But as soon as the thought enters Marion's head, she chastises herself: she doesn't mean anything by it, doesn't mean to listen in on Brenda" (48-49).

All the employees in MCTravel have lunch in the private room that leads from the office except for Tiena, the tea girl, "who disappears to over the lunch period to wherever cleaners and tea ladies go, swallowed up by the crowds of workers who congregate at street corners or under trees in search of shade" (34). Brenda fears for her, but Marion believes that she may prefer to hang about in groups. She offered her the opportunity of staying in the yard under the tree, or even of having her lunch in the kitchen with the rest of them if it rained; she does not say this aloud though for she feels kind of embarrassed.

The human desire to improve one's life, to reach a position of power and dominance is also present in *Playing in the Light*, at different levels. First of all, there is Marion's parents' playing whiteness. They experienced life in an extremely discriminatory society and by trying to leave their past behind, they are trying to reach a better position, for they would be part of the privileged group in society, with all its social and material advantages. Yet the eagerness for a position in society, for something that could show one's success and achievements, is also clear in Marion's choice as far as her apartment, and more specifically, as far as her bed is concerned. Indeed the luxurious four-poster bed in her bedroom also comes to be "a marker of her success" (2).

Ironically, she ends up not understanding how she could ever have wanted that bed: "The bed, stripped of its muslin drapes, is bizarre; it will have to go. She can't imagine ever having wanted it" (209). This is one of the signs which show how Marion's new information on her family's past has affected and changed her. Apparently nothing in her life changed: she goes on as the owner of MCTravel, she goes on being a successful businesswoman, she goes on having her employees, being friends with Geoff and Brenda, visiting her father, but the way she sees herself, the way she feels, has changed, not only because she knows, but also because those around her know. As for Brenda, her buying her own bed also symbolizes her achievement. She feels happy with her new single bed because for the first time that is something that is hers and she dreams about being able to move out, to fix up her own place in her own taste. However, that makes her wonder whether she is superficial and to consider whether one ever knows anything about oneself.

By being able to pay for her apartment in a new luxury block, Marion is marking a lifestyle, fulfilling an adolescent dream, but she is also paying for security and respect for property and she is also protecting herself from the violence which is portrayed in the novel as a part of South African reality. There are not only references to the violence, but also to the beggars in the streets: "The streets are already dotted with ragged people wiping the sleep out of their eyes, buffing their begging bowls, gearing up to bully and abuse the law-abiding citizens who will not be taken in by them" (25). However Marion does not only criticise the beggars in the streets; she is also impatient with the idle rich who "stretch out in the sun". She admires the hard-working middle class, "which is to say people like herself" (25).

Marion is proud of the position she has achieved, of her business, of the firm that she has built from scratch. Her place is like a "haven from the hurly-burly of work" (3). Smartly uniformed attendants monitor everyone coming to the block, guaranteeing the needed security, especially "if you are a woman on your own" (2). This image of hazardous surroundings or situations, of crime and danger in a multiracial and multicultural New South Africa, is recurrently referred to as the story develops. For example, there is the alarm at Marion's office that goes off, the same office that had been cleaned out six months before: "They sit in silence. For what can she do, what can he do in the face of

all this greed and violence, these senseless killings, the anarchy into which the country is slipping" (14).

The newspaper headlines draw people's attention to all the violence and unfair treatment during apartheid, but also describe a country in which violence seems to be a daily occurrence at present. When reading the newspaper, Boetie stresses the state the country is coming to: a girl calling a taxi to take her to the airport and when the taxi arrives, "it's tailed by another, and when the driver gets out he's shot dead by the other one, whose friend jumps out to drive off with the dead man's vehicle" (36). People, especially women, do not seem to have the option of walking alone at night for all the risks that might involve:

> if it were not dangerous, Marion would walk down to the sea. What's the point, she thinks self-pityingly, of living by the sea and not being able to walk down to the shore at night. She believes that in any other country it would be possible for a woman to walk alone at night along a deserted shore. (55)

Luc Renders, in his "Paradise regained and lost again: South African literature in the post-apartheid era", refers precisely to the "crime wave" as one of the apparently unsolvable problems in the new South Africa, portrayed in the prose written in the decade after 1994 both in English and in Afrikaans. Some neighbourhoods are naturally more dangerous than others and those that are more dangerous are the ones where the less privileged happen to live, a reality illustrated in *Playing in the Light*: "Marion takes Brenda out to dinner; she will drive her back to Botenheuwel in the dark, which does not please Geoff. The townships are dangerous even in the daylight, he says, although he has never been to one" (78);

The suggestion is that while things have undoubtedly changed, for apartheid came to an end and South Africa became a democratic country, constructing a just and safe society is easier said than done. Neighbourhoods go on being distinctively different: there are those in which guarded safety is paid for and there are those which are dangerous. Moreover, Anthony Butler states that "almost all of the poor in South Africa are African, and almost all of the rich are white" (45). That is, as previously stated, in spite of all the changes,

the wealthiest go on being predominantly white whereas the poorest and the unemployed go on being overwhelmingly black.

On the other hand, in a country like South Africa, problems have yet to be seen in another perspective. Being a very richly multicultural society, which has undergone years of subjugation and repression, through colonialism and apartheid, it is hardly surprising that true and fair dialogue between different ethnicities tends to be difficult. Naturally there continues to be suspicion and resentment. Jacobs quotes Neville Alexander who

> has pointed out how inadequate – although well-intentioned – Archbishop Desmond Tutu's notion of the "rainbow nation" is for providing the post-apartheid South African imaginary with a symbol for its many ethnic and cultural groupings. The symbol of the rainbow, comprising as it does a spectrum of essential identities, glosses over the contradictions that characterise post-apartheid South Africa … and the illusion of coherence and unity which it is intended to convey dissipates at the first touch of the bitter reality of racial, caste and class divisions. (4)

Anthony Butler points out that "South Africa remains a long way from Archbishop Tutu's vision of a rainbow nation comfortable with and strengthened by its own diversity" (32); and the lack of employment opportunities and the persistently high levels of crime, which have inevitably led to a profound and growing dissatisfaction for South Africans of all classes may be pointed out as some of the fundamental reasons for the situation. When Brenda argues with Boetie about the state of the country and the reasons for the violence, she feels it is useless: "Brenda is angry with herself for rising to the bait. She does not usually speak out: there is no point in talking about these things. It is not possible for people from the different worlds of the country to talk to each other" (38).

Related to the lack of communication or real exchanges between different ethnicities, another important and unavoidable issue is a lack of knowledge about the others' reality, which usually leads to suspicion. Marion often reveals her lack of information with respect to coloured people and their reality. At the beginning she leaves the cleaning girl a note asking her to take the parcel with the dead bird away as she is suspicious of what the girl might do with it: "One never knows what uses such people might have for a dead

guinea fowl" (1), she reasons. When Marion drops in at Brenda's house, and asks Brenda out for a drink, "Brenda laughs, Unless you have in mind a shebeen, there's no such place, no bars or cafés in Bonteheuwel" (69). Marion tries to establish a connection with Brenda's family and neighbourhood on the grounds of religion; Brenda's mother, Mrs. Mackay, however, explains they are not Anglicans. They are Moravian Mission people.

When Marion was fifteen, she taught Sunday-school classes at nearby St John's, where "Father Gilbert had spoken with passion about the parishes in the townships, the poor coloured people who were so lacking in facilities and resources that they were vulnerable to devil's work and dagga" (67). This had led Marion and a group of other young girls to help. She would give up about a year later disappointed at the grim surroundings, the constant gaze "of the brown skollies who came leaning over the church wall to stare at the girls" (67) and at the children's attitudes towards their texts. When she gave up, her mother's unexpected reaction of a certain relief came as a surprise. Not only did she take her on a shopping trip, but she no longer seemed to bother about the fact that she did not go to church every Sunday.

A country is the result of past and the present, of the interaction of the peoples who have made up a part of it. In any given situation, things develop as a result of different realities and the responses to them. As things change, and as violence is noticed by everyone and everyone regrets it, there is a tendency to try to find someone to be responsible for the social problems that are perceived. In *Playing the Light* there are many references to the New South Africa, a time of hypersensitivity in the words of Geoff Geldenhuys, director of a national company that has moved headquarters to Cape Town (24). Marion compares this New South Africa with the past and concludes that

> You can't go anywhere nowadays without a flock of unsavoury people crowding around you, making demands, trying to make you feel guilty for being white and hardworking, earning your living ... Say what you like, but five, ten years ago, before the elections, when things were supposed to be so bad … well, the city wasn't a haven for ragged people standing around and harassing car owners. (28)

Marion does not believe she was really a supporter of apartheid, for "[e]ven though she voted for the Nationalists, she knew deep down that those

policies were not viable" (28). Marion's father misses the "good old days" and blames the "kaffirs" and "hotnos", those black people who are "too lazy to work, just grabbing at things that belong to others, to decent people" (14). Not only John Campbell, but also other characters express their regret for having lost the past, when smart clothes and a careful appearance were a synonym of trustworthy police. While reading the newspaper and all the news on violence, Boetie concludes that chaos and violence are what democracy has brought. Mr. Mahmoud, the owner of the corner shop near Brenda's place, who likes to recite poetry to his customers and who used to write poems against apartheid, now laments the violence in society, his favourite subjects being "violence, the lack of community spirit, or the fecklessness of township youth" (64), although his "eyes grow misty with nostalgia for the bad old days of resistance against apartheid" (63). Brenda believes the current violence is the result of the "years of oppression and destitution and perversion of human beings" (36), of the inhuman condition many had to endure in the past, and asks Boetie whether he does not think he should take any responsibility for it. He feels offended though, for he has nothing to do with violence, and he does not feel responsible, arguing he did not vote for apartheid and he did not have a house with a swimming pool. Brenda, however, talks of the

> the implication of accepting jobs and salaries that others were barred from, a choice of schools and places to live and play that discriminated against others, that came at the expense of cheap labour, of those who didn't have the vote? … [I]n those good old days all you fine people who didn't vote for it enjoyed the benefits. (36-37)

This exposes those people who may not be directly responsible for the abuse, but who are beneficiaries, for they do nothing against abuse, they somehow benefit from it, and therefore cannot avoid being considered responsible for it. In fact, it does not seem exactly possible to keep apart, to stand on the fence, because one way or the other you will end up being directly or indirectly connected to an idea or a policy. Marion, for example, had chosen not to take sides in her parents' arguments. She used to close her ears so as not to know: "Marion's hands would fly to her ears to block out the sound – not knowing meant that she wouldn't be able to take sides" (32). Her parents did not involve her in their decision to opt for a new identity, so that she could start from

scratch. Yet, that decision inevitably affected her, for she grows up believing and defining her whole life based on an assumed reality and later ends up questioning her whole identity. For the first time in her life Marion feels impelled into knowing more about the past, about the torture and acts exposed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and she feels as if she were "a reluctant traveller who has landed in a foreign country without so much as a phrase book" (74). It seems to her this is a foreign country.

Another reality that human beings inevitably have to face in their life, and which is present in *Playing in the Light*, is the question of ageing, exemplified in Marion's father. As people age, they get confused, forgetful and often act in an unrecognizable way, even though they refuse to acknowledge their need for support. All Marion's father has left are his memories of the time he was a farm boy, of his house, of the trees, of Ma and his brothers, of his sister Elsie. Marion's father's frustration with his recurrent trips to the lavatory is vividly described, evidence that he no longer totally controls his organs: "and just then, when he's distracted, an arc of piss passes across the seat onto the cracked tiles at the side of the bath" (8). One can sense John's feelings of the "world shrinking around him just as his gums have shrunk, so that the false teeth clatter and threaten to slip out" (176). One's reaction to ageing is also present in Brenda's feelings towards her mother:

> But it was precisely this that Brenda hated: the sagging bed that … slid her to the centre, to the sponginess of the old woman's body. Brenda hates the smell and the softness of that body, is ashamed of her revulsion at the thought of having suckled at that bosom. She has stared in fascinated horror at her mother undressing: the empty pouches of breasts, the cellulite that bubbles and sags over the knees, the withered shanks, a flash of the balding grey pubis. (65)

Brenda also encapsulates the idea that by getting formal education, you become more insensitive: her sister "Shirley is piously affectionate towards their mother; she reprimands Brenda for being squeamish, for what she calls her sister's airs and graces" (65). Possibly the idea is that as soon as one's social position improves, one tends to look down on those who are beneath.

Related to the issue of ageing there's the inevitability of death, which is brought up by Marion when she justifies her bringing along the key to her

father's house with the fact that he may be laid up in bed: "That's where you – then she corrected herself – where *we'll* all end up, flat on your back with your mouth hanging open, staring wildly into space" (11). And deeply related to death, there is the idea of replacement, transition and reversal, with the cycle of life flowing inexorably for every human being:

> So this reversal is what it all boils down to, he thinks resentfully: you insist that the child should eat the right food and then, before you know it, the years have flashed by and the child in turn, believing that she knows better, invents a diet for you. (11-12)

This idea of reversal can also be seen to a certain extent in social relations as they are portrayed in *Playing in the Light*; indeed Marion's parents have tried to move on, to leave behind a social and familiar background, which has determined their being deprived of opportunities. In their turn and to keep to their new identities they look down on those they have left behind and even when things change, and apartheid comes to an end, John goes on believing those they have left behind are vagrants and criminals. Society has changed, but many of the old principles or ideas have stayed, also with respect to men and women's role in society:

> She'd said Geoff that she would call him. Although she understands that nowadays a woman need not wait for a man to get in touch, she cannot bring herself to do the calling, cannot put herself in a vulnerable position. She is, she supposes, an old-fashioned girl. (56)

Having endured the practice of segregation and the policy of apartheid for a long time, South African society has had to deal with a set of stereotypes that remain deeply rooted in people's minds and hearts. When the country became a democracy, those who had always dominated and who were a minority did not want to lose their power; those who had been dominated were suspicious and eager to reverse the situation. At a certain point in *Playing in the Light* there appears to be a parallelism between people's lives and the rats' lives that Marion observes from the cottage she rents by the sea: she

> leans towards sympathy for the hazardous lives they lead, for their vulnerability, for the terrible reputation they have earned themselves amongst humans, and yet the revulsion cannot be overcome. (…) What

> kind of life is that - to be burdened with such timidity? To have to overcome so much in order to achieve so little, to be the object of such irrational fear and loathing? (24)

Nevertheless Marion is the first to associate laziness with the coloured and in turn, Brenda seems to think all whites are rich. Marion feels the need to tell Brenda she comes from a poor family, "a dirt poor family" (84), which offends Brenda, because she does not like "the construction that binds poverty to dirt" (84) and, on the other hand, Marion's idea of poverty is far from real poverty, the one black South Africans experienced, which is why Brenda resents it. One may therefore conclude there is transition and reversal, but not much seems to have changed. National assumptions related to the question of colour are still disseminated. In the fishing village on the coast where Marion rents a cottage, her father assures her "the fishers were decent white people in spite of being burnt black by sun and wind" (23), and he wonders who would have thought "that there are white people living without water and electricity" (23), recalibrating images of white people in a nation where expectations and representations had become ossified.

Throughout *Playing in the Light* there are also references that show how western influence is ever-present: Marion follows a recent style feature in *Cosmopolitan* to decorate the kitchen; Brenda thinks "Mummy's been watching too many Westerns" (72); Boetie refers to the process Michael Jackson went through to have a white skin and straight hair (51) while listening to his music at Wally's; Geoff regrets the fact that the rand is "useless these days, because there's nothing like savouring the delights of old Europe" (42). On the other hand, the power of colonialism is also portrayed when Councillor Carter was made to feel inferior by a man who had recently arrived from the south of England (138).

Despite all the changes in Marion's feelings towards herself and her identity, there is a feeling that seems to accompany her along the path she follows in the process of her self-rediscovery and that is the feeling of emptiness and loss. Indeed in her to a certain extent reluctant pursuit and final discovery of the truth, Marion never stops feeling empty and "lost":

> She is, after all, not the person she thought she was, let alone the person she thinks the others thought she was. It may be true that being white,

> black or coloured means nothing, but it is also true that things are no longer the same; there must be a difference between what things are and what they mean. These categories may have slimmed down, may no longer be tagged with identity cards, but once they were pot-bellied with meaning. (106)

Her parents were coloured, but they were light enough to pass for white, and so they crossed over to be seen as white by others, to reinvent themselves as white; she was made to believe she was white and now feels she must cross over to be coloured. As Jacobs writes, Marion's finding out of her parents' playing white leads her to reflect on her own hitherto unquestioned "whiteness" and on race thinking in present-day, non-racial South Africa. Being black, or white, or coloured may well mean nothing now, but, she realises, "it is also true that things are no longer the same" (106) for her. For Geoff, her recent discovery does not seem to matter, but for her it is full of meaning. Jacobs goes on pointing out that

> [w]hat she does realise is that her life has been turned topsy-turvy and that its trajectory has become part of an ongoing process of migration, but not a linear one, and one that is, furthermore, irreversible. … Wicomb defines Marion's new sense of her identity in chaotic terms when she suggests to Geoff about such endless crossing over to different places, "perhaps that is what the new is all about – an era of unremitting crossings", which leads to his half-hearted retort as to whether she is "theorising the rainbow nation". (11)

By becoming aware of her parents' decision to cross over at a time when segregation was a crude reality, Marion also comes to realize how difficult her parents' life must have been afterwards – always hiding and lying. Her father especially must have had a particularly tough life for he was a farm boy: at the farm with Marion and without Helen, John "could be himself, as they said, although he was not entirely sure what that meant" (112), and must have felt all the burden of his mother having asked him to keep an eye on his siblings. He was the eldest and in the city his "house should be the family home away from home" (111). He argued things were different in the city, but his mother would not understand it. Therefore the city comes to be connected with danger: "he'd shut the door, and the three of them would sip coffee and dunk their

rusks in that room sealed from the city and its devilish complications" (110). As she uncovers the truth, Marion thinks of her mother as of a calculating woman, with no conscience, no heart, no shame. This shows how difficult it is sometimes to understand people's actions and attitudes, when their historical contexts are different. Her father tries to explain they "were not the monsters she seems to think they were" (117) and that they did not tell her because that was best for her. Once again there is the idea of inversion: John seems to become the child who needs Marion's forgiveness.

Marion tries to understand the old divisions based on colour and she visits the library. She realizes there is no section in the library for "play-whites" or for "whiteness". However, the section "coloured" has a lot of entries, but none refer to "play whites". For the first time she looks at the different laws and their racial definitions. In 1950, a bill was issued that intended to fix the categories of coloured and white, but it seemed to conflict with the previous one, the 1946 law "that allowed mixed blood in one parent or grandparent" (120). *Playing in the Light* shows how incoherent and confusing the laws related to race were during the previous regime, for the simple idea of defining "whiteness" appears to be weird. Marion realizes the Act No. 30 of 1950, the one which allowed her parents to start new lives, defined a "white person" as "one in appearance obviously is, or who is generally accepted as a white person, but does not include a person who, although in appearance obviously a white person, is generally accepted as a coloured person" (121). This bewildering definition ensured that coloured identity remained blurred, as if lacking a real identity and at the same time exposed the categorisation as absurd. As Ronit Frenkel & Craig MacKenzie state, the "fluid and scientifically and experimentially dubious nature [of apartheid's racial categories] is … under scrutiny … in *Playing in the Light*" (2). In 1962 there was an Amendment Act that established that even if one were in appearance obviously white, one would not be considered so if one admitted to having black blood, an amendment that suggested "fear that whiteness might be undermined if people go about speaking of their black blood" (121). Possibly due to the difficulty in defining whiteness, "Marion notes that the amendment, unlike the original, defines whiteness in terms of what it is not" (121). For Marion the Population Registration Amendment Act of 1962 does not make sense. In fact it includes not only the idea that a person who has

been classified as white, but who claims to be coloured, cannot be considered white, but also the idea that if the facts prove the person is not of coloured descent, then the person is in fact white. Neither Marion nor the librarian can figure out how a person with all the privileges of being white would claim to be coloured. Yet the librarian explains that in the seventies and the eighties there were Nationalist campaigns to boost the white population while a contraceptive was "given free of charge to rural blacks" (122).

Marion thinks over the term "play-whites" and reasons that it is incorrect for there was nothing enjoyable about their life – they had to lie, to be always suspicious, to be continuously vigilant, to be careful not to give anything away:

> Play-whites: a misnomer if ever there was one. There was nothing playful about their condition. Not only were they deadly serious, but the business of playing white, of bluffing it out, took courage, determination, perseverance, commitment. (123)

Furthermore, with a child to raise, her parents had to pretend both outside and inside the home. Marion reasons her parents' life was more like "hiding in the light" (124) and she concludes that they left their families and past behind only thinking of "their own advancement" (122). That idea is stated by Jacobs, when he says that

> Her parents … had betrayed their families … obliterated their histories … and stripped themselves of colour …. Being always vulnerable, and therefore having constantly to be vigilant, their never-ending attendance to the rules of whiteness … had left them, Marion realises, 'no space, no time for interiority, for reflecting on what they had done'. They had reinvented themselves as white English-speaking South Africans … dissociated themselves completely from other coloureds, and erased the past … and this was her legacy to her daughter. (11)

Due to a regime of segregation that strongly devaluated their ethnic and culture heritage, Marion's parents made the choice to deny their "colouredness", thus leading to what might be called a point of rupture, in the definition of their identity. In turn Marion's identity has been built solely on the events that took place after her parents' choice. Now that she realizes that there was a whole background she did not know about, Marion feels the need to re-question her life and to rediscover herself. In her introduction to *Coloured*

by History, Shaped by Place, Zimitri Erasmus emphasizes the idea that coloured identities should not be defined in terms of other races, but rather in terms of "cultural creativity, creolized formations shaped by South Africa's history of colonialism, slavery, segregation and apartheid" (4). In relation to Marion's identity as a coloured person, it seems appropriate to mention one of the views of cultural identity Stuart Hall refers to, the one which

> recognises that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute "what we really are"; or rather … "what we have become". We cannot speak … about "one experience, one identity", without acknowledging its other side – the ruptures and discontinuities. … Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. (225)

Then there is the question of the term "coloured" itself, which as Zoë Wicomb states in "Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa", as one of the apartheid categories, it was somehow rejected during the period of revolutionary struggle, when people would rather be called "black". Wicomb refers to the resurgence of the term in the post-apartheid period, pointing out that the "adoption of different names at various historical junctures shows perhaps the difficulty which the term 'coloured' has in taking on a fixed meaning" (93).

In her route towards a new identity, Helen does not allow any faults; she is ambitious and will do everything she can in order to secure what she thinks of as a new life. She makes great efforts to improve her English, to appear confident. She changes the church she attends, by stopping going to the Moravian Church and starting to attend St Luke's Church, an Anglican Church where Councillor Carter, the person she expects to assure her whiteness, worships. On the other hand, John refuses to go, for he is proud of being an Afrikaner, a South African and does not identify with those calling themselves English. Helen cannot figure out why John insists on claiming to be a Boer, when he is seen as English. When John applies for the job of traffic cop, he does not realize it is one of the jobs reserved for whites and he gets it because he is taken for a white and he does not clarify the situation. That is his first step towards "playing white" (127). Although a year after John joins the Traffic Department,

the first coloured speed-cop is appointed, not long after the City Council is forced to stop "taking on coloured traffic-police, because how could you expect white drivers to take any notice of the coloured cops?" (156).

In her pursuit for a new self, Helen changes her name: Helen Charles replaces Helen Kerelse, whose final "se" implied having been someone called 'karel's slave'. Then she decides she is to marry John Campbell and to start a new life, the life she has in mind for both of them. She has plans: "they would buy their new house, move up the slope of the mountain where they could see the curve of the bay, and speak English" (130). In spite of all of John's objections that he will not be able to do it, Helen will not give up and sets her aims in motion. They are not to have children, though; for that will be too risky. John does not exactly understand how far Helen is to go in the pursuit of her aim. For Helen, John lacks ambition and she would like him to change his behaviour: "in the early years of her marriage she was proud of him, but he was not interested in changing his rough ways" (131). She will end up looking at her husband with distaste. Helen aims at "no less than respectful whiteness"; for that aim, she is willing to do, to sacrifice anything. She eventually agrees upon Afrikaans schooling for Marion, but ties with family, connections with her aunt are to be cut. The girl is not to be confused or made insecure by doubts related to her origin. For Marion's mother, pregnancy must have presented itself as a threat, for the child might ruin everything they had achieved, for indeed the child's looks might give them away. When Marion is born with pale skin and smooth hair, Helen decides she will not know anything: "She would grow in ignorance, a perfectly ordinary child who would take her whiteness, her privileges, for granted" (125).

Eventually Helen suspects the neighbours in Observatory are coloured, and so she refuses to socialize with them. Helen's mother is the one who has the idea of using the back gate and of wearing the wrap-round apron. She always comes on Wednesdays, which is her day off as a housekeeper for a very rich family. She is proud of Helen's achievements and she brings decoration suggestions from the house where she works. It is also Helen's mother's decision that the child will call her "Tokkie". In her pursuit for her new position in life, Helen has to leave behind all those ties that may give them away. She has a dark-skinned brother, whom she has not seen for a number of years. She always

sends him a gift at Christmas, maybe to appease her conscience for having no contact with him. When Helen's mother ultimately tells her he always throws it away without opening it, she is angry at being told; she would rather not know. Helen's father, who died when she was eight years old, had been the foreman at the shoe factory at Wuppertal and he had met her mother who came to work there after having been forced to leave school, as there were many children and there was no money in the family. Helen's mother was clever and proud and refused to be looked down on by him. He was handsome and light-skinned and gave no importance to colour or blood. In a way, in Zoë Wicomb's words in "Shame and identity: the case of the coloured in South Africa", the origins of this miscegenation are "within a discourse of 'race', concupiscence, and degeneracy", and so it "continues to be bound up with shame, a pervasive shame exploited in apartheid's strategy of the naming of a Coloured race, and recurring in the current attempts by coloureds to establish brownness as a pure category" (92). As Jacobs concludes, there seems to be somehow "a deep-rooted, internalised sense of shame: for their slave origins, for the miscegenation which produced them, and for being black" (3). Moreover, the way in which Helen secures her family's whiteness means increased shame. As Minesh Dass notes,

> Helen is willing to suffer sexual degradation for whiteness, but the exchange is doubly unfair: she must carry the burden of wanting the purity of whiteness; and, she must (always) carry the burden of being an impure, sexually predatory coloured female who turns the heads of 'pure' white men. (138)

Helen never doubts her aims nor the means to achieve them. She accepts Carter's advances in order to have what she wants. For Helen he is the one who has the power. She needs him to acknowledge that they are members of the white community, worshipping at his parish. She believes she is fighting for a better future for all of them, and all she does is due to necessity. Their "whiteness" is a rebirth like that of Jesus. Whiteness is to be connected with always being right, with no restrictions, with freedom, with feeling "the world belongs to you" (152), with being at ease. That is why John reasons they will never achieve it for they have always to be vigilant, never to be allowed the feeling of rest. Thus they are neither true whites because they always live in fear,

nor do they want to be coloured and underprivileged, and so they can never be genuine: "Tokkie's visits are a relief. Tokkie brings colour and sound … Tokkie can shout and crow all she wishes; that is what coloured people, servants, do. It is the Campbells who have to be still, who have to mind their p's and q's" (152). The Campbells have made a choice and that choice determines all the attention, prohibitions, rules and separations they are to bear. Jacobs refers to the silence that involves Marion's home as a way of showing how 'whiteness' "was achieved, and at what cost" (12). In her journey of rediscovery, Marion realizes the world she has been brought in is not real and, just like the lantern she and Brenda were given by Outa Blinkoog's, her identity seems to be made of many pieces put together, which she now feels compelled to disentangle, in an exhausting journey "of discovery into the discontinuities and contradictions of her own heterogeneous history and identity" (12), as Jacobs puts it.

Segregation meant reclassifying people and that is John's explanation. With the official declaration Helen has secured, John only has to sign a form stating he will have no contacts with coloured people. At first John does not think that also means separating from his siblings, but the truth is he has to stop seeing them. Helen is obsessed with manners and if at first she is delighted to meet the fair-skinned Elsie, she eventually concludes she cannot be one of her relations – not only is she to marry a dark-skinned person but she embarrasses Helen with her vulgarity and lack of manners. Elsie's husband is black but they live in a detached house with a garden, so Elsie believes Helen is jealous. Elsie makes Marion feel shame; and shame is a key word. Elsie's late husband opposed and stood against the apartheid laws, which Helen could only criticise. They had lost touch in the 70s, when "this was a place of black and white, not a place of fairness, no room for concessions" (172). Elsie's family could not accept John or Helen, as they were suspicious of them for they identified with those who were responsible for apartheid, for their youngest child's death. For the first time, Marion sees pictures of her grandparents at her Aunt Elsie's house, which need no hiding. Marion has to deal with her discoveries and not only does she have to accept her new family, but also deal with all those who did not hide, who were there to fight for who they were, for their rights.

Brenda, her companion in her journey of rediscovery, stands for reading and its importance in understanding human relations. Marion does not think she personally has any problem as far as human relations are concerned. Besides she does not see the point in doing something that may turn out to be a disappointment. For Brenda "To live vicariously through other people's words, in other people's worlds, is better than not living at all" (163). Marion feels uneasy in her relationship with Brenda for she has never really established a human relation. She would like not to tell her about her life but she feels the need for it. On the one hand she is afraid Brenda might tell her friends about her story, but at the same she wonders why she does not know them yet. Marion feels empty and lonely, feelings she believes she has never had before or at least has never recognised:

> Growing up on your own, in blankness and silence, meant that she had no expectations of the world, no patience with what she called the pampered, female world of feeling. Now that she has a past, a family, no matter how distant, something like loneliness has crept in. (177)

Her world has changed and so have her feelings and her relationship with the others and with what surrounds her: "Marion flushes; she has never felt less lovely or successful. She no longer knows what success means" (170). She is somehow trapped between the isolation and the silence that have characterised most of her life and her recent need to understand events through contact with others and with literature. She decides to travel, to go abroad for some time. She tells Brenda she will possibly go to Western Europe and as for the business, it is time for her to move on. Her coming to Europe is one of Marion's decisions which show how her recent discoveries have changed the way she sees herself; she feels the need to do it on her own. It is all about a new discovery, a discovery of herself. She avoids the monuments, the famous places, the landmarks suggested on the guidebooks. It is a journey to her inner self. That is why she is "invaded by the virus of loneliness" (188). She feels the world in reverse, not only physically as she is in a different hemisphere but also psychologically. She feels lack of trust for even those who you were supposed to trust can disappoint you: "she would rather say Love you to a ripe avocado pear, and then only after having eaten it, since an avocado too, for all its promise, can disappoint" (188). There is also a feeling of emptiness. For the

first time she reads South African novels from different decades, as "that would give her an overview, an idea of the country's history" (190). In London, when she is staying temporarily in an attic room and looks up from her reading to find a rectangle of sunlight projected onto the wall opposite the skylight window, she watches, mesmerised, as the rectangle of light seems to come alive: "The rectangle is a painting, or rather, is painting in action, of white light on the white wall" (192). According to Jacobs,

> This composition of white on white, of light in motion against a static background of light, symbolises, with its forming and re-forming abstract images, the increasingly complex, unpredictable and irreversible course that Marion's life has taken since her discovery of her coloured parents' decision to recreate themselves in terms of whiteness. (10)

It is abroad that Marion remembers how she and Annie Boshoff separated. When Annie's family is found to be coloured and therefore "play-whites", Helen is adamant: the Campbells are not to have anything to do with the Boshoffs, they will be reclassified, they will "have to move, she could surely not stay in that respectable area with her brood" (194). Marion undoubtedly accepts this idea, for after Annie brings her the scrapbook they own together, she does not hesitate to drop it "into the dustbin in the backyard" (195). Marion comes to realize her very own act of betrayal, for she did not act in a very different way from her mother. As Daymond states in "Shadow stories and shadow selves", "Marion [understands] that she shares with her parents a responsibility for the shadow story, and shadow self, which still haunts her" (165).

As the novel comes to an end, the sense of emptiness and loneliness related to Marion's life and her process to understand her identity does not seem to attenuate. When Marion realizes that Brenda is writing Marion's father's story, she feels somehow betrayed, and as Daymond states in "Shadow Stories and Shadow Selves", "her sense of betrayal still leaves her with a need to control both its contents and its utterance" (157). She is still full of uncertainties, travelling a previously unknown world and she cannot stand the idea of people reading about the life of her family, about her identity. She does not seem ready to let the others know, for she cannot yet fully understand her identity. Just like she separated from Annie, she now separates from Brenda.

The question of cultural identity in South Africa is undoubtedly a complex question, which is subtly portrayed in *Playing in the Light*. In a country which for a long time had to deal with the question of colonialism, miscegenation, and segregation based on colour, the dominated had to see the world classified through the concepts of those who were dominating and that inevitably led to changes, to ruptures, in identity formations. As apartheid came to an end, a process of rediscovering one's distinctiveness had to be undertaken throughout the population. Answering one of Thomas Olver's questions, Zoë Wicomb states that

> no "nation" is cohesive, and affiliations of gender, race and class will always woof across such national traditions. Agreed, the land is important; it's always been a political issue in South Africa. And yes, identity is not only about contemplation of being; it is bound up with the body and the ways in which we experience the ground beneath our feet, and rest our eyes on a familiar landscape. But then different groups in South Africa experience these differently. (189)

However, in her view of multiculturalism, in the novel *Playing in the Light*, Zoë Wicomb goes beyond South Africa, probably derived from her experience of living in Scotland. On her journey to Europe, Marion meets an old Scottish man feeding the ducks who connects South Africa with "murder, rape, knifings, all kinds of atrocities", but who concludes "everywhere is being messed up", for his own birthplace is full of Pakis with their wee curry shops" (202). He feels the government has forgotten the Scottish poor to help those immigrant refugees and asylum seekers. Not only does he express his regret about the money spent with them but also some fear that immigrants may affect Scottish culture. By saying this he proves that racism is not only present in South Africa. Unfortunately xenophobia seems to be present all over the world wherever different cultures coexist, which has become more recurrent thanks to globalization. In South Africa, apartheid simply officialised segregation and discrimination.

As mentioned before, *Playing in the Light* is set in contemporary South Africa, but as Dirk Klopper refers to, it "is centrally concerned with the past, both as personal and as ancestral history" (149), which did not exactly happen with *Coconut*. It focuses on the impact that the choice "to play white" made by a

coloured family during apartheid has had on the current life of their daughter who was kept out of the secret, but who eventually unveils it, to conclude nothing seems to be as it appeared. It also approaches some of the ghosts inherited from apartheid that still haunt South African people. It focuses on coloured people, but it also touches the situation of white people, whether as offenders or as beneficiaries.

CHAPTER THREE: IDENTITY AND MORALS IN *BLOOD KIN*

Ceridwen Dovey was born in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, in 1980, and grew up mostly in the city of East London in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. Just like Kopano Matlwa, she was still young when apartheid came to an end, but her background is not the same for, being white, she comes from a different ethnic and socio-cultural group. In the early 1980s her father got into political trouble for criticizing the Bantu Education System, which led the family to emigrate to Australia for the first time and to take out Australian citizenship. Given these differences, Ceridwen Dovey's options and picture of the world cannot be expected to be the same as those of Kopano Matlwa or Zoë Wicomb.

Blood Kin, Ceridwen Dovey's first novel, written as her thesis for a Masters in Creative Writing at the University of Cape Town, was first published in 2007. In general it seems not to have anything to do with the other two novels under analysis. Indeed unlike *Coconut* or *Playing in the Light*, which are openly set in post-apartheid South Africa, *Blood Kin*'s setting is undefined. No specific country, place or time is mentioned, so that the events can apply to any country in which there is an abusive president, in which people are deprived of their freedom or of equal rights, and in which there is a revolution to depose the president. It tells us of a country, where, after a coup, it gradually becomes clear that things will not exactly end up in a fair way, for once in power any person who eventually occupies the former President's place starts to act in a similar way, progressively taking over the former President's life. It is also interesting that, just like the setting, the names of the characters are unmentioned. There is the President and his wife, his chef and his daughter, his portraitist and his wife, his barber and his brother's fiancée. The lack of references to names, places or time contrasts with the extensive details given about the characters' appearance, tasks and feelings. *Blood Kin* becomes thus a story about power and secrecy, about beliefs and reality, about the complexity of the human being, one's intricate inner self and one's feelings and reactions, when subject to a regime based on imposed power rather than the assent of the governed. Jeffrey Freymann-Weyr refers to the novel as nothing less than a "[s]tudy of human behavior" (interview with Ceridwen Dovey).

The absence of references in *Blood Kin* may be seen as an unconventional way of writing, as by not naming characters, or identifying time or places, the novel seems to lack some of the traditional writing markers. On the other hand, by choosing not to specify any place, character or time, Ceridwen Dovey seems to want to convey the idea that each situation, each move can apply to any ethnicity, to any character, at anytime, anywhere, for the lack of references supposedly avoids connections to specific realities. That is the idea enunciated by Neil Southern, when he quotes E.M. Pospelov and Arseny Saparov, to underline the significance of place names, which come to be connected with history, and national and ethnic identity (398). Moreover, in her conversation with Colum McCann, Ceridwen Dovey states that one of the reasons for the lack of references is precisely thematic, for she wanted to work in an abstract level, with no real connection to a specific country ("Blood Kin"). Nonetheless, and despite this absence of specific references, when reading *Blood Kin,* there seems to be somehow a perceived relation between the events in the book and many of the experiences lived in South Africa. Furthermore, the novel seems to deal with some of the issues that lie behind some of the current problems South Africa has to face, or to question some reasons why South Africa has not become the country many have dreamt of. Referring to African fiction, Gerald Gaylard states that:

> realism was the dominant form of African fiction and criticism from the time of the independence struggles until the last twenty years of the twentieth century … Since then a post colonialist aesthetic and politics has risen to prominence, asking why it has not been possible to achieve social transformation when many of the old reasons for failure are no longer valid. Postcolonialism's answer to this question is that change has tended to be cosmetic, and that more fundamental change is required at deeper levels in both individual psyches and collective organisations. (314)

As previously mentioned, first colonisation and then apartheid determined the subjugation of non-white ethnicities and the dominance of the white minority in South Africa. After the first democratic elections in 1994, the situation seemed to veer towards the reverse, for, as Neil Southern states, to the minority whites, "democratic power can appear as a political force driven by the prejudiced opinions of the majority" (398) and that may affect "the quality of

inter-group relations and the building of trust" (399). In this sense, Neil Southern goes on to mention a "feeling of powerlessness (particularly of a political kind)" and a "sense of isolation" (400), which come to strike the white community. To these, he relates the terms "insecurity" and "uncertainty": "powerlessness [is] expressive of a group's inability either to influence or alter the course of events" and insecurity as "a consequence of this reality", which in its turn

> can easily give rise to a mood of uncertainty regarding a group's sense of belonging to a society or a specific place as well as raising doubts about its cultural future particularly if its cultural environment is perceived as gradually becoming alien and its identity eroding. (400)

As he says, "in South Africa, the dispute centred on the relocation (and democratic allocation) of political power" (400); so the white population of South Africa has had to adjust

> to the disappearance of political hegemony. Democracy has turned the world of South African politics on its head. Readjustments in such a transformed context are challenging. The transition has been successful if measured by the fact that political violence has not plagued post-settlement South Africa; neither have there been major challenges to the new political order. Thus the political implications of white demographics have proven tolerable, albeit not comfortable. Yet it needs to be acknowledged that when a group is stripped of its political power it is likely that it will feel vulnerable. (410)

In *Blood Kin* the topic of the human being's eagerness for power is a key idea. As a matter of fact the lure of power is present throughout the story, which tells us about dictatorship, about a corrupt President, a coup which overthrows him and a Commander who takes his place in the presidential palace only to be replaced himself at the end. The reader is given the picture of the events taking place from the point of view of the former President's portraitist, barber and chef, in the first and in the third parts; and from the point of view of his portraitist's wife, his barber's brother's fiancée and his chef's daughter in the second part, women thus being given a highly-relevant role in the story. This division into three parts, in which the third builds up to a climax, gives us a deeper insight into each character and therefore a better knowledge of the contrast between men and women's perspectives, and their

private and public selves. This can be related to what Gerald Gaylard refers to, when he says:

> If aesthetics is form, the way in which a literary work is structured, then postcolonialism attempts to alter the structuring conventions of literature and consciousness (reading) so as to alter the way reality is perceived, and hence perhaps influence reality itself. (72)

Portraying a country under a dictatorship, Ceridwen Dovey is exposing the reality of those people who live in a country ruled by an individual, through the exercise of his capricious authority, with all the consequences that involves; a country where the power to govern, which is achieved without the consent of those being governed, cannot be removed through legal means. In essence, a dictatorship is opposed to democracy, which is, as Gabriel A. Almond states, "a political system in which citizens enjoy a number of basic civil and political rights" (27), a form of government in which all eligible citizens have representatives and therefore a say in the decisions that affect their lives. Therefore essential concepts such as those of freedom and equality relate to democracy. In contrast, a dictatorship is about tyranny, oppression, coercion and abuse of power. In Almond's words, "[c]itizens are either ignored or pressed into symbolic assent to the government's choices" (103) and only through revolution and violence can people change the dictator; so violence becomes "a prevalent means of resolving conflict and gaining power", which in Ailsa Winton's view may be related to "the existence and exacerbation of so-called 'cultures of violence'" (166).

In *Blood Kin* there is a coup, in which the Commander replaces the President; the country however goes on living under a totalitarian regime for, after the revolution, the Commander's behaviour gradually resembles the President's; repression and abuse of power, and insistent propaganda, go on characterizing the way the country is ruled. This indicates the difficulties that countries usually face in overcoming such a repressive regime as a dictatorship. In relation to the 1970s-90s wave of democratization, Paul Brooker explains that

> not only have some of the old non-democratic regimes continued to survive, but also too many of the transitions from non-democratic rule have yet to produce a true democracy – and indeed have sometimes slid back into some form of dictatorship. (7)

What often starts as a legitimate desire to establish a democratic government, in which everyone is entitled to freedom and equal rights, may end up failing, either for social, economic, political or cultural reasons. Raymond Suttner mentions that often national liberation movements "may, following liberation, use the same rhetoric or act in a manner that comprises a return to violence that threatens constitutionalism" (517). In South Africa, during colonialism and apartheid, the world was seen through the lens of the white minority; local and traditional lifestyles, religions, values were marginalized. Moreover, as stated by Suttner, the denial of the oneness of South Africans and the assertion of South Africa as a country of minorities, and therefore of divisive identities, was constantly expressed (517). He goes on to explain that

> Unlike conventional Western states where interpellation by the state as subject carries important ideological consequences, connoting equality and citizenship for all, the South African apartheid state interpellated individuals not merely as South African subjects. They were also interpellated by the state as specific types of "racial subjects" with varying rights – as "Whites", "Indians", "Coloureds" and "Bantu". Africans, furthermore, were not only interpellated as Bantu, but also as specific "tribal subjects" – as Xhosa, Tswana and so on. (520)

After 1994, the idea of restoring justice and assuring equality for all was prevalent, and with it, the idea of asserting those values and identities that had been suppressed: in Raymond Suttler's words, the ANC's assertion "of the nature and goal of one common people and one common destiny" (518) was official policy. He explains:

> From the moment of its establishment in 1912, the ANC (then the SANNC) posed a counter-interpellation/construction/constitution of the African people as the South African nation of the future. To this end, it set about banishing "tribal animosities" and divisions, and striving to make unity of the African people a reality. (521)

Along with the idea of reinstating justice for all, there came the notion of "Africanization", which as Raymond Suttner states,

> is controversial for many in South Africa, because it is seen, along with affirmative action and "playing the race card", as one of the ways in which merit is devalued. It is regarded by some as undermining the

> allegedly "colour blind" ethical basis that should guide a democratic order and educational system. (515)

So, he concludes that:

> Non-racialism is now widely proclaimed as one of the goals of the new South Africa, and many consequently find it necessary to deny the importance of "race" and, in some cases, regard the reference to race and how many people of a particular race are present in institutions as being a barrier to the establishment of non-racism. (522)

As far as power is concerned, each of the characters in *Blood Kin* feels they have reached a certain position; they have somehow got a kind of power. It is the President, who appears at first to be a meticulous person, who likes to follow a strict routine and who at least apparently wants to give others an accurate image of himself. Every two months, he has his portrait painted, as a reminder of his position in society, of the attention and exclusivity he craves. He wants to be the only one having his portrait painted by the portraitist, thus showing his power. Of course this situation is also profitable for the latter, as that means he gets a good fee and is allowed to paint for himself the rest of the time. The portraitist says he has never "paid attention to politics" (14), but he has been taking advantage of his connection to the President, profiting from politics whether he thinks about it or not. And it was thanks to his father-in-law's relation with the President that he got the job as the President's portraitist. He wants to believe that he is an insignificant player in the game of politics, but he has been using the situation for his own ends. His wife was also paid respect at work because of the way she does it, showing no expression, "leaving a long pause before" answering questions (159), but also because of who she was, of who her family was, as people "had a healthy respect for power and the privilege it confers" (159). Despite the importance of her husband's position, she feels superior, calling him "a fool": "The fool has chosen to stay here at the Summer Residence even though he's been released along with the others" (128).

A portrait functions as a symbol of one's power, of prestige, of authority, being able to convey much about one's character and aspirations, about how one likes to be seen and/or about the circumstances in which one lives. Unlike

a photograph, which has directly to do with physical appearance and objectivity, a painted portrait has to do with perception, with control of reality and suggestive symbols. That is why the Commander also wants the portraitist to paint him. By having his portrait painted, he is following the President's footsteps and legitimizing his power, his right to rule, which becomes extremely important in terms of consolidating it. As Paul Brooker states, "[w]hen a regime's claim to legitimacy … is accepted by its subjects or citizens, they feel duty-bound to obey the regime's rules and commands" (131). The Commander does not simply want to be painted, for he wants to be painted together with the President – so that he can show his newly-achieved power, which makes the portraitist pity the President, just as he had pitied the President's wife before.

The chef, in his turn, is said to have had humble beginnings, and to have reached that position in life that allows him to avoid doing specific jobs the lowly kitchen boys do or at least to do them just when he wants. He feels his power, for he now has the privilege to prepare "[t]he President's favorite meal" (5), in his city apartment, and not even the President's family joined him for it. He "grew fond of doing [his] own dirty work" (5), the jobs that he no longer needed to do; they not only reminded him of how much he had progressed in life, but also gave him a feeling of a certain intimacy with supreme power, with the President. He excuses himself by saying he has been failed by his own flesh, which is a good reason for him to have turned to power – "we all know power and desire couple effortless" (63). He is a self-made man, an ambitious person who clawed his way up and that actually meant leaving his mother behind and his wife insane. As his daughter says, "he'll do whatever it takes to survive" (98). Therefore, whereas those around him seem to feel his ambition and unscrupulous aims, the chef tends to justify his choices by saying he could not have done differently, as others led him that way.

As for the barber, every day he had the President's head in his hands; he had the power to take the President's life swiftly. We are told he came to work for the President to feel he had him in his power. He was ambitious and practised to be the best barber so that he could become the President's barber. And when he finally succeeded in his aims, he did not do what he had come to the city to do. He feels guilty for not having avenged his brother's death and he needs to purge his guilt through order and cleanliness –

everything has to be in its place and there is no place for untidiness or uncleanness. He welcomes the pain of failure, of not having the courage to do what he had set himself to do "the way only the guilty can" (170). He feels his brother scorns him and is sad and angry at him. He feels he has failed him, which torments him. He had come to the city to kill the President, to take his revenge, to avenge his brother's death but he was too afraid of the consequences. He feels like a coward, someone who wanted to live more than he desired vengeance.

Throughout the story, and deeply connected to the notion of having power, course feelings of suspicion and of jealousy. Each of the characters is suspicious of those surrounding them; the chef, for example, feared being replaced by the sous-chef who "had been biting at" his heels (36). He was also suspicious of his wife, as he thought she might be pretending her madness. As for the Commander, he has two armed man watching the chef so that he will not poison his food. And just as the abalone is taken by surprise by the chef, so was the barber when he was arrested, for he was naked. The barber's elder brother, who used to be a fisherman, and his fiancée had been involved in a political resistance movement and had eventually disappeared. The barber comes to realise his brother's fiancée is now the Commander's wife. At different moments of the story, he resents not being his brother, who had been his mother's favourite and who is the person the Commander's wife desires. As he knows that due to his captivity, he looks like his brother, he feels like an impostor.

Each character hides something, is full of secrecy, and that is something human beings are attracted by. The more secrets the portraitist's wife has, the more attracted to her he is. Secrecy assumes an important role in interpersonal life and although it might be seen as simply opposed to transparency, as it implies not giving all information, it is more than that, as it is also a guarantee of privacy. Traditionally secrecy has been connected with non-democratic regimes and their need to keep citizens locked out of knowledge, but democracy has also proven to involve the need for some secrecy, as total transparency means the end of privacy and of individual rights. The problem starts when either the hiding or the disclosure tramples on what are considered basic rights. Thus in all relationships people keep their secrets, not revealing

everything about themselves, and finding the balance between what should be kept as private and what can be public is the key, if one wants to benefit from relationships with others without making oneself vulnerable. Yet, as Lawrence B. Rosenfeld points out,

> Deciding between disclosing and remaining private is an extremely complex process. This depends, for example, on how I balance the risks of disclosing with the rewards, my feelings about the information I might share, the expectations of the culture in which I live, the situation …, my relationship… and the extent to which my disclosure fits the conversation… Interpersonal life consists of the tension between [winning and losing]. (4).

In *Blood Kin*, characters keep their secrets not to be vulnerable, but all this hiding, all these secrets and suspicion, seem to end up in a feeling of solitude, as the characters seem to live in an interior world, a lonely reality, which raises the question of loneliness and identity. David Houghton refers to the fact that "[w]e allow certain more detailed, intimate aspects of ourselves to be released or shared with another as part of a private bond of intimacy, whereas we release less information to those who we to hold a lesser intimate relationship with" (78), but in *Blood Kin* there seems not to be much social interaction, as characters tend to hide most thoughts and feelings even from those they are expected to share a life with; that is what happens for example with the portraitist and his wife. Loneliness and a certain feeling of purposeless are common to most characters. The barber for instance is clearly asking himself "Who am I?", "What do I want?", "What actions am I capable of?" as he came to the city with an aim and he has not accomplished it. He turns to his collection of jars of hair as an escape from what he considers to be a "failure". The same difficulty in defining one's identity is to be seen in the chef's daughter, who was beginning to "untangle the knot that was" her life as her "father's daughter, as" her "lover's woman, as" her "sick and absent mother's child" (101), but after the coup, with all the changes going on, she feels she has lost the knot of her life "and will never find it again" (101). Failing to achieve one's goals usually leads to feelings of disappointment and sadness, but that should be the engine to redefine and reset new aims. Otherwise, part of being human seems to be lost. One's dreams and one's drive to fulfil them give sense to life. Not being able to live up to all of one's dreams is part of life, as human beings

tend to dream beyond their possibilities. Accordingly it becomes important to accept eventual failures and to go on dreaming, for that is the only way to go on being human beings in search of a better life.

There is the idea of a cycle, of replacement, of transition in the regime, only for things to go on being the same – the former President's chef is to cook for the Commander, the former President's portraitist is to paint him and the former President's barber is to make him look presentable. A new regime replaces the previous one but things go on the same way and mistakes go on being made. And that is why the Commander's wife – the barber's brother's fiancée - feels guilty and wonders whether the new order can be contaminated, "whether a bad person leaves behind bad things in his space" (91). Meg Samuelson summarizes the idea and goes further by stating that:

> *Blood Kin* offers a pertinent and profound engagement with the contaminating nature of power, and is equally attuned to its capillary nature as it intrudes into and animates the most intimate spheres of everyday life. It leaves us asking: what structures have been inherited and inhabited by a "new" order increasingly settled in its movements down the corridors of power? And, what is the relationship between the monumental structures of government and the apparently cozy comforts of home? Are such spaces not, perhaps, of the same order?" (132)

There is also the question of cruelty, of whether it is in one's genetic heritage – the President was cruel, and his son is said to be cruel. Cruelty is also present in the portraitist's wife's actions towards the President's son when he was a baby or when she calls the cat cheerfully, entices it and then hits it; or when she tells the President's wife her son is dead, that she has seen his body at the vineyard: "I intend to enjoy her suffering" (161), only to be told that it is also her loss, as he was her half-brother, for the President is also her father and she suddenly realises she is to bear a child from her own father. This same cruelty is shown in the poster glued to the outside of the cracked glass of the barber's shop window - one of the posters the Commander ordered to be pasted throughout the city – a poster of the barber's brother's death, a documentation of his death the Commander had told his wife did not exist. The same poster is then put on her side of the bed, the head of the barber's brother "perfectly positioned on" her pillow, a sign that the Commander's "descent

into tyranny has begun" (147). When in power there is no place for regret or for pity: "The compunction didn't last long. In this kind of place, it rarely does" (183).

The barber's brother's fiancée interprets their movement from the mountains to the city to reclaim space in the name of freedom as a "descent into hell" (92). And she was disappointed as they did not exactly have a welcoming reception and things went back to normal after the coup – people just wanted to get on with their lives. She, the barber's brother and the Commander had wanted to make a difference, to change things and they had gone to the mountains. But their joining the resistance was not understood by the community, for caring about politics was seen as frivolous and the community preferred not to be connected with them, while many people prefer not to care for politics, just like the chef's daughter who says she does not know who organised the coup (154). Accordingly, the population do not seem to want to be involved with politics, which may be related to what Peter Brooke says in relation to some leaders of non-democratic regimes, who are regarded "by large amounts of people … as being morally exemplary, courageous heroes, founding fathers, patriotic statesmen, progressive politicians or tragic martyrs" (2). This probably has to do with the means used to secure power, with the image conveyed by power to citizens and the amount of public information allowed, or else with one's unconscious choice of self-protection through ignorance and non-involvement.

In the process of replacement, the concept of ageing comes to assume a central role, as the beauty of youth gives place to decay and ageing, younger people replace older people with their beauty and strength. The president wants his portraits to show his ageing, "all of the wrinkles and problems in his face" ("Blood Kin"), which is somewhat ironic in Ceridwen Dovey's words, because "he is the President who has used deception throughout his rule and it is a reversed kind of narcissism almost" ("Blood Kin"). The chef does not want to be influenced by the portraitist who aged overnight, but senses his own ageing. He compares himself to the Commander who is young and beautiful. He feels "like a boy trapped in an old man's body" (60) when he meets the Commander's wife. The barber, just like the chef's daughter, reminds him of himself while young, of all he has lost. And that makes

him want to reach out to them and to despise them at the same time. The portraitist also compares himself to the barber, who is young, in his late twenties, and therefore still optimistic. Then there is the President's wife who was too old for his liking as he preferred "younger stock", just like the portraitist whom she had seduced and who pitied her. Before going mad, the chef's ex-wife stopped turning the bathroom light on not to see her ageing face, the beginnings of an old woman's whiskers. When her daughter refers to her eating, we are given the picture of dried food left around her mouth and on her eyebrow and in her hair, which conveys an image of reversion. Beauty in this sense is compared to power - when one is at the peak of power one usually looks down on others, but those who have more power are the ones who suffer more when power diminishes, while a "less attractive man has nothing to lose when he ages" (62).

In *Blood Kin*, things are never what they seem, and the whole story seems to develop around that idea, with the portraitist's wife the first to warn him about it. She knows what she is saying as making things seem what they are not is her job - as a food stylist, she controls and manipulates reality, related to the way she controls her husband. In a way, altering reality is also what the portraitist does in his job, as a portrait always involves many other elements which go behind what is supposedly real, such as the influence of the surrounding environment, and the feelings and subjectivity of the portraitist. On the other hand, the President is said to want to be painted as he is, with each new wrinkle showing his ageing, with no concealing of his physical appearance, as if he has nothing to hide. On the one hand, that might function as a way of showing his people that he also had to face problems, of revealing his "burden", and therefore as a way of ostracizing his alleged tiredness or worries: "He said having his picture painted was his only therapy" (3), and "[m]ade him feel like a king" (3). In this way, each portrait came to be seen as a way of showing his status and of increasing his self-esteem simultaneously. Furthermore, what one shows is only a part of what one is, and as the story develops, the reader is told about the many corrupt and violent actions taken under the President's name. Then there is the conflict between what one is told and what one realizes by oneself: that is what happens with the Chef's daughter, who reasons: "I find it difficult to reconcile tender stories that my

mother has told me about my father during my early childhood with my own later memories of his many betrayals" (122). The barber's brother's fiancée fought against the President's luxury and corruption, but she lived like a queen for a year, allowing herself all kinds of extravagant foods and luxury goods imported from overseas after she found money in the coat of someone related to the old regime and she did not tell anyone about it, not even her fiancé – the barber's brother - as "he would have told her to save the money, or to find the owner of the coat and somehow return it" (95). This clearly shows the difference between what one shows/claims in public and what one thinks/feels. Moreover being a portraitist, a chef or a barber is not apparently risky; they may even appear as innocent jobs. However, throughout the story, one realises those characters are not as innocent as one might think. They are all taken in and held prisoners, just like the President, after the coup took place. As Ceridwen Dovey explains to Peter Franklin in an interview in 2009, she "was more interested in nuanced and complicated ways of thinking about wrongdoing and evil and abuse and corruption - where we couldn't just blame the mad king but could begin to understand that the mad king is within every one of us" (Franklin). Moreover, she recognises that this specific interest relates to her own struggles to understand her relationship to South Africa as a white person who grew up there during apartheid. Although at the time too young to feel she could really be held responsible for what was happening, she could not avoid being included within the beneficiaries of the regime, "in particular beneficiaries who are unaware of the very fact that they are beneficiaries of a political regime" (Franklin).

The barber pretends not to know what the President had done to his brother, when his brother's fiancée states that she cannot believe he had the opportunity to kill the President and did not do it, did not act. When the President was taken prisoner at the portraitist's house, he knew what was happening, there were signs, but sometimes one simply does not want to see. The portraitist's wife called his name, but held the president's hand. His wife shares the President's wife's name and room. And as a prisoner, he is not to see his wife, who is eight months pregnant, until the baby is born. And when he sees and calls her from the window, he reasons she seems healthy and vigorous, but she looks at him "like a stranger, then she stood and walked away" (26). The

Commander tells him "Don't know what she saw in him" (50), but the portraitist does not seem to understand. Then he is released by the Commander whereas his wife goes on being in captivity, but he continues inventing excuses and blaming himself for the situation. Even the President's son, who is hiding, says he knows what she did while the portraitist says "what I did". So things are never exactly what they seem, and often one simply chooses not to know, not to see. Many people had chosen not to see the President's acts: "People are confused. Many had chosen not to know about the President's crimes" (39). Moreover many things were done in the President's name, but most people do not know or pretend not to know, just like the barber, who asks the portraitist "you knew this and kept working for him?" (54), pretending he had no knowledge of it. This situation may in a way be related to the one Melissa Steyn refers to, when she says that "[i]ncreasingly some white South Africans claim that they did not know what was happening during apartheid" (8); by then, oppression, segregation and unfair treatment were blatant, and although many people may claim not to have had anything to do with it, as Melissa Steyn stresses,

> the system of racial apartheid could not have been functional or sustained for over four decades without the active and passive cooperation of the white population – using separate entrances, enjoying whites only transport, beaches, restaurants and cinemas, paying subminimum wages to black employees employed only for menial labour, educating only white children in the schools their children also attended, enjoying the security of curfews, serving in the army and, of course, participating in discourses that justified the status quo. (8)

That undeniable situation has inevitably led to much resentment and suspicion, in an already highly divided society, which to a certain extent seems to be related to two key ideas: the need to expose and the demand for proof. In fact, on the one hand, there seems to be the need to unveil the crimes previously committed: the portraitist reasons "I get a sudden glimpse into what it must be like for the Commander, with people not knowing anything, not knowing what was done in the President's name" (54), and he feels the need to inform the barber about the President's crimes. On the other hand, there seems to be the tendency for people not to believe what they are told without

evidence, without a proof that might assure them that a specific fact is real: when the portraitist tells the barber that he was told about the President's crimes by the Commander, the barber asks him "And you believe him? How do you know he's telling the truth?" (55). The need to show evidence is also one of the reasons why the Commander feels the need to distribute the photographs of mangled people, the proof of the President's terrible acts, throughout the city: "The photographs have been distributed throughout the city, blown up into macabre billboard posters, a decision I didn't agree with. My husband [the Commander] says that now nobody has an excuse not to know" (94).

In South Africa, after the end of apartheid and thanks to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, anybody who felt they had been a victim of violence could come forward and be heard. Those who had been responsible for acts of violence could also give testimony and request amnesty from prosecution. Intended to contribute to the aim of promoting national unity, the commission was therefore meant to be a useful tool in the process of bringing South Africans together. Terry Bell says that "unity became the watchword, reconciliation the means" (285). However, he also points out that the forthcoming "Government of National Unity … drew together, on the basis of equal responsibility, and apparent joint culpability, the authors and administrators of apartheid and the leaders of the anti-racist opposition" (285) and, in this respect, Neil Southern highlights that

> the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, while arguably better than no process at all, was limited and in fact even divisive - many within the ANC were unhappy with the lumping together of what they considered to be the moral legitimacy underpinning the political violence of the liberation movement with the racially motivated violence of the state. (412)

In *Blood Kin*, there are the crimes committed by the President or in the President's name, and there is all the violence perpetrated by those who oppose him and want to impose a new order: "[The Commander] was excited, this was what he'd been waiting for: reclaiming space, in the name of freedom" (92). Furthermore, it is somehow difficult for those who have been fighting against oppression to accept they may end up being seen as not very different from those who preceded them:

> I'm disappointed regardless; I had imagined, I supposed, that we would be welcomed like homecoming heroes, feted and applauded, and have roses flung at our vehicle. But still nobody will believe what the President did, and even if they do, the rumours will soon fly that we will do no better. (93)

Bearing in mind South African society during apartheid, Melissa Steyn quotes B. Applebaum to say that "whites have the most to gain from remaining ignorant and are more likely to display a 'passion for ignorance' rather than engage with the 'difficult knowledge' of complicity in systemic injustice" (12). In addition, Melissa Steyn's reference to ignorance as "an essential part of human relations, culture and organizations" (9) seems particularly interesting. If for white people, ignorance may have functioned as a means of protection, for it functioned as a tool not to feel responsible; for black people, ignorance may have been a way of avoiding greater distress, as Melissa Steyn explains it.

> [P]eople simply accept their lot, the formative broader social, political and economic dynamics rendered invisible at the level of ordinary, daily life. Such ignorance of the relationship between white privilege and black subjugation may have the function of defending the oppressed from painful consciousness and political choice, especially in contexts where extreme disempowerment is pervasive, thus producing subjectivities shaped within conditions of learned helplessness. (18-19)

In a way, as the notion of "ignorance" comes to be understood, not as a simple lack of knowledge, but as a sometimes conscious and sometimes unconscious choice, it may also be linked to the key idea in *Blood Kin* that things are never what they seem, and related to this key idea is the undeniable and unavoidable fact of the complexity of human beings and of human relations, and that idea is clearly portrayed in the way the characters feel, behave and react in *Blood Kin*. People never say the whole truth; even the physical reality of a person is not a straightforward idea: we are given the image of the Commander's beauty as being asymmetrical. His profile seen from opposite sides would be different. You can never know the whole truth: the chef's daughter reinforces the issue when she refers to the mirrors, which give her different images of herself. One only gets versions, never having a complete image of reality.

Moreover, human beings often react out of fear. The portraitist's wife's mother was afraid that her daughter might not like her and she decided not to like her own daughter: that way she would not face rejection. Asked whether she is in love with the Commander, the Commander's wife – his barber's brother's ex-fiancée - says she is afraid of him, that she has been afraid of him for some time, that she was even afraid of him before the coup. He has turned out to be like the President: "I had not seen the President's face up close until he was captured and put in a room in the Summer Residence, and when I saw him for the first time I saw my husband as he will be when he is an old man: haggard, greedy, lustful" (147). She concludes he is a "zealot about power" (147). The chef later gets what he wants, because he knows about the Commander's wife's relationship with the barber and she is afraid that he might tell the Commander. There is also the idea of loss: the barber's brother's fiancée, who lost her parents when she was still a child, the chef's daughter, who could not count on her parents when they had dinner guests, the portraitist's wife's mother, who would fill the house with invaluable artwork and priceless furniture regardless of having a little child in the house: "Parents put strange pressures on their children" (122).

These feelings of fear and loss can be said to have been intrinsic to South Africans throughout history: there was colonisation, which as Simon Gikandi states, meant not only the loss of authority, but also a loss of "agency and free will" (56); there came apartheid, which implied for most of the population the loss of many rights and opportunities; there was the imposition of a dominating so-called superior culture which signified the loss of traditional values, ancient beliefs and ways of being. With respect to fear, it is intimately related to an oppressive regime such as that of apartheid. The experience of living under oppression is well described by Marilyn Frye, when she states that

> The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one's life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict and penalize motion in any direction. It is the experience of being caged in: all avenues, in every direction, are blocked or booby trapped. (85)

Fear did not work only for black people; as Gillian Straker points out, "[w]hites who treated Black people as equals … were called insulting names … and were threatened with ostracism in order to intimidate and shame them into restoring the 'natural order'" (646). Nowadays as mentioned by Lawrence Hamilton "the persistent high levels of material inequality make the wealthy … often plagued by high levels of fear regarding their own and their family's health, safety and security" (359). He concludes that "[i]t is not for nothing that many people in South Africa often speak about how important it is to be 'free from fear'" (359).

Blood Kin is also about how people change. The barber's brother's fiancée who, only months after he had been buried, wondered how she had put up with fish scales and fish-oil scent in her bed; who feels disgust for her husband (the Commander) for whose hands she used to crave; who reasons how long it will be until the moment she will wonder how she could ever touch the barber. Watching one's own desire forms a continuum with watching others desire what you have got: the Commander likes to watch the chef desiring his wife, for example. There is also a connection between pleasure and pain, described in the way the President acted with women, although this also raises the question of violence against women, given that he liked to hurt women. The issue is also present in the relationship between the chef's daughter and her lover, the President's son. The chef likes to inflict pain; his daughter has been trained to endure and she has found out that sex can either be fun, pleasure or a tool of manipulation. The President was watched by his son without realising it. Behind power, there are always "earthly trappings" (155), something the chef's daughter has always liked to see. She ends up watching her father and the Commander's wife in the bathroom. The barber, who had had so many opportunities to carry out his aim with the former President, suddenly takes the step with the Commander and what makes him step forward are the six new wounds he sees on the inside of the Commander's wife's left arm: identical to the scars on her right arm. He concludes "they are all the same, these men, and it is best to nip them in the bud" (175).

All the characters in *Blood Kin* seem to be egocentric: the portraitist who is proud of his art and who seems to think he does not need to establish relations with other people besides those who are honoured to be his audience; he

wants to believe he is responsible for his wife's being kept in captivity; the barber who had not paid attention to his own brother's disappearance for he was too focused on himself; the chef whose daughter describes him as a man "utterly committed to one man alone: himself" (100). The three characters – the portraitist, the barber and the chef - are kept together, but each loses himself in his own thoughts, and does not want to know about the others' lives. The portraitist is afraid of being left out after the baby's birth. The portraitist's wife identifies one's thinking about oneself only – self-devotion - as "the only true freedom" (105). This egocentricity eventually leads to indifference towards others' feelings. The chef tells the reader about his beauty, how it made people around him feel and how he himself felt in relation to the others, namely to women, whom he treated as "stations on a radio" (61). Now he is simply left behind by the younger barber. So even after "what she [the Commander's wife] let [him] do to her in their bathroom" (181), he told the Commander about the barber and his wife. And the Commander made sure they were caught and the chef "gave particular instructions for them to be killed in just the fashion his brother was" (181). He says he likes the "symmetry of it", which is ironic if we think about all the symmetry in the barber's things. The chef cannot figure out why the barber and the Commander's wife left through the front door if they knew about the Commander's plan to capture him. And then there is the smooth transition in which the chef becomes the new ruler.

Bearing in mind the question of gender and the role women and men play in society, on the one hand, in *Blood Kin* women seem to acquire an unquestionable importance, as after the first part, in which the reader is given the President's barber, portraitist and chef's view of the occurring events, they assume the function of narrators in the second part of the novel, thus being able to convey their insight on the events; on the other hand, they are also shown as victims of the way the President or the Chef treat them. Moreover, although they somehow present themselves to a certain extent as manipulators - "My husband is outside the door again, waiting for me … The guard unlocks the door and once again my husband rushes inside like a puppy" (133) - throughout the novel, there are different references to violence against women. Almost at the end, the barber realizes violence goes on, when he notices the Commander's wife's new injuries:

> I watch her hands as they search, so delicate, so assured. And then I see them: six new wounds on the inside of her left arm, raw and fresh, identical to the scars on her right, a sick symmetry of pain. The circles of flesh are raised and blistered. In places the wet scab has split and released clear liquid. She has not dressed them – they are unbandaged, untended, infected. (174)

To a certain extent, this relates to the contradictory realities of contemporary South Africa mentioned by Ronit Frenkel: on the one hand, women seem to play an increasingly important contribution to the "new" South Africa, by having a voice, particularly in Parliament, but on the other hand South Africa still has to deal with one of the highest levels of rape and violence against women in the world. Ronit Frenkel states that these

> contradictory indicators highlight the particularity of South Africa's past, as well as the continuities between the apartheid and post-apartheid periods. While women's struggles were subordinated to the larger anti-apartheid struggle out of the necessities of a nationalist agenda, in a post-apartheid context, the residue of these modes and repertoires of operation coupled with the patriarchal nature of apartheid, has resulted in ambiguous gender positionings that are highlighted by such polarised statistics – where women are clearly both empowered and victimised, seen and unseen, included and excluded in different ways. (1-2)

Being given the opportunity to play the role of narrators, of having their own voice, the women in *Blood Kin* seem to get a right which South African women were not allowed for a long time, during the colonial and apartheid periods. As Ronit Frenkel puts it, women tended to be "excluded from official accounts by both their male counterparts and western constructions" (2). Being first-person narrators in the second part of the novel, they are able to give their view of events, their inner feelings and thoughts, which often differ from what they show and let those around them think. The use of different narrators in the novel, all of them first person narrators, not only seems to strengthen the idea of egocentricity which characterizes each and every one of the characters, but it also contributes to completing the puzzle of their relationships. Men, usually seen as controllers, are also deceived and controlled; women, generally expected to be motherly, can reveal their insensitivity: "I am tired of the burden

of bearing another human being, the enforced earnestness of impending motherhood" (159).

Blood Kin, a debut novel, which is said to be a fable of the arrogance of power by J. M. Coetzee (back cover), can be seen as a frightening portrait of reality, applied to different societies, especially to those which are divided, like South African society, a society in which people have now to redefine themselves. As Luc Renders states, "not only the whites, but also the blacks have to reinvent themselves and their past" (123). Thus this search for one's identity, for one's place in society, and for the right to feel part of one's country, may paradoxically even explain the way in which *Blood Kin* is written, with no references to time or place, dealing with power politics and inter-personal morality. Nadine Gordimer, when referring to the intimate relationship between fiction, morals and politics, states that "[f]iction's morality lies in taking the freedom to explore and examine contemporary morals, including moral systems such as religions, with unafraid honesty". (117). In this particular situation, the question is not religious, but mainly political and social. Nadine Gordimer also refers to the fact that the white minority had "accepted the lie that apartheid was both divinely decreed and secularly just" (119), and then when apartheid came to end, they had to deal with the personal and social consequences of having accepted that lie.

When referring to new South African art, Albie Sachs famously states that as far as themes are concerned, "the only conflict permitted is that between the old and the new, as if there were only bad in the past and only good in the future" (132). In a way, *Blood Kin* seems to want to show that in each person, situation or reality, there is the good and the bad; that by changing the elements in a situation, one cannot eradicate the bad and create the good by decree. Reality and human nature are much more complex. In a way, *Blood Kin* also seems to draw people's attention to the caustic effects of power, how it changes and affects people. It may even be a way to reach what Zoë Wicomb refers to as "an awareness not only of power, but of the equivocal, the ambiguous, and the ironic which is always embedded in power" (182).

Ceridwen Dovey also explains the void of cultural and geographical markers as a way of avoiding feeling like a fraud (Franklin), as she had just moved to Cape Town when she started writing *Blood Kin* and had lived outside

of South Africa for ten years. Nevertheless, if during apartheid, and according to anthropologist Mahmoud Mamdani, cited by Ceridwen Dovey when interviewed (Franklin), there were three categories - the victims, the perpetrators and the beneficiaries of an abusive political system - in *Blood Kin* those three categories are portrayed in the characters that perpetrate the terror, those that really believe things should change and suffer the consequences, and those that benefit from the situation often unaware of that very fact, or at least claiming they are unaware. During apartheid the beneficiaries were all those whites who, as Gillian Straker states, "simply accepted the privileges that accrued to [them] as "first-class" citizens, an acceptance that was in [their] self-interest" (646).

Blood Kin may relate to South African society in a different way to the other novels dealt with, which is not unexpected as its author also has a particular relation to her country on account of her ethnicity. However this novel also comes to depict many of the problems and situations present-day South Africa has to deal with, one of them being the unavoidable idea that the end of apartheid did not mean the end of division, the disappearance of all problems. Indeed South African society still has many different problems, at different levels, for violence and unfair treatment have not simply vanished. Some major obstacles might have been overcome, but certain types of problems have resurfaced in other forms due to the complexity of human beings and the nature of power.

CONCLUSION

One of the most enriching and in-depth ways of getting an insight into a society is through literature, which tends to articulate the values, the struggles, the ideas, the contradictions and the structural orders within that society. As Melissa Stein states, "[t]he hearings of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, for example, did not reveal how ordinary people experienced the quotidian life of apartheid; how they perpetuated, enjoyed, suffered and resisted the system" (9). Through literature, it is possible to envisage the everyday conflicts, the intricate feelings and reactions and the many lasting conscious and unconscious consequences those actions have had on the South African people. As Ngugi wa Thiong'O sums up, "[t]he writer as a human being is a product of history, of time and space" (477). *Coconut*, *Blood Kin* and Pla*ying in the Light* are undoubtedly very different novels, written by writers whose focus and central ideas clearly diverge, but despite the many differences in the text (both in content and in style), there are key ideas which are common to the three writers and one of these relates to human beings, their often paradoxical nature and their eagerness for power. The idea that things are not exactly what they seem is also present in all three novels.

Throughout the three novels the image is articulated of a society which still has to face many problems derived from its past and present realities. Both Ayanda in *Coconut* and Brenda in *Playing in the Light* refer to the conspicuous long-lasting inequalities in South African society. These and associated deep-rooted feelings are still responsible for conscious or unconscious difficulties in interacting, building trust, accepting oneself and others, defining one's identity as a person from a particular ethnicity, religion, or group, and ultimately as a South African. As Juliana Makuchi points out, "identity must be constantly constructed in the context of other identities, always shifting depending on whom one encounters" (33), and in South Africa not only are there many different cultures co-inhabiting, but history has also hampered the encounter in many different ways. F. Abiola Irele refers to the work of Southern African writers as "having an urgent moral preoccupation with the human drama" (8), that resulted from the race question and policy of apartheid. As might be expected, such issues are unavoidably present in all three novels.

Things were not to be expected to be easy in a country which has undergone so many years of divisions and persecutions, in which a few benefited while many were victims. That reality has led to unavoidable consequences. As Luc Renders says, "[n]ot only the victims, but also the perpetrators of atrocities during the apartheid years are not able to shake off the ghosts of the past" (128). Then there are also those who claim that they had nothing to do it, that they were not responsible. Melissa Steyn refers to that situation when she says that

> Increasingly some white South Africans claim that they did not know what was happening during apartheid; … and even that it was not as bad for black people during apartheid as it is for white South Africans in postapartheid South Africa. (8)

Accordingly there seems to be the idea that former victims have become perpetrators, which is one of the ideas in *Blood Kin*: the commander and his followers slowly take on violence. This idea, mentioned by Phyllis Taoua in "The postcolonial condition" (211), is to be another obstacle to building a new South Africa. In *Playing in the Light* Marion is one of those who are not "perpetrators", but who somehow contribute to the situation by ignoring it: "Somehow she bears the shame of the perpetrators; somehow she, who has never had anything to do with politics, has been branded by this business; somehow, her parentlessness has bonded her with the brigadiers" (75). On the other hand, those South Africans claiming no direct relation with previous crimes, either as victims or as direct perpetrators, nevertheless feel associated with included within one of these groups, and accordingly realise they cannot simply stand on the fence. In this sense, it is particularly interesting the note that Ceridwen Dovey feels that she would have been an impostor if she had set *Blood Kin* in South Africa as, when she started writing, she had been living abroad. Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* is clearly set in South Africa, however, regardless of her having been exiled for twenty years. Moreover, Zoë Wicomb noted in an interview published in 2002 that "writing about South Africa is arguably a way of coping with absence and longing and a need to belong'' (Meyer and Olver: 182). This is probably related to the two authors' relationships with their identities in a post-apartheid South Africa.

The question of race, of identity, did not and could not simply be

expected to disappear. There's an idea of a prevailing feeling of lack of belonging, of loneliness, and also of suspicion pervading the three novels. In the same way Ofilwe's house in *Coconut* is empty, emptiness seems to be the word to describe Marion's life as she struggles to rediscover herself, in *Playing in the Light*. In the same way Fikile in *Coconut*, who does not want to identify with the neighbourhood, seems to fail in building a home, a place where she can feel safe, so does Marion, as Minesh Dass puts it, with her "many (failed) attempts to construct a safe, comfortable home for herself" (137): she has nightmares in her apartment; unwelcoming memories and visions haunt her and she travels to England after finding out about her parents' playing whiteness, as if that discovery led to a feeling of being inauthentically displaced.

Then, there is the question of eagerness for power, which is connected one way or another with lying, torture, sexual abuse, and violence in general. For example, Fikile in *Coconut* wants to be white, rich and happy, and does everything in her power to pursue that dream, whereas, in *Blood Kin*, the Commander ends up leading the same life the President used to. In P*laying in the Light*, Helen accepts abuse to get new documents to prove she is white. In this search for power, speaking English seems to be the key for acceptance. Fikile of *Coconut* reminds of Helen in *Playing in the Light*, in the sense that she wants to reinvent herself, by creating a new name, a new background, a new person, something that Helen thought she had achieved. That change, however, had consequences for her and for all those around her. In *Coconut*, Ofilwe compares Fikile to the traitor pear who wants to be an apple; the same idea could be applied to Helen, from *Playing in the light*. This story of the traitor pear, which is said to be one of the stories old Virginia used to tell Tshepo, seems to represent an old oral African narrative pattern, full of symbolism, in a way opposed to the "Western discourse and its privileging of the written" (256), referred to by Harry Garuba. To a certain extent, it approaches the desire mentioned by Irele to praise African tradition and inheritance in opposition to what colonialism and the consequent contact with the Western culture brought.

Ofilwe and Tshepo's feelings and doubts are the same as those many immigrants' children now have to face all over the world: they are fighting to rediscover themselves in a somehow different neighbourhood, with which they

do not identify. In a way, the violence found in many cosmopolitan cities is the violence portrayed in these novels. In *Blood Kin* there is the violence in relationships, and in politics; the violence of one regime which is replaced by the violence of another. *Coconut* and *Playing in the Light* portray a multiethnic society, in which violence is a constant threat.

There are also other worries being expressed in the three novels under analysis, such as, for instance the worry that by getting educated, one may drift away from traditional values and family, one may get snobbish. Brenda's sister in *Playing in the Light* thinks she is snobbish about their mother while in *Coconut*, Gogo, Fikile's grandmother, accuses her of being a snob. This probably has to do with the idea that traditional principles are undermined by the values of the dominant culture connected with Western society. As Charles Taylor states, with the politics of equal dignity, somehow people are forced "into a homogeneous mold" (43) that is not neutral, for it is a reflection of the dominant culture, with which they may not identify.

Another interesting image in the three novels is the image of the bed, which comes to represent one's independence and privacy, one's space. In *Coconut*, Fikile, who sleeps on the floor so as not to share the single bed with her uncle, dreams about "a king-sized bed with a solid-wood headboard dressed in decorative ironwork and red leather" (116). In *Playing in the Light*, Brenda seems to experience the feeling of personal achievement when she is able to buy her new single bed. Moreover, Marion's "four-poster bed" (2) is regarded by her as a symbol of her achievements, although it somehow loses its meaning, as the character unfolds her family's background and undergoes new and previously unknown feelings. As for *Blood Kin*, the bed seems to symbolize a lack of privacy and to function as a tool of dominance and control, for beds are shared, willingly or not, and are used as an instrument of manipulation, to achieve what one wants, to show one's control over others.

At the end of *Coconut*, one reads "Sometimes what you think is your greatest obstacle turns out to be the least, and what you thought would be easy enough to conquer troubles you still" (191). That statement seems to apply to different ideas conveyed in the three novels. There are those who can finally afford a new lifestyle in a new neighbourhood, like Ofilwe's family in *Coconut*, or who reinvent a new identity for themselves like Helen in *Playing in the Light,*

thus overcoming great obstacles and evincing great achievements but who somehow end up being troubled by new and unexpected difficulties. On the other hand, the statement in *Coconut* could also apply ultimately to South Africa's achievement of democracy, for this was the removal of what might have been seen as one of the greatest obstacles to justice and freedom. What seem to have been ignored however are the inevitable consequences that apartheid has left in people's minds and feelings, which are different for white and non-white South Africans, just as were different the experiences of "colonization … among both white and non-white (post)colonials" (19), as pointed out by Juliana Makuchi. Those different experiences and their effects, those different backgrounds, reflect themselves in the different ways of writing and of approaching topics, as far as the writers of *Coconut*, *Blood Kin* and *Playing in the Light* are concerned. As Neil Southern points out, there are important ethnic differences between whites and Africans and although they are not nationally divided, "nation-building around a shared South African identity is not unproblematic" (400).

Despite the understandable and expected differences, Kopano Matlwa, Ceridwen Dovey and Zoë Wicomb give us images of a shattered South African society in search of itself and of its identities, drawing one's attention to the many different current realities there. There seem to be different conflicts going on at different levels in a society that has long undergone divisions: the conflict between what is traditional and what is the result of western influence, between the past and the present and between inner feelings and thoughts and one's visible reactions and movements. Above all there seems to be the question of national identity, of what it means to be a South African, for history and circumstances have led to too many conflicts for this to be at all clear. In *Coconut*, while Ofilwe realizes she and her family do not fit into their new place of living and are not exactly accepted there, her brother Tshepo faces the conflict between what he sees as true and traditional and what he already knows. Charles Lindholm states that "[p]ersons are authentic if they are true to their roots" (2), and that is something Tshepo feels does not happen in his life, which he would like to express the value and dignity that he thinks what he believes to be his traditional culture deserves. By trying to fit in with the dominant culture, Ofilwe ends up feeling untrue to herself or, in Charles

Lindholm's words, "without a genuine culture or heritage to call [her] own" (129). In turn, Fikile in *Coconut* and Helen in *Playing in the Light* deal with the conflict between ethnic background and the life they dream of, which is the very denial of their identity. Marion's father seems to get lost in the new identity created by his wife, and if at the beginning Marion criticizes all the "fuss about authenticity" (40) in the new South Africa, she ends up having her world shaken by the lack of truth in her past and authenticity in her life. Therefore none of these characters seem to identify with, to feel they belong to the place where they are and strive to identify themselves with, and that leads to different conflicts on the inside and on the outside. As for *Blood Kin*, the concerns about identity are also clear and there is a focus on what might be called primeval human responses, feelings and actions, as on the type of things that drive them to act. There is abuse of power, deception, lack of interaction, in a generally negative idea of society, which can nevertheless be related to South African history, both the apartheid and the post-apartheid periods.

At a different level and as is said about the writers analysed in "Gender in African Women's Writing", these writers may have also "used their writing as a weapon to delve into the African woman question" (15). In fact, there is the question of betrayal, of sexual abuse and of violence, in Ofilwe's father's cheating on her mother, in Fikile's uncle's abuses, in *Coconut;* or in the chef or the president's use of women in *Blood Kin*. Nonetheless one cannot say women are only portrayed as victims in these novels, for they are also shown as manipulators: for example, the chef's daughter or the portraitist's wife in *Blood Kin*, who control their partners, or Helen in *Playing in the Light*, who takes control over the whole situation of redefining her family as white. Juliana Makuchi points out that "African critics now generally agree that African women writers offer more dynamic representations of women than the images of subordination often presented by their male counterparts" (6), and in none of these three novels does there seem to be an image of passive subordination. Each female character seems to have the power and will to impose herself as an active player in the events. Even Gemina, Ofilwe's mother, who comes from lowly origins, is cheated on and who gives up working as a nurse to stay at home raising her children, seems to impose herself in the way she is described by Ofilwe, as someone who "spins all types of heads wherever she goes" (53).

One might say the three novels under analysis are three different ways of dealing with the past – related to the different realities lived by their authors. Moreover, they articulate their writers' worries as South African citizens. Ceridwen Dovey, Kopano Matlwa and Zoe Wicomb are three different voices, that more or less directly, intentionally or unconsciously, show us how they have come to understand the world, giving us different perspectives on society, showing their concerns, not only in terms of a particular society as a whole, but also as women writers in particular. Their vision of the world could not have been expected to be the same, for Zoë Wicomb was born in a different decade and Ceridwen Dovey belongs to a different ethnic group. In a way, the three novels seem to convey a range of problems and obstacles from different angles which together shed much light on contemporary South African society. The diverse and longstanding problems and obstacles depicted, whether interior or exterior, are still felt to restrain one's right to being and feeling equal and unique.

There are clear differences between *Blood Kin* and Coconut / P*laying in the Light*, which are directly related to the authors' choice of narrative form. To a certain extent, one might even feel in Ceridwen Dovey's *Blood Kin*'s lack of temporal and special references a certain kind of "fear", or at least restraint, in assuming herself as entitled to have a voice in her country's destiny. Indeed whereas the coloured writers openly set their novels in South Africa, addressing the issues of violence, of xenophobia, of discrimination, of prejudice, unequal treatment, abuse, ethnicities and identities, Ceridwen Dovey seems to approach the question of South Africa's current problems from another perspective, focussing on human beings' eagerness for power, suspicion, and their need to justify actions by showing proofs of past terrors. In *Women Writing Africa, the Southern Region* one may read that black women have "been silenced much more than white women" (2), and that may also explain why there seems to be a reversal now with Kopano Matlwa and Zoe Wicomb's voices apparently shouting louder in their assertion as South Africans.

Raymond Suttner refers to the current position on Africanism that proclaims non-racialism as one of the goals of the new South Africa, thus denying the importance of "race", or suggesting that race does not matter, and using Nelson Mandela's words: 'We have no Whites; we have no Blacks.

We only have South Africans'. Nonetheless as Raymond Suttner also points out

> Not being a "race" does not say what one is.... There is some similarity to the apartheid category of "Non-White", which merely said that one was not what was desirable, namely, white. Here one is saying one is not what is "undesirable". (523)

In a country where ethnicity and colour have so long established and played such a determining role in one's life, it seems however naïve to believe one can simply erase race, origins and history. As Raymond Suttner also states, the assertion that all peoples in the country are South Africans can be a step towards "erasure", but he also stresses the important factor that there is a difference between being an African who never carried a pass, and one who did (523). The past determines the present just as this will determine the future. There have been social, economic and political divisions, which are difficult to overcome, to ignore or to erase. That is the idea pointed out by Ailsa Winton, when referring to urban hostility:

> post-apartheid political violence ... is broadly the result of ongoing political divisions, a failure to confront past wartime divisions and their legacy, and the corruption and politicization of security services and the judicial system. (169)

Daniel Herwitz stresses that "A goal of its social transformation is to enhance levels of communication, thus allowing human diversity to become an object of acknowledgment and reasonable dissensus to become part of the political process" (49). However he also notes that "for those goals to be achieved, its people must become more alike through processes of democratization and globalization" (49), and that seems to be a difficult route to follow in a country in which people have endured a long struggle for their identity, against colonialism, which, as Peter Caterall states, "involved a form of globalisation" (331) and against internal oppression as well. Despite all the obstacles, South Africa cannot give up its dream of becoming a united and fair country. As Lawrence Hamilton States,

> There is little doubt that South Africa has come a very long way since the release of Mandela and the overthrow of apartheid. It has liberated its people from the shackles of a regime based on racial segregation,

> domination and oppression, it has successfully consolidated representative democracy, the rule of law is upheld by an independent judiciary and a highly progressive and laudable constitution, and it has (in the main) stabilized and grown its economy. (357)

Statistics and everyday news show that it has not been successful in tackling other problems, such as those of poverty and unemployment or inequality. Hamilton describes South Africa as "one of the most unequal societies on earth" (358) and that has to do with the difficulties in breaking the cycles of poverty-lack of education-lack of opportunities and extreme wealth-education-power, both leading to an increase in violence and crime. That comes to mean that South Africa has not been able to fulfil its ambitious dream yet. That does not mean it should stop dreaming or fighting to be a better country. South Africans certainly have a difficult task, for not only do they have to struggle to overcome problems related to inequalities and different ethnicities, they also have to exorcise many ghosts coming from the past. As with all dreams, there are parts in the South African dream which may be impossible to attain due to human beings' nature (as *Blood Kin* seems to imply), but only by dreaming can problems be overcome. What is achieved may not exactly have the contours of what has been dreamt of, but it is through those experiences that one can make things better.

Each of the novels under analysis is a way of dealing with the world around, with the problems affecting South African society. They are somehow an echo of the reality perceived by each of the writers, and an attempt to contribute to a better South Africa. Literature can be an intense way of addressing problems and to a certain extent of bringing them to light, so that they can be tackled not only by the individual, but also by society as a whole. Nadine Gordimer quotes Per Wästberg to say that "the imaginative transformations of fiction … help people understand their own natures and know they are not powerless" (121), and so, as she concludes, "[e]very work of art is liberating" (121).

For years people were told that white was desirable and that black was ugly, for years people have depreciated all the non-white ethnicities; for years non-white ethnicities seem to have tended to devalue themselves. When democracy arrived, to a certain extent things tended to be reversed and the

white ethnicity tended to be overshadowed. Albie Sachs makes an important point when he says

> white is beautiful … The cultural input from the white communities can be rich and valuable… they (we) are fighting for their own rights, the rights to be free citizens of a free country, and to enjoy and take pride in the culture of the whole country. … They seek to be ordinary citizens of an ordinary country, proud to be part of South Africa, proud to be part of Africa, proud to be part of the world. Only in certain monastic orders is self-flagellation the means to achieve liberation. (136-137)

Perhaps there is still "self-flagellation", or there is still too much resentment and suspicion. Perhaps there are still too many inequalities or divisions or perhaps there are conflicts between what one might understand as traditional and what one thinks is the result of the encounter with the white communities and the so-called western culture. Carlotta von Maltzan states that

> The postcolonial conflict revolves around the need to belong or to identify with the west and all its manifestations including globalisation and/or modernity, and the inclination to assert a unique African cultural identity not defined or grounded by colonisation including all its present day manifestations such as globalisation and modernity. (116)

Perhaps there is simply the difficulty in accepting that everyone can be valuable and rich and important in a society. But the realization of this very simple idea, which could be the very first step towards a more peaceful world, seems to be somehow a hard thing to accomplish, for it implies knowledge and acceptance of one's identity and value, recognition by others and one's right to have a say. *Coconut*, *Blood Kin* and *Playing in the Light* show that none of these things is as easy as one might think. On the contrary, they prove to be very difficult. However, they cannot be perceived as impossible, as that would mean giving up the dream of improving the world.

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