

THE HAVES AND HAVE-NOTS IN THE FAMILY: INTRA-CLASSISM IN ZOË WICOMB'S *OCTOBER*¹

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Abstract: Zoë Wicomb's penultimate novel, *October* (2014), tells the story of fifty-two-year-old Mercia Murray, a woman who has lived in Scotland for twenty-five years. The novel mainly revolves around the concepts of homemaking, exile, return and (non)belonging. While in other Wicomb works the characters come from different families or backgrounds, most of *October*'s relationships are intra-familial, making class inequality the primary factor to distinguish the different characters. In this sense, Wicomb proves in *October* how the opportunities the characters are given throughout their lives can lead to almost opposite outcomes, even if they come from the same or a very similar background. Drawing on Bourdieu, Seekings and Wright's theories on social class, this article aims to explore the classist attitudes displayed by the different characters, with particular focus on Mercia Murray. Postcolonial theorists such as Jacob Dlamini, Bhabha or Spivak – among others – will be used to support how Mercia's classism contrasts the national preoccupation with race in post-Apartheid South Africa. Furthermore, it will be seen how class is an essential factor in the increase for upward mobility – a concept that has not been properly studied in postcolonial literature since it has been fundamentally focused on how race determines the individual position in society. Through the small sample of South African society Wicomb presents, this paper will focus on the concept of class, as it will also explore the inferiority complex and mimicry attitudes attached to less socio-economically developed individuals.

Keywords: Postcolonial literature; South Africa; class; colouredness; Zoë Wicomb

TENER O NO TENER EN LA FAMILIA: INTRA-CLASISMO EN LA NOVELA DE ZOË WICOMB *OCTOBER*

Resumen: La penúltima novela de Zoë Wicomb, *October* (2014), narra la historia de Mercia Murray, una mujer de cincuenta y dos años que ha vivido en Escocia durante veinticinco años. La novela gira principalmente en torno a los conceptos de construcción del hogar, exilio, retorno y (no)pertenencia. Mientras que en otras obras de Wicomb los personajes provienen de diferentes familias o contextos, la mayoría de las relaciones en *October* son intrafamiliares, lo que convierte la desigualdad de clase en el principal

¹ Recommended Citation: Gutiérrez-González, Laura. "The Haves and Have-nots in the Family: Intra-Classism in Zoë Wicomb's *October*." *Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* 14, no. 1, 2026, pp. 1-17: <https://reunido.uniovi.es/index.php/jaclr/index>

diferenciador entre los personajes. En este sentido, Wicomb demuestra en su novela cómo las oportunidades que se les presentan a los personajes a lo largo de sus vidas pueden llevar a resultados casi opuestos, incluso cuando proceden del mismo origen social, o uno muy similar. Utilizando las teorías de Bourdieu, Seekings y Wright sobre la clase social, este artículo tiene como objetivo explorar las actitudes clasistas que manifiestan los distintos personajes, con especial atención a Mercia Murray. Otros investigadores poscoloniales como Jacob Dlamini, Bhabha o Spivak – entre otros – servirán para analizar cómo el clasismo de Mercia contrasta con la preocupación nacional por la cuestión racial en la Sudáfrica posterior al apartheid. Además, este artículo analiza cómo la clase es un factor esencial en el ascenso social – un concepto que no ha sido adecuadamente estudiado en la literatura poscolonial, al estar fundamentalmente centrada en cómo la raza determina la posición del individuo en la sociedad. A través de la pequeña muestra social sudafricana que Wicomb presenta, este artículo se centra en el concepto de clase y en las actitudes de complejo de inferioridad e imitación asociadas a los individuos con un menor desarrollo socioeconómico.

Palabras clave: Literatura poscolonial; Sudáfrica; clase; mestizaje; Zoë Wicomb

1. INTRODUCTION

Questions of race, belonging, and identity have long been central to South African literature and criticism, and Zoë Wicomb's fiction has frequently been read through these lenses. However, what marks the difference of this novel is the fact that it plays an important role for the analysis of classist attitudes. Zoë Wicomb's *October* tells the story of fifty-two-year-old Mercia Murray, a woman who has lived in Scotland for twenty-five years, "who has been left" (1) by Craig, her Scottish partner. Following her separation from Craig, Mercia receives a letter from her brother Jake, writing from Kliprand, South Africa, asking her to go back home (13-14), which is, in fact, the trigger of the whole story. *October* mainly revolves around the concepts of homemaking, exile, return, and (non)belonging, despite other subtle topics that shape the whole oeuvre of Wicomb, such as secrecy and social (de)constructions. This narrative provides the framework through which Wicomb explores not only national and diasporic identity, but also the less-examined dynamics of social class within a single family.

Set in post-apartheid South Africa, *October* reflects a historical moment characterised by both socio-political transformation and the persistence of structural inequality. In this sense, Wicomb proves in *October* how the opportunities the characters are given throughout their lives can shape almost opposite outcomes, even if they come from the same, or a very similar, background. The siblings Mercia and Jake accurately represent this class inequality, driven by their eagerness to achieve social upgrading, Mercia represents the strong character who leaves her family behind for a brighter future,

while Jake portrays the negative consequences of Apartheid: alcoholism, poverty and slackness. As Mercia notices, her and her brother's story "is from a different continent, a different hemisphere, a different kind of people" (12). Their almost opposite trajectories exemplify how social mobility generates not only material disparities but also emotional and symbolic forms of distance within the family.

Building upon the analysis of class dynamics within the Murrays, a different perspective arises with the other main character, Sylvie Willemse – Jake's wife. The Murray and the Willemse families were neighbours in the past, but despite sharing space, the Murrays were considered to be better educated, to have better hair and better blood (92). This means that the classist attitudes seen within the Murray family members can also be found outside the familial space. Together, these relationships allow Wicomb to present class not only as a purely economic category but as a relational and affective structure that shapes everyday practices, moral judgments, and forms of belonging.

This novel allows Wicomb to show the role class plays in South African society, only sometimes blurred by the racial issue, since the characters in this novel come from the same family, while in other Wicomb works, the characters come from very different social backgrounds. This article approaches the intra-familial hierarchy through Erik Olin Wright's concept of "mediated class locations," which enables an analysis of class differentiation within the same household (27). However, this approach has been challenged by other critics who have considered the dominant family member's class position to be the same for the whole household (Runciman 382). In the case of *October*, the family members of the Murray family do not share the same social status but almost opposite ones. This questions Runciman's analysis of social class in the household and opens a space for examining intra-familial class differentiation as a narrative and social phenomenon. Other critics, such as Goldthorpe, have attached this dominant individual to the male figure, which, again, would not work for this analysis, as it is Mercia, the novel's protagonist, who has the dominant income. Yet, despite the individuals' wealth, other factors such as behaviour, relations, or education that also shape the class categories (Bourdieu) will be considered to explore the classist attitudes of Mercia Murray.

The aim of this article is to examine *October* in terms of the representation of class as an intra-familial way of distinction, focusing on the ways in which social mobility produces hierarchy, distance, and morality within the family. Drawing on Wright's theory of class locations, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, and sociological studies of

mobility in South Africa (such as Seekings and Goldthorpe), this article argues that Wicomb uses the Murray family to dramatise how class is lived, performed, and negotiated at a micro-social level. While class has long been a central component of intersectional postcolonial analysis, often examined in relation to race and gender, this study contributes to existing scholarship by foregrounding intra-familial class relations as a narrative strategy through which post-apartheid inequality becomes emotionally legible. Methodologically, the article adopts a textual analysis of key episodes in *October*, interpreted through sociological and postcolonial theory. The discussion focuses on three interrelated dimensions: first, the reproduction of class habits through education and cultural practices; second, the psychological consequences of upward and downward mobility; and third, the results that access to higher economic positions provide and how this affects the individuals' sense of (non)belonging.

2. CLASS ANALYSIS

Although Mercia Murray, who considers herself to be in a “privileged position” (27), is the most overtly class-conscious character in *October*, classism is not restricted to her perspective. Other characters, such as Nicholas (Mercia’s father) or Sylvie (Jake’s wife), also display their classism throughout the whole novel. Rather than presenting class as a purely individual trait, Wicomb displays it as an intra-familial dynamic, negotiated through everyday practices, language, and relationships. This dynamic aligns with Wright’s vision of class in *Class Counts: Comparative Studies in Class Analysis* (1997) not only as an economic position but also as a set of social relations and power structures within specific contexts.

From the very beginning, Sylvie boasts about being raised under “a good zinc roof [in] Kiewiet Street” (6), in Roodepoort, a posh city near Johannesburg, known for its prime location and quality schools and medical facilities. This early reference situates Sylvie within a discourse of respectability that relates material infrastructure with moral and social worth. This relation can be associated with Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, where material conditions become markers of respectability and legitimacy. In fact, Sylvie, who married Jake for the good social position of the Murrays, does not see the point of “being married to a Murray who has sunk lower than the lowest farm laborer” (23). Furthermore, she justifies beating her child Nicky by ascribing it to the impoverished situation of the country; blaming the socio-economic scene instead of her educational

abilities: “there overseas where people still are decent, children may know how to behave . . . but here, in this godforsaken place, nothing other than a smack will keep a child on the straight and narrow” (30). This moment not only reveals Sylvie’s class anxiety but also her tendency to delegate her personal responsibility to the national decay. Wicomb thus links individual situations to broader structures of socio-economic frustration. Furthermore, Sylvie represents internalised inequality; that is to say, in Bourdieu’s terms, how this structural inequality allows the individual to normalise certain practices.

To have a better understanding of the Willemse family Wicomb provides the reader with a short description of Sylvie’s family and their class pretensions: “The Willemse sisters were respectable. . . . almost as snooty as the Murrays [but] they [did not] have such good hair, such good blood, so why they gave themselves airs and graces, no one knew” (92). Wicomb’s ironic voice – “no one knew” – represents the communal gossip that reinforces class boundaries. The Willemses’ failure to justify their self-importance reflects how social mobility is often constrained by collective disdain. Furthermore, by comparing them to the Murray’s status, the author presents the intra-class hierarchy within the coloured² community. This distinction complicates purely racial readings of post-apartheid identity by foregrounding class as a decisive social marker.

2.1. INTRA-CLASSISM

Classism in the novel is not exclusively exercised by elites but across the whole social hierarchy, reproduced even among those who are themselves marginalised. Sylvie’s family also displayed their classism towards other family members with a lower social position, because classism is not only displayed by the rich, but by anyone who has someone economically below them. This intra-class disdain highlights how internalised colonial hierarchies perpetuate themselves even among marginalised groups. Bhabha’s theory on mimicry, where he argues how individuals deny aspects of themselves by condemning others who mirror them, reinforcing a fragile sense of superiority (280), accurately represents Sylvie’s performance. In other words, the denial of the self allows

² Despite the connotation of the word “coloured” this article understands the term as “population group that emerged in the Cape in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries because of contact between Africans, Malaysians and Europeans. Despite partial European heritage [they were] subjected to most Apartheid legal restrictions” (Clark and Worger 13).

the individual to condemn others for what they have in common (colouredness or social position), proving in this way their social superiority.

On a previous visit, when Mercia arrives in Kliprand, Jake not only boasts about his new social position but also, aware of his sister's social position, seems surprised by Mercia's "plain skirt and T-shirt [and] scuffed flat shoes" (21). Jake assumes her clothes display her indifference towards her family: "Are we not good enough for you? For a proper hairdo and makeup? We're not plaasjapies³ anymore" (21). This reaction proves that, even with an apparent disinterest in class position, every individual aims to rise in the social hierarchy and aspires to respectability. Bourdieu's notion of "habitus" aligns with this reaction, as clothing functions as a marker of social position and belonging. As mentioned earlier, Mercia and Jake represent how each individual takes advantage of opportunities. Considering that they come from the same socio-economic background, one may wonder about the reasons that led Jake not to take advantage of his family position when, in the words of Driscoll, "all the evidence suggests that class remains the single most powerful determinant of life chances" (2). In fact, one of Wicomb's flashbacks shows the moment when Jake abandons his idea of social upgrading when talking about university and "those pathetic tales of a snot-nosed barefoot child with no schooling" (79). Jake's dismissal of "pathetic tales" of self-improvement exposes his awareness of structural limitations. Wright's argument that access to opportunities does not guarantee mobility aligns with Jake's cynicism about the recognition of the limits of meritocracy within post-apartheid South Africa.

Another important aspect, considering Jake's lack of concern for social class, is that he expects the classist individual (Mercia in this particular case) to perform her class position as seen, for instance, in the quotation above that deals with Mercia's clothing. Jake's prejudice against his sister recalls Seekings' analysis about how cohabitation affects the behaviour of dependent members and how class must be constantly enacted to be legitimate. Seekings considers it probably best "not to assume that adult men are always the dominant individual in the household, determining households' class position" (15). Wicomb's fiction provides a narrative in which such household negotiations become visible. In the absence of sociological data on "attitudes and behaviour *within* families or households in South Africa" (15 italics in the original), Wicomb illustrates these

³ This term refers to "farm boy."

dynamics vividly, showing how income inequity affects familial relations. This again reinforces Bourdieu's idea that class is not only possessed but performed.

Nicholas (who, after moving to Kliprand became "a first-class kind of man" (135)) gained that position due to his strangeness, "for strangers must be honored. He was an outsider and so necessarily better" (136). Here, being an outsider automatically positions an individual in a higher social position, whereas nowadays, migrants from other parts of Africa trying to find work in South Africa, or migrants trying to reach Europe are often positioned in a lower social category. In a colonial context, Aijaz Ahmad claims that "the outsider [is] seen as bearer of that Enlightenment rationality" (289). This may explain Nicholas's archaic perspective, but it does not align with the time this novel is set, as Ahmad's quotation refers to white outsiders during colonization. His disregard for Kliprand is continuously glimpsed through his classism: "those people don't wash their hands; one can't risk eating their food" (148). This exposes the deeply internalised class hierarchy that structures life in *October*. His generalization about "those people" reveals that classism is not simply an abstract social category but the usual perspective through which he interprets human worth.

This tension is evident when Mercia queries her father's criticism of the incongruous relation between poverty and cleanliness, but right after, she recalls her surprise about the rich not being clean. For Mercia, there is no connection between poverty and cleanliness. Instead, there is actually an inverse connection between wealth and cleanliness. This global dichotomy has been addressed by writers and scholars. George Orwell, for instance, deals with this issue in *The Road to Wigan Pier*,⁴ asserting that "the essential thing is that middle-class people believe that the working class are dirty. . . . and, what is worse, that they are somehow inherently dirty" (130). Orwell's work aligns with Mercia's classist prejudices that dichotomise rich/poor and clean/dirty. Wicomb's narrative shows how ingrained social assumptions about cleanliness both reflect and reinforce class hierarchies.

Mercia encapsulates most of the classist references in *October*. She lives in a "grand nineteenth-century Glasgow apartment, built by sugar and tobacco lords from the spoils of slavery. . . . with the marble fireplace and mantelpiece at the far end" (222-223).

⁴ Orwell's work is divided into two sections: the first one contains his sociological research on the working class in the north of England before World War II, while the second part narrates Orwell's working-class background and his political moral sense (Pettican 10).

When she arrives in Kliprand, she wonders about Jake's decision to stay there: "It puzzles her, Jake's retreat to Kliprand. They have always talked about it as a place to leave behind, so why has he stayed and taken this Kliprand girl as wife? Mercia corrects herself; she must not be unkind or snobbish" (29). There are two remarkable facts about Mercia's attitude: first, her awareness of her own classism and, secondly, how little she cares about being like that. On the other hand, she would not have conveyed so many classist comments. Thus, Mercia fits in what Wright calls "class *consciousness*: The subjective awareness people have of their class interests and the conditions for advancing them" (21) and imposes her interests above others. Her awareness about her position allows her not only to maintain that sense of superiority but also her relatives' internalization of their social status.

Mercia's attitude would also relate to the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) and how the Black high spheres enjoyed a good position in society, which remained out of reach of the rest of the black population. In fact, when Mercia "is embarrassed, critical of her own snobbery" (32). She paradoxically wonders: "what on earth is Mercia to make of these people who belong to her" (32). "These people" refers to Jake, Sylvie, and Nicky, but the fact that she uses the verb "belong" is nothing but striking and symbolises the class attitude that allows the individual to think of people as their belongings. She considers herself responsible for them for having money. Furthermore, when Nicky tears his trousers, Mercia and Sylvie discuss the possible solution and Sylvie explains to Mercia how she learnt to sew fashionable clothes because her family had no money, so "she doesn't buy that stuff about being poor" (130). For her part, Mercia displays once again her blindness to the social distance that exists between her and Sylvie by asserting that "patches these days are okay, ripped trousers twice as cool and not at all a sign of poverty . . . It makes no sense that people should want to pretend to be poor" (131). This perspective shows how privilege enables the socially higher individual to romanticise need or poverty, reinventing necessity into style. In fact, this idea has been analysed by various scholars. In *Planet of Slums*, Mike Davis argues that elites perceive poverty as something visually rich or aesthetic. bell hooks, on her part, claims that the socially and economically superior spheres turn marginality into a desirable, aesthetic experience. The irony in Mercia's comment lies in how poverty can be aestheticised or made fashionable, while for Sylvie it is a social constraint. Wicomb exposes the paradox of class performance through Mercia's defence of "faux-poor" fashion, another critique of class

privilege. Even in the more subtle conversations, Mercia is incapable of hiding her animosity towards her poor sister-in-law. Mercia's reactions reveal her persistent need to measure others by her own urban, middle-class standards. In the analysis of class, Weininger studies Bourdieu's class foundations in which both food and clothing are considered part of the "consumption practices and preferences" including both 'canonised' forms of culture and everyday practices such as "food, sports, newspapers, clothing or interior decor" (93).

Public transport is also a topic in the class issue. In *Capitalism's Crises: Class Struggles in South Africa and the World*, Alfredo Saad-Filho criticises the fact that governments do not publicise or invest in public transport while they allow the car market to rise uncontrollably, only sharpens the socio-economic gap (183). This context explains why Wicomb situates Mercia on a bus rather than a train, highlighting the contrast between her social expectations and reality. There, Mercia wonders: "why was Mercia on a bus rather than on the train to Edinburgh? . . . So why not the bus, why not see for herself why people of her kind preferred the train?" (106). Mercia is already aware that the transport suitable for her position is the train. What makes this excerpt classist is not only Mercia's differentiation between the train and the bus – the bus being the public transport for the poor – but also the fact that people talk and children travel in trains as well. This suggests that what bothers Mercia is the lower position of both the passengers and the bus, and not the child himself. This is precisely what Bourdieu describes as "habitus," an internalised sense of what is "appropriate" for someone's class position and thus the bus means a symbolic class location. In this same vein, using Wright's concept of "class locations" in *Class Counts: Comparative Studies in Class Analysis* (1997), which emphasises how individuals perform and defend their social position, Mercia reasserts her place in the middle class at the same time that she distances herself from those 'socially inferior.'

Despite Mercia's awareness of her own classism, she does not seem to avoid it at any time, so she continues displaying her classism towards her sister-in-law. When she discovered that Jake had married Sylvie, her only response was: "what on earth, Jaques, are you doing with one of those people?" (86), suggesting that Sylvie, and subsequently her family, was not enough for a Murray for their social position. As Jake conveys later in the novel, "you do know that she's not your kind, not good enough for your brother. You've become European, too grand for us; you don't belong here anymore. How

bourgeois you've become, Mercy" (159). The striking point here might be Mercia's answer admitting her bourgeois and asserting that social and economic security is, after all, of value because it brings tolerance of the other, which can only be a good thing (159). Thus, the focus should be on Mercia's belief that social and economic security is a synonym of tolerance. There are two ways to understand this assertion. On the one hand, Mercia would agree with Todorov's belief that Europeans become proof of their superiority by believing themselves capable of understanding the other (quoted in Spivak 218). On the other hand, Mercia would relate to Spivak's idea of Westerners considering themselves as generous and kind towards the "Other." While Todorov's is an archaic understanding of how inter-cultural relations work, the second understanding may effectively explain the condescendence and disdain Mercia demonstrates towards Sylvie and Jake. This dual interpretation shows how Mercia's view blends paternalistic generosity with subtle disdain. In fact, Mercia "distances herself" from the lower-class Sylvie belongs to maintain the social gap. Being herself from a coloured rural background directly allows Mercia to think of herself as more sympathetic with the lower classes. Her empathy, however, is mediated by superiority, making it conditional rather than genuine.

2.2. CLASS & EDUCATION

The relation between class and education in former years has been extensively analysed, with education being an important factor for social upgrading. In fact, Mercia conveys how she would support Nicky financially (42) and criticises Jake for not empathizing with their father: "you refuse to understand the pressures under which that generation was raised . . . The large families, the poverty, and lack of education" (84). It is interesting how "poverty" and "lack of education" are intertwined to prove the attachment these two concepts had in previous generations (Dlamini 92), and how this connection is still ingrained in younger ones. Besides, there are not only references to education itself, but also to how to educate. While Nicholas used a whip to educate Jake, and Sylvie used a belt to educate Nicky, Mercia brought a different approach to education, one of providing the child with different options so he could decide which one would be better. Wicomb cleverly provides the reader with different instances where one can see the almost opposite ways of educating Nicky by Sylvie and Mercia. When Mercia takes Nicky for a walk, she tells him that he will "see that things [he does not] know can be looked up in a book" (38) and gives him options for taking flowers. The child finally decides to take one to show his mother, but when they arrive home, Sylvie answers: "why

didn't you pick some for Mamma? They last very, very long in water" (40). This exemplifies the difference between imposing a decision and allowing the child to choose between the options available. The two very different ways of educating a child can actually derive from the contrasting class positions between Mercia and Jake/Sylvie, along with the life opportunities mentioned earlier. Richard Breen's analysis accurately represents how Mercia and Jake's opposite decisions have not only shaped their own lives but also how they educate children:

if life chances determine the conditions under which certain types of action are undertaken – including the interests that people have (and which they may express in, say, voting) and the resources they can bring to bear (and which may be important in, say, shaping their children's educational attainment) – then variations in these actions will be structured according to class position. (49)

When dealing with education, Nicholas (Mercia and Jake's father) must be taken into consideration for all the biased thoughts he taught his children. For example, he was disappointed by Mercia's PhD in literature for her not being a real doctor, when, genuinely, the education jobs were "previously monopolised by white people" (Seekings, *Social Stratification and Inequality in South Africa* 10). However, Nicholas conveys the classism attached not only to education but also to different degrees. The fact that Nicholas sees a PhD, despite being a high degree, as something useless is due to the fact that it is about literature. Those more 'vocational' disciplines were – and still are – not seen as posh or productive as other disciplines, such as medicine, for instance. Nicholas' view underscores the role of education as a tool for class mobility and distinction. Mercia, on the other hand, representing new generations, understands the importance of achieving a PhD, regardless of the subject. In terms of going to university, there is Fanus, an old friend of Mercia, who "would not be going to university [because] the Lategans were poor, the father a farm laborer who would not manage to pay for higher education" (181), showing the other side of South African society.

Education, age and *clethnicity*⁵ are a usual combination in postcolonial literature, as they together exemplify the difficulty of conviviality between races and ages. For instance, Jake charges his father Nicholas with being an Apartheid and Tricameral Parliament collaborator because "the people around them were not their kind, and thus

⁵ Felicity Hand coined this term in her *The Subversion of Class and Gender Roles in the Novels of Lindsey Collen (1948-) Mauritian Social Activist and Writer* (2010) to include both class and ethnicity as intertwined influences for social formation.

Nicholas taught his children to speak English. . . . He explained that Kliprand was inhabited by uncouth, uneducated people” (80-81). The Tricameral Parliament Jake mentions refers to the Apartheid court that was established between 1984 and 1994, where restrictive policies for the coloured and Indian populations were installed, limiting their political voice in the country’s legislation. Furthermore, from 1969 to 1980, a Coloured Persons Representative Council in South Africa was meant to represent coloured South Africans in the Tricameral Parliament. The fact that Jake thinks of Nicholas as a Tricameral Parliament supporter explains how Nicholas’ racist and classist – as well as incoherent – mind would have agreed with restrictive policies for coloureds, being himself coloured, although he does not consider himself of the same social status as other people from his community. However, the intransigence Jake condemns in his father resonates with his own stubbornness towards Nicholas, as Jake is incapable of understanding his father’s reasons to behave the way he did. While the excerpt above can be related to the racial issue, I argue that the reason for Nicholas’ eagerness to stand out among others is not only skin colour but social class. That is why; despite being coloured, he taught his children to speak English – a determining factor for social position. He instilled in their minds their unbelonging to the place – because Nicholas felt hierarchically superior in many aspects, not only in terms of race.

On her side, Sylvie also aimed to achieve a certain kind of social superiority, but this was truncated by Nicholas’ rape. Previously, her family wanted to train her as a teacher (65) but was “Oom⁶ Lodewyk would take her on in his butchery” (99). Sylvie’s eagerness to rise the social ladder is accentuated in the butchery, where she created a whole character “like the film star on TV, the one in *Egoli*” (102), by covering her naked body with a sausage “like a rick silk scarf” (102). This intimate moment confirms the inferiority complex she drags throughout her whole life, a complex that can also be attached to the character of Jake. Wright mentions Charlesworth and Bourdieu in his analysis of how the youngest generations of the working class have fallen into scarcity and shortfall. The following passage aligns with Jake and Sylvie’s reduced existence, which represents a percentage of the younger generation:

the younger members of the working class – despite sharing similar life conditions and a similar lifestyle – exhibit a collective identity that has slipped altogether below the threshold of discursive articulation. Under these conditions, their symbolic

⁶ This term means “uncle” and it is also used as an honorific, not necessarily indicating a blood relationship, especially in rural communities.

existence is reduced to what Bourdieu (1984 178) calls a “lifestyle ‘in-itself’” – that is, its characteristic practices and objects function primarily as signs of deprivation, and thus, as stigmata (Charlesworth 2000 150–202) (*Approaches to Class Analysis* 117).

This quotation represents Wicomb’s portrayal of Jake and Sylvie as figures trapped within the social limitations of post-apartheid South Africa. Both characters’ lives are shaped by instability and marginality, and their “lifestyle in-itself” (as Bourdieu calls it) do not function as a chosen identity but as evidence of exclusion. Although apartheid had officially ended by that time, Wicomb suggests that class hierarchies continue to determine the individuals’ position. Jake and Sylvie represent the younger working-class generation that is relegated to a liminal space where they are neither empowered nor represented, and Wright’s word “stigmata” precisely exposes how they remain vulnerable, especially in terms of invisibility.

Finally, an intriguing moment comes with the idealization versus the reality of countryside life, both perspectives paradoxically stated by Mercia. On the one hand, she realises “the apparent lack of new spring growth, the lambs are gamboling in that desolate veld” (57). On the other hand, she thinks of “the cliches of the countryside sprang to life, with lambs gamboling on brand-new legs, yes, actually leaping joyfully in the reluctant sunlight” (69). The first instance happens during her stay in Kliprand, while the second one takes place near Glasgow. It is revealing how, depending on the place, Mercia finds the countryside a desirable place or somewhere to escape from. When comparing two countrysides, one from a first world country, and the other one from a developing country, the former is perceived as bucolic and idyllic and the latter is attached to underdevelopment and impoverishment. However, she seems to give little importance to travelling and what this has brought her, except the civility achieved through money (128). I fail to see the relation between the civility achieved through money and travelling. Mercia here suggests that money brings civility and, consequently, that someone cannot be civilised and poor at the same time. These incongruities derive from the incessant classism that distances her from separating money and social position from every aspect of her life and reveals how space is not experienced neutrally but through class filters, reinforcing the idea that class is the ultimate framework through which every aspect is interpreted.

3. CONCLUSION

The whole novel presents a protagonist whose class position is contradictory despite her education and her awareness of the world, she refuses to sympathise with those who differ from her. This disregard for her own people resonates with the Black high spheres in the BEE, whose power and economic profit were not distributed to the general black population. However, it remains unknown whether Wicomb meant Mercia to be this irrational to illustrate the incomprehensibility of the higher classes.

Through the different characters in *October*, Wicomb demonstrates that class does not only work as an economic structure, but as a relational force that shapes identity and behaviour. Mercia displays class mobility through education, her move to Glasgow and her economic improvement in contrast to the rest of the family members. Wicomb uses her protagonist to study social hierarchies and to prove that class is an essential factor in determining the individual's progression. By focusing on the intra-familial dynamics of the Murrays, this article shows how class is actively negotiated by the family members, where their social positions collide and thus create a reciprocal moral judgment rather than the union socially expected within relatives.

Throughout her oeuvre, Wicomb displays the main difficulties non-whites – from very diverse backgrounds – have to cope with in Apartheid and post-Apartheid South Africa. Her work, along with most of both literary and scientific studies, has its focus on the issue of race, but this emphasis on race has been demonstrated to be blurred when the individual's disadvantage shifts from race to class. Despite the critics' debate on this idea, Wicomb's chronological work proves that class has been a factor in the increase for upward mobility, and her most accurate example is Mercia Murray. The analysis highlights how class is performed through many subtle everyday practices, such as education, language, and relationships, and how these almost symbolic practices reinforce the idea that social mobility not only creates inequality but also produces new forms of social hierarchies among those individuals who share a common origin.

October proves these ideas with Mercia and Nicholas encapsulating all the attitudes, mindset and chauvinism expected in a classist individual. Concurrently, Sylvie and Jake embody the inferiority complex and mimicry attitudes attached to less socio-economically developed individuals. Together, these contrasting characterizations present not only the structural inequalities in South African society but also the

psychological and social consequences of class divisions. The range of characters Wicomb presents in this novel serves as a small sample of South African society and underscores the sometimes-forgotten importance class has for its individuals' upward mobility.

In this sense and applying Wright's concept of mediated class locations, further research could extend this analysis to other South African narratives in which intra-familial relations constitute the central focus. Such a comparative approach would help determine whether the class disparity portrayed in *October* is an exceptional case within Wicomb's oeuvre or a more representative pattern across postcolonial literature. Moreover, following studies such as Goldthorpe's, which traditionally attach class dominance to male figures, future research could examine female and male trajectories of both intra- and inter-generational mobility in South African – or postcolonial – literature to explore the extent to which class relations diverge across gender lines. Additionally, since *October* highlights the psychological consequences of class mobility – manifested in Mercia's detachment and Jake and Sylvie's internalised inferiority – subsequent research might investigate the relation between class mobility and sense of belonging in post-apartheid narratives. This would allow researchers to expand their understanding of class as a structural force and thus reveal how mobility shapes relations within family members marked by unequal access to opportunity.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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