

Deconstructing Gender in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and Zoe Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*¹

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ABSTRACT

Most Postcolonial writers in their narratives present characters who suffer rejection and discrimination because of their gender. This situation is glaring in patriarchal societies where men feel they are superior to the woman folk. This paper aims at projecting the link between postcolonial narrative discourse and the deconstruction of patriarchy. Put differently, this paper shows how the authors under study, though from different socio-political and cultural backgrounds, participate in their narratives to question the superiority of men over women in the postcolonial world. From the prism of postcolonial theory, this paper, hinges on the premise that Coetzee and Wicomb in their narrative fictions believe that deconstruction of gender is one of the panaceas for harmony in the postcolonial socio-political space.

Keywords: *Patriarchy; Deconstruction; Postcolonial Theory; Postcolonial Narrative; Deconstruction of gender; Deconstruction Patriarchy.*

INTRODUCTION

Gender can be defined in many different ways as the concept is widely used. However, Harriet Bradley gives us an applicable definition in her book titled *Fractured identities* which focuses on the relation between women and men. To her, "Gender refers to the varied and complex arrangements between men and women, encompassing the organization of reproduction, the sexual divisions of labor and cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity" (Bradley 205). In *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* Lois Tyson claims that women are often portrayed as sweet, beautiful, weak, irrational and emotional, while men are described as strong, fearless and the ones who make all decisions. The ultimate goal for feminism is to increase our understanding of women's experience, both in the past and present, and promote our appreciation of women's value in the world (Tyson 119). Makama, Godiya Allanana in "Patriarchy and Gender Inequality in Nigeria: The Way Forward" submit that that:

Gender is the socially and culturally constructed roles for men and women. For instance, gender roles of men as owners of property, decision makers and heads of household are socially, historically and culturally constructed and have nothing to do with biological differences. It is important to note the difference between sex and gender. Sex refers to the biological differences between male and female. For instance, the adult female has breast that can secrete milk to feed a baby but the adult male does not have. (118)

The term "Gender" in common usage refers to differences between men and women. it often refers to purely social rather than biological differences. Some even view gender as a social construction rather than a biological phenomenon. In J.M Coetzee *Disgrace* and Zoe Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* he authors present and discuss women to prove the fact that a woman can survive and construct a better identity in any patriarchal society.

Makama, Godiya Allanana further explains that: "Gender is the socially and culturally constructed roles for men and women. For instance, gender roles of men as owners of the property, decision makers and heads of household are socially, historically and culturally constructed and have nothing to do with biological differences" (118).

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Harriet Bradley in her book *Gender: Key Concepts* claims that the distinction between male and female has a very old history (3) but gender is something that varies according to time and place, which means that gender today is not the same as hundred years ago and gender in Sweden is not necessarily defined in the same way as it is in South Africa. The different characters in the stories do not share the same age, culture and religion. Feminism, on the other hand, examines how women often are subjugated.

Maria-Sabina Draga-Alexandru in “Constructing the Female Self in Migrant Postcolonial Fiction” contends that: Female emancipation...goes hand in hand with the reassertion of an age-old patriarchal assumption: “that the woman is there to offer support and, since she is seen as belonging to the private sphere rather than the public one, it is up to her to rebuild the protective environment of home” (124). Here, one realizes that for real emancipation to occur, the woman must be able to debunk the assumption that she belongs to the private sphere and not the public one and it is only in this context that she can rebuild a protective environment free from patriarchal hegemony.

DECONSTRUCTING GENDER IN THE NARRATIVES OF J.M COETZEE AND ZOE WICOMB

Deconstructing Gender a theme explicit in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and *Youth* and Zoe Wicomb’s *David’s Story* and *Playing in the Light*. J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* begins with a description of one of David Lurie’s weekly visits to an unusual colored prostitute, named Soroya. She is described as “quiet, docile and compliant.” David violates Soroya’s careful division between her private life and her public work. Hence, she stops her visits to Lurie abruptly. At a certain point, David feels that regular visits to the prostitute Soroya makes him happy, but such understanding is not genuine for him. Lurie’s sex with Soroya is intense but not passionate so he feels his intercourse with Soroya is to be akin to the “copulation of snakes: lengthy, absorbed, but rather abstract, rather dry, even at its hottest” (3). This shows Lurie’s attitude towards intense sex; it is not a reciprocal relationship between two individuals. It is a fleeting contract by which he tries to satisfy his physical desires. While commenting on David Lurie’s temperament, the narrator feels that “his temperament is not going to change; he is too old for that. His temperament is a fixed set” (2).

The narrator in *Disgrace* presents Soraya as one who is living a double life because she is married with kids yet, she is having an affair with David. The omniscient narrator states that in Soraya’s arms, David “becomes fleetingly; their father; foster father; step father; showdown-father, he bed afterwards, he feels their eyes flicker over him overtly curiously” (6). The message J.M Coetzee intends to pass across here is that men should not bring forth children they cannot cater for. One can also deduce from the above quotation that Soraya is involved in prostitution because her husband cannot take care of his children. David is not also at fault because he pays Soraya to sleep with her in the hostel where she works. Here, one can also say that although Coetzee is not encouraging prostitution, what he is really frowning at is the nonchalant attitude of men who find it very difficult to take care of their families.

When David meets with Soraya, her husband and children in the market, “His thoughts turn, despite himself to the other father, the real one. Does he have an inkling of what his wife is up to, or has he elected the bliss of ignorance?” (7). He has elected the bliss of ignorance because his wife leaves the house every other day and in the night for that matter and he does not border to find out where she goes to. What his wife is up to is not his problem in as much as she is bringing money for the up keep of the family. Here, Soraya has no other choice than to involve herself in prostitution to provide for her children.

Furthermore, In J.M Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, one also realizes that David shows no remorse towards women. As seen in the text, he uses his desire as an excuse to use women. A good example can still be seen in the relationship between David and Soraya. It should be noted that David uses Soraya to satisfy himself and he uses his power to show his superior position. During the time he sees this girl, he tries to change her in many ways; for instance, the way she looks with her make up. The narrator states that: “Not liking the stickiness of the makeup, he asked her to wipe it off. She obeyed, and has never worn it since” (5). This is the first time in the text that David takes advantage of his position to show power, firstly by using Soraya and secondly by telling her to change her looks. He gains power by putting himself in a position where he is shown as the dominant one and Soraya as his possession. The third time David disrespects women is when Soraya disappears back to her real life and requests that no one should be looking for her and David does the opposite since he already has a relationship with her in his mind. He does not respect her will to be left alone, because of his own wish to be pleased by her (9-10). We

are made to understand that when David goes to the hotel where she works, he finds out her real name and decides to telephone her in the night when her children and husband are asleep. In a telephone conversation between David and Soraya, the former tells the latter that: "I don't know who you are... You are harassing me in my own house. I demand you will never phone me here again, never" (10). David takes sex to be an act of exercising his power. David is not unaware of his power as a white over a poor prostitute who has her family, children and a husband. Lurie seeks to probe into Soroya's personal life; she disapproves of this invasion on her privacy. She makes it very clear to David that her life as a prostitute has nothing to do with her life as an individual. It should be noted that he keeps harassing Soraya against her wish because he does not respect her as a person. Soraya's decision to quit prostitution is J.M Coetzee's way of discouraging prostitution and it also portrays the fact that women should be given the respect they deserve. Here, David feels that he is superior to women and that is why he does not treat them well.

Post colonialist frown against the superiority on men and that is why they believe that the liberation of women can only be successful only where patriarchy has been debunked. In other words, the two theories used in the analysis of this work are radical movements that believe in the freedom of women who find themselves in any patriarchal society.

Furthermore, one can say that David's desire for women becomes his burden and he cannot control it, and the loss of his work is a result of it. One would also say that David once tries to explain his burden to Lucy, but as a comparison to a dog: David states that: "[...] desire is a burden we could well do without" (90) and he makes himself comparable to a dog and its hatred of its nature. David sees the problem with his desire and he hates what it does to him. He cannot control it but no matter how hard he punishes himself he cannot deny his nature. Desire is something uncontrollable to David, it leads him to women and he shows his power through it but at the end of the day, he also loses his power through his desire for women.

[...] when we were still living in Kenilworth, the people next door had a dog, a golden retriever [...] 'It was a male. Whenever there was a bitch in the vicinity it would get excited and unmanageable, and with Pavlovian regularity the owners would beat it. This went on untill the poor dog did not know what to do. At the smell of a bitch it would chase around the garden with its ears flat and its tail between its legs, whining, trying to hide.' [...] A dog will accept the justice of that: a beating for a chewing. But desire is another story. No animal will accept the justice of being punished for following its instincts'. (89-90)

This could be considered as an excuse for his behaviour and his daughter Lucy asks him: "So males must be allowed to follow their instincts unchecked? Is that the moral?" (Coetzee 90). Whereupon he answers: What was ignoble about the Kenilworth spectacle was that the poor dog had begun to hate its nature. It no longer needed to be beaten. It was ready to punish itself." (Coetzee 90). From the rhetorical questions in the above quotation, one can deduce that Lucy is insinuating that any man who misbehaves, should be punished. In this case, it is apt to note that the punishment of David is justified because it is morally wrong to harass women sexually, especially when it has to do with minors like Melanie.

In the text, women are not only looked down upon by David and Petrus but also by other people in the society. People at the University more or less support David and his actions towards Melanie. One of the lecturers at the University says that: "[...] David, I want to tell you, you have all my sympathy. Really. These things can be hell." (Coetzee 42). Many people support David and his actions: "You may find this hard to believe, David, but we around this table are not your enemies. We have our weak moments, all of us, we are only human" (Coetzee 52). David's actions are thus justified by his peers. He is backed up by other people on the same level. This could also be connected to how women are looked down on in the story. Melanie, who is a victim of David, is not supported by people around. It should be noted that David never says, nor admits, that his harassments of Melanie Isaacs are disgraceful. There is only one person who tells him that his actions are inappropriate and shameful and that is his former wife Rosalind: "[...] The whole thing is disgraceful from beginning to end. Disgraceful and vulgar too. And I'm not sorry for saying so" (Coetzee 45). Nobody ever tells David that what he does is wrong since he is always supported by others, apart from a few exceptions. Therefore, he sees his actions as more acceptable than they are and his actions may be considered a product of the society he lives in. Moreso, one can say that David's former wife considers David's actions as inappropriate, vulgar and disgraceful because

she understands that it is a terrible thing to harass a woman. It is also possible that Rosalind is bitter with David because she has been harassed and disgraced by him in the past.

Again, in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, there are two women in the story David cannot control; Lucy and her friend, Bev. They are strong women, which is something different from the women David has dealt with earlier. David always tries to control Lucy but he cannot do it. Lucy is very strong woman who takes care of herself and breaks all the gender roles. Lucy has a big house and a farm that she takes care of. Lucy here can be seen as a strong woman given that unlike some women who depend on men for a house and a farm, she struggles to own the two and this is exactly the message that J.M Coetzee wants to pass across to women who find themselves in a patriarchal society.

David's thoughts about Lucy and Bev are not healthy at all. Some of the first things David notices about Lucy when he sees her is that: "[...] she has put on weight" (59). "Soon she will be positively heavy. Letting herself go, as what happens when one withdraws from the field of love" (65). Despite the way David feels about Lucy, he does not succeed control her. Similarly, the first time David meets Bev, he perceives her as: "[...] a dumpy, bustling little woman with black freckles, close-cropped, wiry hair, and no neck. He does not like women who make no effort to be attractive (72). And once again, women's looks is what David is most interested in and since Bev is not good-looking enough, he does not like her. From a feminist perception, this is a way of looking down on women. In the above quotations, David reveals his thoughts about the women who are close to him. Again, when he sees Helen, Lucy's friend for the first time, he wishes Lucy would find someone better because she is not beautiful enough.

Just like David, Petrus is one of the persons who does not have respect for women. When Lucy is raped, instead of sympathizing with her, he decides to ask David the following question: "Will Lucy go to the market tomorrow? (115). This tells a lot about Petrus and his refusal to understand a woman's experience of a rape. Again, one can say that Petrus refusal to understand Lucy is a justification of the fact that he considers women as inferior.

David and Petrus have different intentions of using women. Petrus gains economic and material winnings and that is probably because he has always been poor and riches is therefore what he looks for. In the case of David, on the other hand, it is harder to tell what he gains from using women. One could argue that David's way of acting towards women is a consequence of his troubled life, since he lost his wife. David at least gains sexual pleasure and takes advantage of the position he possesses when he uses Soraya and Melanie. The narrator makes Petrus' way of acting and using women seem less accepted than David's. This may be because the story is focalized through David, as mentioned earlier, and therefore we do not get much sense of what Petrus' thoughts are.

South Africa's history is hereby still present in the story and the portraits of white and black people are brutally exposed. It could all be a contest to show who is in charge. David's rape seems to be more about not seeing women as worthy but let us not forget about Soraya, the black woman he struggled for. He spent time mentioning many times that Soraya is black and he also takes time to hate the black men for raping Lucy, a white innocent girl. David's old-fashioned thoughts of black and white people are still present.

Furthermore, talking about the life of David and women, Lucy reminds him that: "You have paid your price. Perhaps, looking back, she won't think too harshly of you. Women can be surprisingly forgiving" (69). Here, Coetzee portrays the woman's character as one who forgives easily. This can be confirmed as far as the text is concerned because no matter the behaviour of David the women he has dated in the past are still very good to him. A very good example of women and forgiveness can be seen in Lucy who decided to pardon her rapists and despite the effort by her father for her to abort the baby she got as a result of rape, she refuses. Here we can say that women have a soft heart as compared to men.

Again, commenting about women, David affirms that every woman he has come in contact with, has taught him a lesson about himself and has made him "a better person" (70). From the above quotation, one can say that he has learned a lot from the women he has encountered. Knowing who her father is, she responds to him in the following words: "I hope you are not claiming the reverse as well. That knowing you have turned your women

into better people” (70). From the above quotation, one can say that why Lucy makes the above statement is because she is aware that all the women David has met are good but David has been a very bad person.

Again, when Petrus’s wife is expecting a baby all and sundry including Petrus are expecting that the child would be a baby boy and when asked what he got against girls he explains that: “Always it is best if the first one is a boy. Then he can show his sisters – how to behave. Yes... A girl is very expensive... Always money, money, money.” (130). From the above quotation, Petrus insinuates that a girl child is useless and can only be taught by boys and that is why he feels that he cannot spend his money on girls. According to Petrus, girls are expensive because “you must buy this, you must buy them that” (130). After listening to Petrus about the issue of the girls “Lucy smiles, but he knows she is embarrassed” (130). Lucy is embarrassed because it is unthinkable to comprehend the fact that girls are better than boys and that it is not right to spend money on them.

In the text we equally see Petrus’s discrimination against women clearly exhibited when Lucy and her father goes to visit Petrus and his wife, the narrator says that he “From the kitchen area, if that what is what they call it, Petrus summons his wife. It is the first time he has seen her from close by. She is young – pleasant-faced rather than pretty, shy, clearly pregnant. She takes Lucy’s hand but does not take his, nor does she meet his eyes” (128). From the above quotation, we realize that Petrus’s wife greets Lucy but does not take David’s hand and “her eyes do not meet his.” Here, one can conclude that she finds herself in a patriarchal society where a woman is supposed to be seen and not heard. Again, the fact that Petrus’s “summoned” his wife from the kitchen to receive a gift from David and Lucy justifies the fact that Petrus does not have any respect for her.

It should be noted that apart from the fact that Petrus is interested in a boy over a girl, Lucy feels that he treats women badly. Talking about Petrus, the omniscient narrator states that Petrus is a “dominating personality. The young wife seems happy, but he wonders what stories the old wife has to tell” (137). From the above quotation, one realises that Petrus is domineering especially to his wives. According to Lucy, Petrus’s first wife may be happy but the “old wife” has a lot of stories to tell about Petrus and his domineering behaviour. In a way, J.M Coetzee is condemning the patriarchal and attitude of Petrus. Again, another instance of patriarchal dominance in the text is seen when Lucy talks to her father concerning men, sex, and hatred. She states that:

Hatred...when it comes to men and sex, David, nothing surprises me anymore. May be, for men, hating the women makes sex more exiting. You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange – when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her – isn’t it a bit like killing? Pushing the knife in; exiting afterwards, leaving the body behind covered in blood – doesn’t it feel like murder? (158)

From the above quotation, one realises that men use force to inflict untold pain on women through rape and this according to Lucy is not different from murder. Again, one can say that this is J.M Coetzee’s way of saying that molesting women because they are weak is uncalled for.

Another idea of gender deconstruction can be seen in Lucy when she decides to keep the pregnancy she gets as a result of rape. Talking to her father about why she intends to keep the baby, she tells him that “why? I am a woman, David. Do you think I hate children? Should I choose against the child because of who its father is?” (198). The rhetorical questions explains the fact that Lucy is not just God fearing but she is also a woman of dignity. The fact that she decides to keep the baby is J.M Coetzee’s way of portraying the fact that mothers are supposed to take care of their children, irrespective of how they got them. In fact, when David realises that Lucy is eager to keep the baby, he asks her the following question: “Are you telling me you are going to have the child?” (198). She responds to her father’s question in the affirmative and states that she is not “having an abortion” (198). When Lucy informs her father that she is not having an abortion, he tells her that she did not tell him that she does not believe in abortion (199). When Lucy realises how mad her father is because she wants to keep the pregnancy, she addresses him thus:

[...] David, I can’t run my life according to whether or not you like what I do. Not anymore. You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character; I am the minor character who doesn’t make an appearance until halfway through. Well contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor. I am not minor. I have a life of

my own, just as important to me as yours is to you, and in my life, I am the one who makes the decisions. (199)

From the above quotation, it is obvious that David is patriarchal and domineering and that is why Lucy feels that her father must not decide for her all the time. In fact, from the above quotation, it is clear that J.M Coetzee is advocating for a society where the rights of the woman are respected.

Again, commenting on what Lucy said to her father in relation to moving into Petrus's house, as a wife, Bev Shaw addresses David thus: "women are adaptable. Lucy is adaptable. And she is young. She lives closer to the ground than you. Than either of us" (210). Here, it is obvious that this is J.M Coetzee's way of saying that unlike men, women are always ready to tolerate any situation especially in their homes just to make their families happy. Lucy confirmed her love for her child in the following words: "love will grow – one can trust Mother Nature for that. I am determined to be a good mother, David. A good mother and a good person. You should try to be a good person too." (216). Here, one can say that Lucy is determined to be a good person and a good mother and, this is a message to all mothers that they are supposed to love their children come what may. She feels that her father should struggle to be a good person too because it is possible that he does not have an iota of love for women and that is why he is not in love with his wife.

In Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* through the presentation of the activities of the protagonist, Marion Campbell, we realise that the author's project is one of deconstructing gender in post-Apartheid South Africa. Just like Vera Stark and Sarah Barcant, Marion Campbell is presented, in the novel as self-assertive and self-confident. The narrator stresses that Marion lives alone in her apartment at Bloubergstrand. Most importantly, he comments that "Marion's apartment is modest – she has no need for more than a bedroom – but the flat is the fulfilment of an adolescent dream" (2). This statement justifies the fact that Marion's present success is the result of a childhood dream, desire, and commitment to its fulfilment. Even at the early stage of her development, she is conscious of the fact that her future lies in her hands and she has to work tirelessly to succeed in life. Moreover, the idea of living alone shows that she is against those who think that women can only depend on men to survive. Furthermore, the above citation also depicts the view that Marion is ambitious and hardworking.

Again, in the novel, we equally see Marion do a lot of things to make herself happy without a man beside her. The narrator states that "On Sunday morning, Marion rises at dawn to drive to the fishing village on the coast where she rents a cottage" (22). Here, one realises that she does not ask for the service of a driver to take her around; she does it herself. This emphasises the view that a woman can work things out for herself without asking for support from anybody. The narrator brings to the readers' vision the beauty of the coastal scenery in the following passage:

When the sea is well risen, she has to stop for tortoises carrying their ancient carcasses across the gravel road. In spring, the road is flanked by fields of Namaqua daisies that bring the tourists, who drive absurdly slowly to admire the garish colours, a5ZXXXbut now in April there are not many people about. Here on the lagoon, the Atlantic is not so cold – she may even swim – but sitting in the sun with her magazines, an extraordinary tiredness, a laziness, washes over her. She is content to walk on the sand, to sit and doze all day on the beach and watch the tide come in, watch the water lap at the fine white sand, nibble at the lengthening shadow of the cliff growing greedier and greedier until it roars its hunger into the cavities of rocks. (22-23)

The use of the above vivid description is to show how the beauty of the landscape is a reflection of the joy and happiness in the mind of Marion as she visits this touristic site for recreation. Besides, she is very forceful and dynamic in her society. She is a vibrant middle class woman with a successful career in business. It is in this light that the narrator says that "It is the hard-working middle class that she [Marion] admires, which is to say people like herself" (25). From the text, the reader is made to understand that Marion who is a female character has "[...]" advanced in the world precisely because she presses on (3). Marion, who is a woman, has advanced contrary to the impression that women are relegated to the background.

Furthermore, Marion's greatest determination is to make herself comfortable in life even without a husband. This is a dream which has been animating her vision throughout the novel. She is proud to share her dreams with the people or workers in her agency and even to her subordinates. The narrator affirms this when she says:

There is nothing more tedious than listening to other people's dreams. And despite knowing this, knowing that a dream is only of interest to the dreamer – who inserts it into the puzzles of her own life, hoping it will throw its feeble light over her peevish questions, her half-hearted attempts at making sense of the world – Marion has a perverse urge to tell her dream to these in her office, people whom, strictly speaking she barely knows. (29)

What Marion dreams of, in one of her dreams, is a green Jaguar or a boyfriend, although she says that having a boyfriend is not too certain. The narrator says: "Marion's dreams of a green Jaguar or a boyfriend, although she has doubts about the latter" (29). This statement justifies the fact that Marion does not see the need for a boyfriend in her life. In other words, she doubts about getting a boyfriend or starting a relationship with a man. It should be noted that unlike other women, Marion does not wait for anybody to take care of her. She has been able to impose herself in the society where she lives. What is interesting as far as Marion's dream is concerned is the fact that the narrator dedicates five (5) pages in the text to explain Marion's dream probably because he wants to emphasise that women have the right to dream big irrespective of whether they have a man helping them or not. The narrator equally justify the fact that women, just like men, should struggle to be who they want to be in life, irrespective of what others feel. The narrator comments:

Marion behaves like someone who doesn't know that you are exposed to your dreams, that people will shake their heads or wink at each other when your back is turned. She does not try to stop herself from telling. There is perhaps the hope that, in the telling, the dream will release at least some of its meaning; that details inaccessible in silent recollection will reveal themselves to shape a skeletal narrative. (29)

Similarly, the author, Zoë Wicomb, does not only present Marion as confident and self-assertive; she is seen as hardworking and diligent in her profession. The narrator presents her as someone who "[...] likes being in her office when everyone has left and the place is hers to potter about in, as she cannot do in the presence of others" (15). This character trait shows that she is dedicated to her business and will sacrifice all that she has to make it progress. In this regard, she avoids all places of relaxation such as film halls, night clubs and bars to allocate more time to her job. The narrator comments:

On the pad on her desk is a list of tasks for Monday morning that she might as well get started on; but she is restless, perhaps because it is getting on for Saturday evening in a city decanted of people – people who are readying themselves for the elusive pleasure of the night. (15)

Furthermore, we realise that Marion is the bread-winner in her family. This goes contrary to the traditionally-held belief that women are mere observers in their families, while the men are the ones who provide the needs. The narrator draws a contrast between her and her brothers who are very boring and irresponsible. As an illustration to the discourteous and ill-mannered behaviour of her brothers, the narrator comments that "Except for what the brothers stole from the left on lazy Sunday afternoons, pocketfuls taken to the mealier field where they would lie hidden between rows of maize, chewing, and checking the lengths of their penises" (4). This contrast brings out the view that the woman, in the post-Apartheid context, to an extent is more responsible and sensitive to social values than the man. Also, the important role Marion plays in her family is seen when she informs her father that she will be coming to visit them in Cape Town. John Campbell waits for her eagerly. The narrator declares:

He waits for Saturdays when Marion comes, or for the occasional phone calls during the week when she might announce that she'll be popping in, or that she is on her way, by which he has come to understand that she has only just thought of coming, and that there will be long minutes of hunting for keys, of finishing a cup of tea, of finding in her cupboard treats to bring for him or stopping at a shop for a packet of biltong or mebos, while he waits patiently through slow time. But with his special ear for traffic, he picks out precisely the sound of her car as it

approaches the robot in Main Road; he can tell from the screech of wheels whether she is waiting at a red light before turning, or whether she is slowing down on the green, slipping into second gear in order to turn into Burns Road. (6-7)

Brenda Mackey is another female character in *Playing in the Light* that the author uses to show the vital role that the woman plays in the post-Apartheid South African society. She is of the coloured race and also a member of the MCTravel Company. Just like Marion, the author penetrates her personality to bring out the shift towards female empowerment in the New South Africa. The narrator describes Brenda in the following words: “Brenda Mackay is soft-spoken, soothing even, unless that is just the musical lilt of her Cape Town accent, but at times there is something of an ironic edge to her voice that is unnerving” (17). Just like Marion, she is also assertive in her character; she is also diligent and duty conscious at her work place. The narrator admits that she (Marion) is always at work even when she is sick. Her boss, Marion Campbell, is very happy with her behaviour. Also, the narrator authenticates this assertion in the following words:

Marion felt a twinge of guilt about Brenda. The girl has turned out to be reliable and conscientious; she’s never missed a day, even coming to work when she had that dreadful cough and had to be sent home. Come on, she said, take Monday off; take yourself away somewhere nice. (18)

Brenda, however, rejects this offer and asserts thus: “No, really, Brenda said, I’m not in need of a break” (18). From the above quotation, one realizes that Brenda is working very hard and even comes to work when she is ill. When Marion realizes that she is ill and ask her to take a break, she refuses to take a day off. Here, one can say that just like men, women too can be very hardworking and dedicated to work.

In the same way, Marion’s mother, Helen, is one of the female characters in the novel who deconstructs gender bias. She rebukes her husband, John Campbell, for not letting her dress in trousers which he believes is a dress designed only for men. John is a rigid conservative who believes that the gender divide should be maintained. Following this, Helen criticises him thus: “Campbell, you’re no longer on the farm; this is the city. I won’t be a plaasjapie here, and you know better than to call me Lennie. It can’t be a sin to wear trousers, because nowadays, here in town, you’ll see smart, respectable women wearing slacks [...] she said bitterly” (10). This rebuke, by Helen, shows that she wants to be free to wear whatever she wants to wear besides, the fact that she wears trousers does not mean that she is bad person since responsible and respectable women wear trousers nowadays.

Moreover, the gender concept of sisterhood is very strong in the post-Apartheid era as seen in the relationship between Marion and Annie Boshoff. These two female characters are very much attached. This stems from the fact that they grew up together. The child-like relationship that they had has followed them to adulthood. This sisterly bond between Marion and Boshoff is seen when the narrator says: “Marion would have preferred to live above Main Road, close to Annie Boshoff” (9). The probable reason for this wish is that they can consolidate their relationship and live together. Through the relationship between female characters in this novel, the author seems to think that there should be a collaboration among post-Apartheid women for them to make their voices heard.

The idea of gender acceptance and reconciliation is also portrayed in the MCTravel Company where the male workers have no bias against their female colleagues because of their gender. This cordial relationship between the sexes is seen in the relationship between Boetie van Graan and Brenda Mackey. When Brenda was recruited in the company to replace Mrs Chester who has gone on retirement, she is given a warm reception by Mr. Boetie who is also a worker in the company. The narrator remarks that:

When Marion first announced to her staff that things were tight, and that when Mrs Chester retired, she planned to replace her with a young colored girl, she was not surprised at Boetie van Graan’s skepticism. It was to be expected: he was not as enlightened as the rest of them. But when Brenda arrived, a slip of a girl who looked no more than sixteen, he did the right thing. Times were changing and he certainly was not going to be left behind. Boetie took her hand warmly and said, Brenda, very pleased to meet you. I’m Mr. van Graan and I hope that you’ll be happy here. (19)

This idea of gender acceptance is proof of the view that the future of post-Apartheid South Africa lies in the hands of both men and women who must come together to contribute to national development. The cordiality between the sexes in this company therefore epitomises the entire post-Apartheid society.

A similar case of gender acceptance is also found in the relationship between Marion and Geoff. Their relationship shows signs of the reversal of roles and gender deconstruction. The omniscient narrator remarks that when both of them are at home, Geoff is the one who does the cooking for Marion. This is contrary to the traditional role of the man as seen in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* where the man occupies public space and the woman domestic space. The narrator says:

They leave the restaurant without ordering food. In the car, Geoff folds her in his arms, ruffles her hair and is gratified by the convulsions, by the tears that course down her cheeks, tears that he kisses away. This revelation turns her into a ragged waif in need of protection. Once home, he cooks for her. A simple pasta is comforting, he says, turning it also into a lesson. First, the grating of the lemon peel so that the juice has time to be infused with its zest, before being toast in the pasta with olive oil, garlic and parsley. (77)

From the above quotation, one can say that after the outing of Marion and Geoff, while at home, the later decides to cook for the former hence debunking the fact that cooking is only reserved for women. More so, still talking about Marion, the narrator explains that "[...] she knows how to be civil. She knows the names of museums and churches; as a travel agent, she knows the sites that can't be missed, and so asks after the queues at the Uffizi, the piazza in Arezzo the subsidence, in Venice" (42). The above quotation explains the fact that Marion is an independent woman. The narrator confirms this by saying that when Marion goes out with her boyfriend, "[...] she loves being out with him walking where a woman would not walk on her own, seeing Cape Town anew, but no, not like a tourist, rather the familiar place reused by rain into rightness" (43). What is interesting here is the fact that Marion breaks the barrier of walking where a woman would not walk and this is because she has decided to impose herself in a society that is dominated by men.

Again, also talking about gender deconstruction and self-assertion, the narrator claims that when Geoff, Marion's boyfriend said he would call Marion and did not; she said "she would call. Although she understands that nowadays a woman needs no 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). Here, it is very clear that the time when men expect only women to call them is in the past now. This emphasises the idea of self-assertion where Marion feels that if she is that important, Geoff her boyfriend should also do the calling and not the other way round.

In the text, one realizes that apart from fighting against Apartheid, Father Gilbert also fought against gender inequality in the Apartheid days. In the Anglican Church, he tried to maintain gender equality. The narrator says that, as the parish priest of St. Luke's Anglican Church, he opted for a way of making his mark through the introduction of "[...] the Maundy Thursday midnight ceremony of humbly washing the feet of his parishioners, as Christ himself had washed those of his disciples" (160). Maundy Thursday, as far as Christianity is concerned, is the Thursday before Easter, commemorating the Last Supper of Christ with his apostles. During this occasion, he chooses a woman [Helen Campbell] to be among the twelve parishioners whose feet are to be washed. The narrator records that many members of the parish council interpreted Father Gilbert's action as a spiritual sacrilege – since they did not consider the woman worthy to be chosen. However, Father Gilbert justifies his decision by bringing the parishioners to the knowledge that "The Bible, he explained, was not immutable; the Church must move with the times" (160). The decision, by Father Gilbert, to include a woman among the twelve shows that he does not consider women as inferior and this is exactly the vision of Zoe Wicomb and J.M. Coetzee as far as the post-Apartheid South African is

CONCLUSION

In accordance with the above facts therefore, one will assert that a critical study of the texts under study as seen in above paragraphs reveals that the ideological and artistic vision of the authors under study is their ability to deconstruct gender.

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