THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN ZOË WICOMB’S
DAVID’S STORY: THE VIOLENCE OF REPRESENTATION

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Introduction

*David’s Story* is the second novel published by the South African author Zoë Wicomb. Just as her debut novel *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town*, this novel deals with the experience of ‘coloured’ South Africans, especially during the Apartheid years. Set in 1991, at the beginning of the ‘new South Africa’, the novel explores the world of the liberation movements: a world filled with betrayal and danger. The protagonist David Dirkse is struggling with the consequences of his involvement in the fight for freedom. He hires an amanuensis to write his story down, and together they try to make sense of everything that has happened in his life. Eventually it becomes clear that his story revolves around his fellow comrade Dulcie - otherwise known as ‘the beloved’ – who was tortured and possibly even killed. As a result of David’s inability to talk about her, the narrator invents a story for her based on a few inferences from conversations with David. Therefore, we never hear her own voice and is she only present in the silences of the text. In fact, her absence draws attention to the other absences in the novel and in all South African discourse, such as the struggle of the women before, during and after Apartheid. Historical figures like Sarah Baartman and Eva/Krotoa illustrate how women in a patriarchal society are always represented through stereotypes and the contemporary women are victims of the violent responses to these stereotypes. By looking at the female characters, and the way they are represented, I will argue that the stereotypical representations of women violate their true nature and also lead to violence on their bodies; and that, paradoxically, any attempt at an accurate representation will lead to violence as well, specifically to violence on language.

In the first chapter I will examine how Zoë Wicomb’s background and aesthetic politics influenced her representation of the women in this novel. As a coloured woman she is particularly sensitive to the experiences of women like her and women who played a more active role in the struggle. Furthermore, her interest in feminism mingled with traces of Black Consciousness encourages her to explore a patriarchal world in which women are suppressed in several ways.

In chapter two I will examine two historical figures that are mentioned a number of times in *David’s Story*: Sarah Baartmann and Eva/Krotoa. Baartman - otherwise known as the ‘Hottentot Venus’ - was a Khoisan woman who was exhibited throughout Europe as an example of the sexualized savage. Eva, on the other hand, was a negotiator between the Dutch colonizers and the indigenous people, who was later accused of being a betrayer of her people. They both played a part in the South African nationalist project – which meant to
unite all races under a new South African flag - that came into being during the struggle and that was put into motion after the struggle had ended. In this project their images were severely altered to match the image of the new South Africa: they were no longer represented as savages, but as Mothers of the new nation. Wicomb questions this process in her novel, and I will explain how she tries to show that they are victims of different discourses that all use their images for their own purposes. The author uses a number of references to and incarnations of these two characters – specifically of Baartmann – to indicate that nothing has changed in post-apartheid or post-colonial times: out of shame women’s images are still changed and domesticated to represent the new South Africa.

Chapter three will deal with Dulcie, her trauma – which is also a collective trauma – and the way this is represented. First I will look at the nature of the trauma and the reason why women are so badly treated. Then I will discuss David’s complicity and his attempts at dealing with Dulcie and the trauma she represents. David wants to talk about what has happened, but is not able to. I will use the work of several trauma theorists, like Dominick LaCapra and Cathy Caruth, to illustrate his attempts at reaching the truth. His relationship with the amanuensis is also very important in this regard. And finally, I will focus on the post-structuralist idea that language always fails, which is why Dulcie can ultimately only be represented in silence.

In my research, I used several critical essays on David’s Story, but Meg Samuelson’s work Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women? was the most influential because it dealt with several similar ideas, such as the image of Baartman and rape in a South African context. Overall, I chose to focus on the women in the novel and the way they are or are not represented, to come to the conclusion that language always fails. I will try to explain how this novel illustrates how women become the victims of male violence as a result of their stereotypical representation as helpless victims; and how these stereotypes are violations as well. In the end I will also argue that Zoë Wicomb’s attempt at adequately representing Dulcie and the traumatic events surrounding her, will lead to a complete loss of language and will illustrate the ultimate violence of representation.
1. Zoë Wicomb

1.1 Biography

Zoë Wicomb was born in 1948 in Namaqualand, South Africa – the same region where David comes from. She came from a poor family, categorized as ‘coloured’ under Apartheid legislation.\(^1\) This disadvantage in South African life – segregation inevitably diminished people’s chances to rise to their full potential – was compensated by her education. She went to a secondary school in Cape Town and later to the University College for Cape Coloureds. In 1970 she moved to England for the first time to study English literature at Reading University. Her knowledge of the English language was a way to a better life, which she has obviously achieved. In 1987 she debuted with a collection of short stories called You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town. Written in the final years of Apartheid, this novel deals with accepting one’s heritage, one’s colouredness. David’s Story was published in 2001 and won the M-NET prize. It was supported by a project of the Feminist Press at The City University of New York called ‘Women Writing Africa’. The aim of this project was to make African women’s voices heard. This way Zoë Wicomb actively helps to make the culture, the history, and the – often traumatic - experiences of South African women known to a broader public. Her personal background is expressed in all her works: David’s Story is not so much about a male guerrilla, as it is about the coloured women who were actively engaged in the struggle against Apartheid as well as those who were not directly involved. Wicomb belongs to the second group, but that does not prevent her from writing about all the aspects of the struggle. As a coloured woman she was better off than the black women, but she was still not as privileged as the white women, and therefore she suffered under the Apartheid regime as well. Dulcie, Sally, Sarie, the unknown narrator, and all the other women in David’s Story possess characteristics that can be traced back to the author herself, or women she might have met. In an interview with Hein Willemse she said that “a good third of David’s Story is based on childhood experiences: people I’ve known, people I’ve spoken to.” (151) The novel is fictional, but her own personal life as well as that of many others occasionally shines through. Her latest publication is Playing in the Light (2006) and besides these three fictional works, she has also published several theoretical or critical essays. Her background not only

\(^1\) “The Population Registration Act of 1950 divided South Africans in four racial categories: White, Coloured, Indian and African. The whites were considered ‘civilized’ and therefore had ‘absolute control over the state’. Since white people were more important, ‘the state was not obliged to provide equal facilities for the subordinate races.’” (Thompson: 190)
influenced the contents of her novels, but also the way in which she is perceived by her reading audience and the critics. When Thomas Olver asked her about her place in the literary canon, she situated herself in the tradition of both coloured writers and post-Apartheid writers. With coloureds she shares “concerns such as identity, subjectivity, the problem of writing itself, born out of our common social and political conditions”, while with post-1994 writers she shares a certain ‘Zeitgeist’ (Olver: 3)

For the last decade she has been living in Scotland, where she is a literature professor at Strathclyde University, but Wicomb herself has stated several times that this has no influence on her work. Hein Willemse calls her ‘an example of hybridity’ – being both Scottish and South African – but she disagrees because she does not see herself as Scottish at all: “I feel like I am in a glass bowl in Scotland. It is not as if I can ever connect with that society. I can’t become Scottish.”(Willemse 149) However, Willemse speculates that her exile must make it easier to write about South African history, because she is removed from the daily realities and because the distance might provide a fresh perspective. She does not have to face people who are upset about her representation of lesser-known aspects of Apartheid, like the violence within the ANC. Wicomb reacts by stating that she does not believe her stories will really hurt people and that she doubts whether the physical distance between herself and her mother country provides her with any extra freedom.(Willemse: 149-50) In an interview with Thomas Olver she elaborates on her feelings towards Scotland and the reason why she keeps writing about a country she left more than a decade ago: “Writing about South Africa is a way of coping with absence and longing and a need to belong.” On several occasions she has expressed her desire to return to South Africa, since “it’s not possible to go on mining memory”.(Olver: 1)

1.2 Feminism and Black Consciousness

Wicomb’s aesthetic voice was shaped by two very different positions in the cultural field, namely Feminism and Black Consciousness. According to Dorothy Driver, who wrote the afterword for the Feminist Press edition of David’s Story, “these two ethical-political positions continually interrogate each other in her fiction, each position nudging the other closer to the truth, giving rise to an awareness of the ways in which women’s bodies are used

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2 In an interview with Eva Hunter, Zoë Wicomb said, “I don’t imagine that I would ever have been able to speak and write if there hadn’t been black consciousness, if there hadn’t been feminism.”. (Hunter: 88)
as signs by political or cultural movements that at the same time refuse to hear what women say.” (239) By using these two ideologies, she is able to represent the experiences of coloured women in South Africa. In most postcolonial African literature, Black Consciousness is used: being Black or coloured is something these authors are proud of, and after years of oppression they want their voice to be finally heard. However, the experiences of the female population are – sometimes purposely – ignored or made light of. In *David’s Story*, Zoë Wicomb tries to reach this unheard female voice or at least portray the problem of finding and representing this voice. To facilitate such a project in a novel, adopting Feminism as a way of thinking is ideal. Her blending of a racial and a female point of view makes this novel all the more interesting.

Feminist theory deals with the discrimination of women, their inferior position in a patriarchal society and their objectification. These problems are painstakingly real in South Africa – the novel gives numerous examples – and they are dealt with from a female perspective. David’s story is not told by David himself, but by an unknown female narrator who constantly changes the story to her own liking. As a result, it is not David’s life that becomes the centre of attention, but Dulcie’s – fictionalized – life. Much to David’s dislike, the story is turned into a story about women. The narrator herself addresses this problem in the beginning of the novel: “I would hate a reader to think that my failure to provide facts, to bridge the gaps in the narrative, has something to do with the nature of our [the narrator and David’s] relationship. Or with my gender.”(Wicomb 2) She might not like it, but her concerns are quite justified. Her female point of view did have an impact on the story, since she changed ‘David’s story’ into ‘Dulcie’s story’. David is rather upset about this – though he later comes to realize that she is in fact very important to his story – and he forces his amanuensis to change it; which she refuses. Her reliability as a writer should definitely be questioned – and I will address this issue in chapter three - but her changes do make the novel more interesting. Zoë Wicomb’s feminist perspective is the cause of the novel’s preoccupation with women and what they do and do not represent. As a woman, choosing feminism as a starting point for her fiction, seems like an obvious choice, since the oppression of women is still a major topic in South African life and using this ideology is a perfect form of resistance. In an attempt to define feminism, Mary Eagleton states that it is all about “the wish to manifest what it is to be female, to declare the experience and perceptions that have been unheard.”(Eagleton 1) However, in traditional feminism not all female voices are heard, but almost exclusively those of white, middle-class, heterosexual women. This way, a feminist tradition has been installed that “is almost as selective and ideologically bound as the
male tradition.” (Eagleton: 3) Feminism resists sexism, but racism and ethnocentricity are still omnipresent. White feminists are unable to recognize the differences between themselves and their black colleagues; they do not see the problem in applying their ideas to Third World women. (Eagleton: 3) The greatest difference between white and black – or coloured – women is the fact that white women can stand up against men without breaking up the unity of a racial group that has long been oppressed. It was therefore necessary for non-white feminists to develop a different kind of feminism: one that takes into account their racial heritage and not only their gender. And this is precisely what Zoë Wicomb does: her feminism is modified by her adoption of Black Consciousness, a form of political consciousness that emerged from the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM)\(^3\). The founder of this movement, Steve Biko, wrote in 1971 that BC “seeks to infuse the Black community with a new-found pride in themselves, their efforts, their value systems, their culture, their religion and their outlook to life.” (Biko: 49) This movement was only partially about the political liberation of the oppressed people in South Africa – not only the Black people, but the Indians and coloureds as well- while the other part was about the psychological liberation of these people. In order to gain freedom, they had to believe in the value of their blackness, they had to understand what it means to be black and accept that, even be proud of it. This consciousness of being black – or in Wicomb’s case, being coloured – is clearly reflected in David’s Story: David’s quest to find his origins, the constant problems characters have with the colour of their skin (or other black ‘trademarks’) are a good indication of that. However, a major problem of the BCM is that it tends to ignore women: when Steve Biko talked about BC, he proclaimed that it was “the realisation by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their subjection.” (Biko: 49) The black female does not seem to be important in their struggle for physical and psychological liberation and it is therefore necessary to mingle BC with feminism in order to adequately represent the experiences of Black women.

Wicomb’s two positions in her writing seem to be conflicting since one focuses on gender and the other on race, but they tend to complement each other perfectly because they both need the other in order to fully explain what it is to be a coloured woman. Wicomb’s problem of reconciling these two views is reflected in Dulcie, a woman in between two worlds: on the one hand she is a fierce soldier who fought against black oppression, while on the other hand she is also a woman who is the victim of a patriarchal society. Just like the author, she tries to

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\(^3\) The Black Consciousness Movement was an anti-Apartheid activist movement that emerged in South Africa in the mid-1960s after the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress were banned.
unite these two positions. Similarly, Wicomb’s ‘conflicting’ views are reflected in the relationship between the female narrator and David: Meg Samuelson points out that their meetings are “an exchange between a radical, militaristic discourse that has in part emerged from the BCM and a liberal humanist discourse associated with certain strands of feminism.” (Samuelson: 132) From their respective positions, they are both unable to understand Dulcie: the narrator is not capable of mentally picturing a woman who is also a guerrilla, while David simply refuses to recognize the different experiences of women in the ANC and in society in general. Also, the narrator seems to indulge in some sort of liberal feminism in which men and women are considered equals, whereas David fails to acknowledge this equality. When the narrator asks him what it is like for women in the Movement, he answers: “Irrelevant(…) In the Movement those kind of differences are wiped out by our common goal.” (Wicomb: 78) He later criticizes her for turning his story into a story about women: “Who would want to read a story like that? It’s not a proper history at all.” (Wicomb: 199) Zoë Wicomb opts for a blend of feminism and Black Consciousness in her aesthetic politics, even though a new, typically African ideology has been developed as well, namely Womanism4. This recent approach to literature and literary criticism departs from the experiences of black women and would therefore seem an ideal position to analyse the history of South African women and the way they are represented, but Wicomb heavily criticizes this approach in her article “To Hear the Variety in Discourses”. According to her, “the necessary linking of race and gender is not adequately theorised in the concept of womanism.” (Wicomb 36) Womanists tend to favour the issue of race over gender and it is therefore not a good substitute for traditional Western feminism. In their struggle against white oppression – both cultural and political – they have the urge to side with their male counterparts against their common enemy. This way they tend to ignore their femininity and pay more attention to the colour of their skin. Desirée Lewis similarly notes that womanism “sees national and racial solidarity as a priority.” And she continues her deconstruction of womanism by explaining how it ‘tends to naturalise stereotypical definitions of masculinity and femininity, and urges women in their conventional supportive roles to assist in male-centred struggles against white oppression.’

4 Alice Walker was the first to use the word to describe the experiences of coloured women in “In Search of our Mother’s Garden: Womanist Prose”. Delores Williams further developed the concept of Womanism and gave this definition: “Womanist theology challenges all oppressive forces impeding black women’s struggle for survival and for the development of a positive, productive quality of life conducive to women’s and the family’s freedom and well-being. Womanist theology opposes all oppression based on race, sex, class, sexual preference, physical ability, and caste” (Williams: 67).
(Lewis: 162) Both Wicomb and Lewis are very critical of womanism since it seems to represent everything that feminism is against: they are not resisting the patriarchal system, nor trying to change their stereotypical positions. Whether Wicomb’s presumption is correct or not, she does not support womanism and prefers her own feminist approach modified by Black Consciousness.
2. Writing Back: Questioning and Changing the Representation of Women

In postcolonial literature, ‘writing back’ to colonial discourse is an omnipresent phenomenon. Authors like to address centuries-old discourses that misrepresented them and their ancestors, and they would change the representation of their people in order to proclaim their value as a unified nation. In the ex-colonies, previously oppressed and objectified people would use literature to prove their worth. In *David’s Story* this phenomenon is touched upon as well, but Zoë Wicomb tends to criticize it. Her novel is not simply an act of writing back to colonial discourse, but to postcolonial discourse as well. Coloured South Africans had been subjugated since Jan Van Riebeeck arrived at the Cape in 1657, and it was not until 1991 – when Apartheid was abolished – that they could really start constructing a South African nation. This nation-building project was very important during the transition period – and therefore a major theme in *David’s Story* – but Wicomb criticizes its consequences, specifically in regard to women. Her criticism is especially noticeable in her references to two historical figures, whose bodies were used in both imperial and in nationalist projects: Sarah Baartman and Eva/Krotoa. The latter is mentioned only briefly, but is nonetheless important since she is a woman whose image was often changed: she was seen as an ally of the Dutch and traitor of the Khoisan, or vice versa. Her final representation is that of ‘Mother of the Nation’. Similarly, Sarah Baartman, who was portrayed by the colonizers as a sexualized savage – her Otherness and sexuality were considered rightful reasons for a forced ‘civilisation’ - was later turned into a symbol of the ‘new’ South Africa. In building their new nation - with its appropriate icons - South Africans completely disregarded the truth about these women and they used colonial discourse in their representation of Sarah and Eva. Ironically, they ‘violated’ these women’s bodies in the exact same way as the colonizers did - which is the reason for Wicomb’s criticism. These two women of mythic proportions have always been represented by others, we never heard their own voice, but nonetheless their bodies have always been used to convey certain meanings. And Meg Samuelson even wonders whether “the project of remembering nation, dismembers women” (Samuelson: 2).

In the second part of this chapter, the women of *David’s Story* are the main focus. Just as Baartman’s body was used to create a certain image for black people, certain roles are created for present-day women as well. Out of shame, many women are placed in domestic roles; and female soldiers like Dulcie are an almost unacceptable exception. Eva/Krotoa and Sarah Baartman’s influence can be found everywhere in the novel; they are incarnated in women like Dulcie, Sally and the narrator, and Baartman’s steatopygia is a physical characteristic of
every female. The numerous implicit and explicit references to these two historical figures and their modern incarnations all indicate the importance of the South African past, the women and the way representation is constantly altered to fit in a particular project.

2.1 Mythification of Sarah Baartman and Eva/Krotoa

In the post-Apartheid era, a nationalistic discourse was constructed around two historical figures of South African history, in an attempt to write back to the racist colonial discourse in which black or coloured people were depicted as savages. The narrative that was created for these mythical figures is a good example of how the past is altered to suit present interests. There are only a few facts known of Sarah Baartman’s and Eva’s life, while the rest of their story is completely invented by both the colonizers and their own people. Sarah Baartman was a Khoisan woman - born in the Eastern Cape of South Africa - who lived from 1789 until 1815. She was a slave of Dutch farmers near Cape Town. In 1810 the surgeon Alexander Dunlop took her to England, where she was exhibited by Hendrick Cezar as the Hottentot Venus. Later, she was exhibited in Paris by an animal trainer until she died in 1815. The French anatomist Georges Cuvier performed an autopsy on her, and he was the first to expose her enlarged genitalia to the world – she was only exhibited for her steatopygia, or protruding buttocks. So before and after her death, her body was always reduced to her sexual parts. A cast of her body, her skeleton, her brain, and her genitalia were kept at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris. In 1995 South Africa began campaigning for the return of her remains and on 9 August 2002 – on Women’s Day - Baartman was reburied. David’s Story was published in 2000, while the South African government was still petitioning for the return. Eva, born Krotoa, was a Khoisan girl who acted as a translator for the Dutch colonizers. According to

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5 The exhibition of Sarah Baartman caused a public scandal in London and several groups demanded the abolition of slavery. "The state’s objection was as much to her lewdness as to her status as an indentured black."(Gilman: 213) Abolitionists objected to her display on humanitarian grounds. According to Qureshi it was this ‘politicization’ and not her exhibition that made her so unusual. “There was little mention of her whilst she remained a curiosity – the turning point in her status came with abolitionist interest in her repatriation.” She did not immediately become famous because of her steatopygia or genitalia; it was the abolitionist interest – just as she would later become famous because of the feminists. After all, she was not such an amazing curiosity because of “the considerable presence of black peoples in Regency London”. (Qureshi: 239) Her skin colour was not really rare and she was included in “debates on slavery and the status of the black.”(Qureshi: 241) Her distinctive ethnicity – namely that of Khoisan – was purposely ignored; a phenomenon that happened more often: the colonizers ignored her distinctiveness so she could stand for the sexualized savage, while in later postcolonial times she simply came to stand for South Africa as a whole.

6 The report Cuvier made about his investigation “reveals a tension between acknowledging Baartman’s humanity (she is not even named), and the expectation of bestial habits borne from the belief that she represents an inferior human form.” (Qureshi: 242)
Julia C. Wells, she “served respectively as a youthful goodwill apprentice, interpreter, trading agent, ambassador for a high-ranking chief and peace negotiator in time of war.” (Wells: 418) Eva’s success depended heavily on the level of trust she gained both with the Dutch and her own people. She was quite close to the Dutch commander Jan Van Riebeeck and she also had “the unique ability to acquire information about the Khoena7 of interest to the Dutch.” (Wells: 423) So, it seemed as if she favoured the Dutch people above her own, which resulted in a break with her own people. After she had married a European – a Danish surgeon by the name of Pieter van Meerhoff – she probably converted completely to the Dutch way of life. The cause of her death is unknown, though rumours insist that she could never fully adapt to the Dutch society, in which interpreters like her and her husband were no longer necessary. During her life she had tasted success and in the final stages of her life nothing was left of that: it would therefore be quite possible that she slowly faded away and died: “The cause in which she had thrown her life no longer existed.” (Wells: 436) Over the course of history, their life-stories – especially Baartman’s – have always been used to create certain – unjustified - images of the Black people. First I will discuss the way they were represented during colonial times: Baartman was an icon for the sexualized savage, whereas Eva was associated with treachery and alcoholism. Then I will address the issue of the later domestication of their images by the South Africans themselves, who felt ashamed for their inferior status. And finally, they were turned into national symbols: Mothers of South Africa. In David’s Story, Zoë Wicomb refers several times to the violence that was done to their images and in her essay “Shame and Identity” she mentions that when it comes to Sarah Baartman, one has to consider “the nasty, unspoken question of concupiscence that haunts coloured identity, the issue of nation-building implicit in the matter of her return, her contested ethnicity (Black, Khoi, or ‘coloured’?) and the vexed question of representation.” (Wicomb: 93)

2.1.1 Imperial Discourse: Sexualized Savage

During the period of colonization, Sarah Baartman became a symbol for the essence of blackness, and more specifically for the black female. She became “the iconic figure of African womanhood in metropolitan fantasies: fundamentally primitive and lascivious.” (Samuelson: 86) As I already mentioned, Sarah Baartman was transported to England in

7 Julia C. Wells uses the word Khoena as an alternative for ‘Khoisan’ or ‘KhoiKhoi’.
1810, where she was exhibited – among other strange animals who represented the imperial conquests – as the ‘Hottentot Venus’. ‘Hottentot’ obviously refers to the African tribe, whereas Venus is an ironic reference to the Roman goddess of love, who unlike Baartman was widely admired instead of scrutinized. The Europeans were fascinated by this ‘caged creature’ because of her unusually large buttocks – a condition called steatopygia – and genitals. Her appearance was quite normal for Khoisan women, but not for White women: the European colonizers and scientists used this difference to prove the inferiority and the oversexedness of the blacks. However, it has to be noted that during her life-time, she always refused to show her genitals: only after her death were they fully exposed and examined by the French scientist Georges Cuvier. His anatomical studies confirmed the differences with ‘normal’ white women. As I said, her most noticeable trait was her steatopygia or large buttocks, which, in European eyes, promptly became a physical aspect of every black woman in the colonies. “When the Victorians saw the female black, they saw her in terms of her buttocks and saw represented by the buttocks all the anomalies of her genitalia.” “The presence of exaggerated buttocks points to the other, hidden sexual signs, both physical and temperamental, of the black female.” (Gilman: 219) Those other ‘hidden signs’ were her genitalia – which were considerably larger than those of white women – and the sexual overdrive that was associated with it. As a result, all black females were considered lascivious. Gilman confirms that in the nineteenth century it was perceived that the black female possessed a ‘primitive sexual appetite’ because she had ‘primitive genitalia’ (Gilman: 213) And he also mentions the motives for creating such an inferior icon: “If their sexual parts could be shown to be inherently different, this would be a sufficient sign that the blacks were a separate (and, needless to say, lower) race, as different from the European as the proverbial orang-utan.” (Gilman: 216) The different anatomy of black and white women was crucial for the imperialist project. By the portrayal of black females as savage and lascivious Others, European citizens got the impression that civilization – or rather oppression – of the people in the colonies was a necessity and it had to be done by every means possible. Sarah Baartman’s image - and as a result that of all the indigenous people - was inherently different and inferior to that of the normal white woman. “As postcolonial feminists have pointed out, the indigenous woman’s body became a crucial site of contestation during the colonial era."

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8 This was called a sinus pudoris, otherwise known as the tablier French word for ‘apron’) or ‘curtain of shame’, all names for the elongated labia of some Khoisan women.
9 Apparently, prostitutes were also banned from the category of ‘normal woman’. In the western iconography of the nineteenth century the icon of the Hottentot female and the icon of the prostitute were often linked.
colonial regimes focused on women’s bodies in order to justify colonial rule by proving the
supposed barbarity of indigenous peoples.” (Walsh: 2) The Africans were considered by the
public as savages with an enormous sexual appetite, which made civilizing or domesticating
them necessary for ‘the good of mankind’. Sarah Baartman’s role as an icon for all black
women did not end with her death. When she was later exhibited, she was still an icon for the
Khoisan women in general; later people could still go see her and form the same opinion as
their ancestors: she was “an ethnographic metonym, a role exploited in all forms of her
display in a chain linking her to all Khoisan women and Africa. Her role was an exemplar of
Khoisan anatomy reinforced by the synecdochal nature of the museum itself: objects are
decontextualized and re-presented as substitutions for the whole, thus embedding the
associations institutionally.” (Qureshi 246) Now, in postcolonial times, Baartman’s image is
changed in a positive way while “Cuvier’s humanity is under question.” (87)

Eva, a negotiator between the Dutch and the Khoisan, must have been one of the first
women in South Africa associated with miscegenation. Therefore, the colonizers and even her
own people started to ruin her name and turn her image into that of a disloyal alcoholic. David
describes her as ‘the first native woman of no parentage who in spite of being taken into the
cleanliness of the Dutch castle, in spite of marriage to a white man and fluency in his
language, reverted to type and sold her own brown children’s clothes for liquor.’(38) The fact
that he wanted to include a piece of text on her illustrates how people, over time, came to see
her in a more positive way. Just like Baartman, the South Africans did not choose to represent
her correctly, but instead they turned these two women into symbols of domestication and
nationalism.

2.1.2 Shame and Domestication

Nowadays, Sarah Baartman and Eva/Krotoa are granted the title of ‘Mothers of South
Africa’, but a lot of time and effort was needed to change their colonial image into this more
positive one. Being a mother could not be associated with wild sexuality and alcohol abuse,
and therefore a project of domestication was put into motion. Instead of being proud of their
ancestors, South Africans adopted the European point of view and perceived themselves and
these two icons as inferior to white people. To boost their self-esteem, they decided to change
their image into a more proper one. Since the nation was seen as a family, these women were
granted the image of mothers: they were civilized and domesticated according to Western
standards: “Rather than deconstructing the binary of domesticated (white) versus sexualised (black) femininity, however, current discourse has focused instead on the task of shifting Bartmann from one category to the other, without destabilising the terms themselves.” (Samuelson: 95) In an attempt to write back to empire, the South Africans got stuck in the same discourse: black women were supposed to be more like white women. The shame which the colonizers experienced when they first gazed at those uncovered black female bodies, became their shame.

In this project of domestication, they ignored the women behind the iconicity. Sarah Baartman and Krotoa were turned into mothers – an image which is associated with subordination and obedience - even though reality suggests otherwise: the complexities of their lives were completely ignored. They were both strong-willed women, who even played important roles, but misfortune led to their downfall and the violation of their representations. For instance, Sarah Baartman may have been ‘enslaved’ for several years, but during that time she always refused to show her most private parts. She may have been the object of scrutiny, mockery and abuse, but she always managed to hold on to what little dignity she had left. Likewise, Eva – who is considered a helpless ‘tool’ of the colonizers – must have been a strong woman: according to Julia C. Wells, she was a woman “who exercised an extraordinary level of control and influence over the key men in her life.” The Dutch people desperately needed reliable translators, and as a woman, she “exploited gender stereotypes.” (Wells: 418) At the same time, the important role she fulfilled for the Dutch also indicates her high position in the Khoisan society.

It is clear that “women are shaped into the ideal forms that reflect the desired national body – usually that of Mother, or simply Womb.” (Samuelson: 2) Everything else, their true life account, is simply forgotten to fit in the project. They both exemplify “the domination of women and the flattening out of their lives as they are shaped into vessels of a national allegory.” (Samuelson: 5) South Africa’s shame-filled response to the imperial image that was created for Baartman and Eva led to yet another misrepresentation and as a result their memory was violated all over again.

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10 Meg Samuelson calls her ‘Sarah Bartmann’ instead of ‘Sarah Baartman’ – which is the name Zoë Wicomb uses in the novel.
2.1.3 Nationalism

The new South Africa gave birth to the ‘rainbow nation’: an imaginative construction which was created after Apartheid had ended. With segregation being over, South Africans began the task of uniting their people: black, white, and coloured. The idea of nationhood – depending heavily on the people’s state of mind – was completed with the admission of a number of iconic figures representing this group of people who came stronger out of the Apartheid era. The mythification of Sarah Baartman and Eva/Krotoa was completed when their images of Mothers were turned into ‘Mothers of the Country’. As symbols of the new South Africa, they represent a nation in which the differences between the racial groups are neglected. They became symbolic ancestors to every South African – regardless of their skin colour. Also, they represent the end of centuries of oppression. They ‘are’ the new South Africa, in which the past is put to rest: “national rhetoric insists that Bartmann’s homecoming brings an end to the ordeal of sexual exploitation and abuse she experienced during, and after, her life.”

(Samuelson 100) In other words, if the past is included in their nationalist project, then it is only to show how proud they are of their roots. The negative aspects are deliberately forgotten.

As Mothers to the nation, these women “bear the symbolic weight of nationalism; their bodies are the contested sites on which national identities are erected and national unity is forged.” (Samuelson: 2) Sarah Baartman and Eva/Krotoa were chosen to represent the country because they are ‘symbolic threshold figures’: “they all inhabited the colonial contact zone.”(Samuelson 3) They existed between the colonizers and the indigenous people and now between the past and the present – in the transitional period. They also possessed a certain physiology which the colonizers considered savage, but which is perfectly accepted in the modern South African society. Also, Baartman was deprived of her home just like many other South Africans during the Apartheid years. Her homecoming – literally: her body was reburied in her native country – mirrors their homecoming. As for Eva, her attempt at reconciling her Khoisan roots and newly found European influences might be an internal conflict that many young South Africans can relate to. In David’s Story, this nationalist project – with Baartman and Eva as icons – is often questioned. In several interviews and articles, Zoë Wicomb has contested this project of nation-building, first and foremost because it rules out the differences between people. Nationalism implies a strict unity, or as Bishop

11 Their assumptions are incorrect. Sexual and physical abuse is still rampant, and racism s not extinct either. In chapter four I will explain more about the violation that women still suffer from in South Africa.
Desmond Tutu said on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: “Ours is a remarkable country. Let us celebrate our diversity, our differences. God wants us as we are. South Africa wants and needs the Afrikaner, the English, the coloured, the Indian, the black. We are sisters and brothers in one family – God’s family, the human family.” He may want to celebrate the differences, but in the end they are ignored to make this new nation work. Sander L. Gilman points out the need for a ‘homogeneous image’: all the differences between the various racial groups – or other categories – were more or less lifted and the icons belong to all of them. The protagonist David is one of those people who feel this way: in a conversation with the narrator he insists that Baartman represent every single one of them:

“Besides, what on earth has Baartman to do with your history?
But it’s not a personal history as such that I’m after, not biography or autobiography. I know we’re supposed to write that kind of thing but I have no desire to cast myself as a hero, he sneers. Nothing wrong with including a historical figure.
But she may not even have been Griqua.
David gives me a withering look. Baartman belongs to all of us.
Ergo, we are all Griquas, I laugh.”(Wicomb: 135)

The narrator is mocking David, but the reality is that most South Africans feel the same way: Baartman represents all of them, and therefore they are all the same. A second problem that Wicomb has with the nationalist project is that the colonial and Apartheid years are completely ignored. People like to pretend that the past no longer has any influence. Samuelson agrees that “the project of re-making the nation as Home, which was enacted around Bartmann’s body, is one that cannot acknowledge such continuities and complicities between the colonial past and the national present.” (93) Wicomb’s critique seems justified: the lives of women in David’s Story all contain similarities, no matter what period they live in. The novel not only illustrates the author’s problems with nationalism as a whole, but more importantly, her problems with the use of women’s bodies as icons. First of all, because the South Africans use the exact same discourse as the colonizers: they domesticate the women and turn them into Mothers of the Nation. This way, they are re-objectified: they are “re-established as a curiosity merely renamed as cultural icon” (Qureshi: 251)

A second concern Wicomb has is that an individual’s suffering is compared to the suffering of a large group of people – thereby completely ignoring the real, personal pain Baartman and Eva suffered. Every South African associates himself with Sarah Baartman,
including the Griquas, who are so prominently figured in *David’s Story*. Wicomb claims that it is just “another version of the fashionable scramble for alterity – and with no regard to the further outrage to her memory.” (Olver: 4) Every group uses her for their own means, to represent certain aspects that suit their group, but obviously that was not what Baartman was about. “And such appropriation of an icon of brutalisation and oppression as Baartman undoubtedly is, does it not smack horribly of staking a claim on suffering? A pathetic and distasteful cry of ‘We have suffered as much as blacks’? Or: ‘We are as indigenous as blacks’. Which is to deny the fact that she is already of mixed race.” (Olver: 4) Wicomb’s critique may be justified, but this does not mean that she gives up on the idea of a nation completely. Her perspective on the project of nation-building is that she recognizes the necessity of it during times of oppression – since it unites people, “it produces the system that would overthrow the old system” (Willemse: 151) - but she also points out that people are now stuck with it. And in every nation, certain people are not accepted: they are marginalized. In this case, the coloured people seem the greatest victims, since they embody the most visible evidence of the colonial and Apartheid past. But overall, she does not “want to be too negative about nationhood because it’s also a necessity produced by colonialism. You need a strategic nationalism to mobilise people against oppression.” (Olver 4) She only wants to warn people that after freedom “it spirals into the ill-health of exclusion, intolerance of others, xenophobia, meanings that have always been contained within it, but have been happily overshadowed by the common purpose of liberation.” (Olver 4) In *David’s Story*, Zoë Wicomb is writing back to imperial discourse as well, but not by covering up the truth about these two historical females. Instead, she shows how what happened to them still has an enormous influence on the present. The women in the novel all experience similar things, and it is shame that puts them into certain roles.

2.2 Sarah Baartman and Eva/Krotoa incarnated

In *David’s Story* Saah Baartman and Eva/Krotoa are not only mentioned in connection with the nationalist project, but there are also traces of them to be found in the other female characters of the novel. Wicomb shows how the past still haunts the present and how more modern women go through similar experiences. According to Shane Graham, “Both women’s stories become ur-texts of a sort for the situation of the women in David’s life – in other words, they are phantoms whose later incarnations include Dulcie, the narrator, and his wife
Sally.” (5) Baartman’s presence is especially noticeable in the women who carry her name: Saartjie – who later changed her name to Sarah and Sally - and her mother Sarie Meintjies. Sally’s different names remind us of the number of names under which Baartman is known: Saartjie, Sarah or Sara - not to mention the variable spelling for her last name. Sally changed her name so that it would sound more European, whereas Baartman did not really have a say in the matter: people had simply forgotten the correct spelling. This is of course a very explicit recurrence of the past, but Baartman is also present in the characters’ lives in a different way: just like Baartman’s image, South African women are domesticated. Sally was an active ANC member – that is how she met David – but when Apartheid had ended, she was forced by her fellow comrades into the role of housewife. The male members of the Movement reclaimed their superiority in the country, and women who did not comply would be severely punished – Dulcie, for instance, ends up on a hit list. As it turns out, this act of domesticating powerful women is a phenomenon of all times: Rachael, the wife of Andrew LeFleur – who lived from 1867 until 1941 - was pushed into a subordinate role as well. Before her marriage, she was a modern woman, who was greatly influenced by European customs; but afterwards, she handed over her power to her husband and for the rest of her life she “resolved to obey”. (Wicomb: 48) Rachael’s domestication is reflected in the name her people gave her, a name that immediately brings Sarah Baartman and Eva/Krotoa to mind: ‘Mother of the Volk’. Baartman and Eva’s image has always been invented, and the same thing happens to Sally and Dulcie. When Sally left home, her parents Sarie and Joop assumed that she was “running after men, ‘cause for what other reason could a girl want to disappear so mysteriously, and although [Sarie] did not speak to Joop for days when he said she was whoring around, she knew deep down that he must be right.” (Wicomb: 122) Sally’s absence was linked to her sexuality, because the truth – in their eyes – was even worse: she was actually involved in politics, but her parents wondered whether ‘it was not worse than whoring?’(Wicomb: 122) Dulcie’s life, on the other hand, was invented on a much larger scale: the narrator of David’s Story created an entire life for her, based on a few facts David had provided her with. The narrator even admits that “since there is little to go by other than disconnected images, snippets of Dulcie, I must put things together as best as I can, invent, and hope that David’s response will reveal something.”(Wicomb: 80) The story – complete with thoughts and feelings – that the narrator created for her may or may not do justice to what she actually went through. As I said earlier, Dulcie is one of those women who was supposed to be domesticated in post-Apartheid times, but she refused and remained in her strong position. Not only was she a military leader within the Movement, but we also see her
working as a negotiator between civilians and the UDF.\textsuperscript{12} Her strong character and her power of speech are inspiring to David, he is mesmerized by ‘her boldness’ (Wicomb: 125) Her role as a middle man between two groups of people reminds us of Eva’s middle position between the Khoisan people and the Dutch colonizers. An even stronger incarnation of Eva is the narrator of the story. She is a learned woman who constantly has to shift between her European education and her African roots. David often accuses her of not being able to understand what happened to Dulcie, because her world “is another world altogether.” (Wicomb: 196) Just like Eva, her important role as a connection between two cultures works for and against her: their value as writers or negotiators is thankfully accepted, but their distance from their own background is often criticized.

Sarah Baartman’s steatopygia made her an icon for all South African women, and \textit{David’s Story} illustrates that it is indeed a condition that many women possess. To Hein Willemse, Wicomb admitted that one of the main purposes of the novel consisted of recovering and redefining the theme of steatopygia and that she wanted to write back at those negative colonial descriptions. (Willemse: 146-147). So she tried to redefine it in more positive ways. For instance, the sexuality that it is associated with can be seen as good thing. David and Sally demonstrate how it can be very appealing to men: “Steatopygous Sally, turning to the tune of the collapsed springs of the mattress, presses a buttock into David’s thin hip, and offering warmth and well-being that brings a sleep-smile to his lips, does not as yet know of the epithet or its meaning.” (16-17) Sally is proud of the shape of her body: she is not aware of the humiliating meaning steatopygia had in the past. In the novel, steatopygia is often linked to power. For instance, her large buttocks contained Rachael’s authority, which made Le Fleur fall “in the swell of her full-grown steatopygia a spirit moving him to husbandhood. She handed over without a word, and without betraying an iota of the fear he inspired in her, the symbols of authority passed on by Adam Kok I.” (Wicomb: 46) Later, Rachael’s physical appearance also saves his life, when she ties a package of important documents on her back: “the package settling in the curve of her back, in the generous space shaped by steatopygia, where it would never be found.” (55) Even though she was placed in a subordinate role, she still kept some of her former power in the form of those large buttocks. This famous condition is also the reason why certain women were selected to fulfil the important role of Rain Sister. These were “the women blessed with the most bountiful behinds, the queens of steatopygia, [they] were the chosen Brides of Christ” and “they would

\textsuperscript{12} The UDF or United Democratic Front was a group which recognized the need for “unity in struggle through which all democrats, regardless of race, religion or colour shall take part together.” (Thompson:229)
be the ones to carry water to the promised land. Not the volksmoeder, Racael Susanna, who was no longer in good health, but Antjie and four other women who had been shaped by God into perfect vessels for collecting and carrying back radical moisture from the rain-soaked Cape peninsula with which to temper the radical heat of Namaqualand.” (Wicomb: 153) They were seen as ‘vessels’, just as Sarah Baartman and Eva/Krotoa were also reduced to domesticated mothers, whose only job was to take care of their children, the South African nation. As ‘vessels’, these women’s sole job was to bring back water from the Cape. Almost every other powerful woman in the novel is described as suffering from steatopygia as well: Dulcie has a ‘sturdy steatopygous form’ (212) and Rachael’s aunt is even known as ‘Lady Kok of steatopygic fame’ (42). Wicomb wanted to change the representation of steatopygia, because in the past, it was a sign of black concupiscence. When David calls his wife steatopygous, he “falters over the word that has fired his imagination, that has set the story on its course so to speak, for he is anxious, having found the fancy name, that it will not be understood simply as natural fat padding of the buttocks but rather might be read in white people’s pathological terms.” (17) And when the narrator alludes to the mixed heritage of David, she says that it “brings us once more to the field of concupiscence, a subject that after all cannot be avoided in the writing of this story. For David and I were left to patch together a family history, and more’s the pity that it would seem to support the colonial assumption that concupiscence and steatopygia are necessarily linked.” (96) However, it is not only dangerous from a Western point of view to misunderstand steatopygia; the South Africans themselves tend to associate it with sexuality as well. As I explained, Baartman was domesticated out of shame, but in the present time, women occasionally still feel awkward about their body. The narrator illustrates this:

“Recently I have become aware of the complexities of walking . It has something to do with the realisation that other people stride purposefully, mark out their paths mentally and do not expect to deviate, so that anyone else, especially a clumsy, steatopygous woman like myself simply has to get out of the way or risk being knocked down. Looking back to trace my craven zigzag paths, I cannot help but feel a sense of shame. “ (201)

Wicomb tries to show that there is no reason for women to feel ashamed of their bodies, since steatopygia is a perfectly natural condition that has nothing to do with savagery or lasciviousness. In fact, Sally explains the origins of her condition:
“No one had told her that all that keeping still encouraged the growth of an uncommonly large posterior, and by the time Sally thought of taking more exercise, steatopygia had set in for good, lycra had been invented, and she was doomed to long-legged step-ins that turned fresh spring days into a stifling tropical swelter. It was the Movement that offered freedom in the form of loose khaki trousers and a break from reading about the sad coloured condition. And marriage to David, she sighed, that lost her her place in MK – and took her back to the overrated business of reading novels.” (119)

If she had not left the Movement and stopped all physical exercise, her condition might not have been that obvious. Qureshi confirms that ‘her steatopygia was simply the excessive accumulation of fatty tissue.’ (Qureshi: 242)

Another element of shame in the novel is the women’s hair. Obviously, this can also be related to the shame South Africans have always felt about their bodies; and just as they tried to cover up Baartman’s private parts – both literally and figuratively – they hide their wild hair under nylon stockings. During Apartheid, coloured people were very much occupied with their hair, since it could determine whether they were considered black or white. In accordance with the Population Registration Act of 1950, people were divided in racial groups based on their appearance. ‘If the authorities had doubt as to the colour of a persons skin, they would resort to a “pencil in hair test”. A pencil was pushed in the hair, and if it remained in the persons hair without dropping, it signified frizzy hair, the person would then be classified as coloured. If the pencil dropped out the person would be classified as white.’ (Rebirth Africa Life on the Continent) It was therefore very important to have flat hair - as we see with many women in the novel. In general, coloured girls “wore the cut-off ends of stockings – or rather those modern panty hose – on their heads to flatten their hair, swirled smoothly around the skull after a punishing night in rollers.” (Wicomb: 7) And when Sally was born, it was “ascertained that she was a girl, and [Sarie] got ready the nylon stocking to pull over her head, for there was much woolly hair that had to be smoothed and flattened over the pulsating crown.’ (9) All this indicates the subjugation of black or coloured women, but as the novel illustrates, this flattening of the hair was later exploited by the guerrillas. It could be interpreted as a mockery of the Apartheid legislation, when the female guerrillas pull their stockings completely over their faces to remain unknown. This way, they could use the stockings to fight their subordination in South African society.
“The Movement managed to recruit so many coloured women. Who does not know that resourcefulness and frugality are virtues next to godliness and cleanliness? In the stunning heat it was not surprising that bare-legged young women found a new use for the charity bags of old stockings - We cut the up for pillows, Madam - but they came to serve the sinister function of fighting the curl in the hair of women who found that it took no more than a swift tug to drag the nylon across the face and radically transform their sleek-haired selves into guerrillas. Thus killing two birds with one stone, they saw in the Movement a liberation from laying their weary heads on the discarded panty hose of the rich. That Africanisation would at the same time discourage the fight against frizzy hair was an irony which they could not foresee.” (9)

The people who fought for freedom assumed that once Apartheid ended, they could just be themselves and possess any kind of hairstyle or skin colour they want. When Sally talks about her daughter, she has big dreams:

“hardly had the little mite uttered her first word than her hair was pulled tight in preparation for the stocking. It was only as she drew the nylon over the head of the squealing child that Sally thought otherwise. They had been speaking of nothing other than liberation. It would be, they were sure, only months before the overthrow of apartheid, so that the little girl would be no guerrilla, oh no, she would be a doctor, a lawyer, or even a scientist; only months before children would sit in neat rows on their school benches, reciting their multiplication tables rather than running wild and being mown down in the streets; only months before rows of girls would whip the stockings from their heads.” (15)

But even after segregation was stopped, coloured people and their wild hair were still not that easily accepted in society.

Sarah Baartman and Eva/Krotoa’s voices are long lost, but modern-day coloured women still experience the same things: they are pushed into domestic roles and feel ashamed of their bodies. Unlike Sarie’s belief that there really is a ‘new’ South Africa, the past still haunts the present. David’s Story is an attempt at writing back to imperial discourse to correct the image of Sarah and Eva, but it is also a means to show how strong modern women relive their experiences every single day.
3. Dulcie: The Embodiment of Unrepresentable Trauma

The novel may be called ‘David’s’ story, but the true protagonist of his tale is his fellow comrade Dulcie Oliphant. Little is known about this woman, except that she filled an important position in the Movement. Just like David Dirkse, Dulcie is a guerrilla fighter for ‘Umkhonto we Sizwe’ (MK), the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC). Not only her military actions were legendary, but she also seemed to be an extraordinary politician “who wins the trust of the conservative Griquas of Kliprand by knowing their hymns and praising their sense of community.” (Gane 106) Dulcie is the silent voice in the story, since David is not able to talk about her and the trauma she represents.

Severe sexual violence was inflicted on her and on other women as a result of their increasingly active involvement in the struggle. South Africa is a patriarchal society in which women are supposed to play the part of helpless beings with no other task in life than being a wife and a mother. During the struggle, several women – including Dulcie and Sally – gained the same power as men, which resulted in their inevitable punishment by torture and rape. They were constantly reminded of their subordinate status and they simply had to accept what the men did to them. Dulcie and Sally never speak up about the violations of their bodies, which makes them complicit as well as resistant.

These atrocities, committed in the name of freedom, have a traumatic impact on the protagonist because ‘his beloved’ is one of the victims and because he might have been complicit in her torture. As a result, he feels compelled to talk about his life and the things that are bothering him, but he finds himself unable to do that. He came up with the solution of hiring an amanuensis to write his story down, so that he could distance himself from it. Unfortunately, he never seems to get over his traumatic experiences and in the end he chooses suicide over dealing with the reality of the events. The narrator then continues to write the novel because she is traumatized through him and seeks closure as well. She invents a storyline for Dulcie, but is unable to get any definitive answers about what happened.

Dulcie remains silent in the novel, but, paradoxically, seems to speak through this silence. Her absence draws attention to the other absences, such as the experiences of all those female ANC members, and it also challenges our understanding of language as a means to represent reality. Dulcie and the trauma that she suffered, can never be expressed in language because language ultimately fails.
3.1 Gendered violence: the role of women within the ANC

The trauma that Dulcie experienced is a constant element throughout the story, but the circumstances of that traumatic experience remain just as Dulcie – elusive. There is no doubt that Dulcie is a rape victim, but David’s behaviour suggest that there is a lot more to it.

3.1.1 Re-domestication

Even though we never hear her own voice, we can assume that Dulcie was traumatized by the treatment she received as a female member of the ANC. In her ‘invented’ storyline she repeatedly goes through traumatic experiences of a sexual nature - experiences that are meant to teach her a lesson. In a patriarchal society like South-Africa, it is nearly impossible to accept women who do not fit the stereotypical roles of women as helpless beings whose main task in life is to support their husbands and take care of their children. As the new representation of Sarah Baartman and Eva/Krotoa as Mothers of the Country already suggested, this is a violence on the true nature of women in general. Reality is much more ambiguous than those men like to think, and their need for more freedom fighters brought their ideas of the roles of women in danger. Apartheid and the resistance to it created a new type of woman: the female activist. “Women’s occasional protest activities and extensive participation in liberation movements that began in Africa in the 1960s was inspiring, and certainly challenged traditional male-female relations as small numbers of women even took up arms.” (Walsh and Scully 4) During the years of the struggle, these female ANC members, especially the guerrillas, were very useful to the Movement and they had a chance to fill important positions. Both Sally and Dulcie went to training camps in other countries, where they were prepared for their tasks as guerrillas – although Sally later became a more passive member of the ANC. These camps were meant to empower the members, but they were also used to show the women their rightful place in society. The narrator hints several times that in order to mean anything in the movement, these women had to put aside their female sexuality and appearance and they had to behave as men. Sally, who seemed to be doing some sort of spy work, never had to go this far and she remained very feminine. But Dulcie - being a true guerrilla – definitely has the appearance of a man. The narrator infers from several conversations she had with David that Dulcie is the fearless leader of an MK unit and therefore very significant within the Movement. To keep her in place and to keep the stereotypical roles of men and women intact, the men had to make a statement. And they did so in the most explicit way by violating her body and reducing her to a helpless victim – the
role she was meant to fill in a patriarchal society. Gillian Gane points out that rape is the best way of showing women their place because it is “always a political act – the exertion of male power over a female body.” (Gane 104) Helen Moffett explains that their treatment of women is also a projection of the way all black and coloured men are treated by the white people, by the ones who installed the Apartheid regime in the first place. Their own women have become the Others who have to be punished in order to protect society. “Under Apartheid, the dominant group used methods of regulating blacks and reminding them of their subordinate status that permeated not just public and political spaces, but also private and domestic spaces. Today it is gender rankings that are maintained and women that are regulated. This is largely done through sexual violence, in a national project in which it is quite possible that many men are buying into the notion that in enacting intimate violence on women, they are performing a necessary work of social stabilisation.” He also expresses the need to “deconstruct our current narratives of both rape and race”, which is exactly what Zoë Wicomb is trying to do. (Moffett 132) It is important for the author to show that strong women do not deserve to be physically and psychologically tortured, since they are definitely not subordinate to men.¹³

Meg Samuelson says that another reason for the rapes has to do with their shame about the colour of their skin, but also “the shame of women’s participation in the struggle – which is discursively equivalent to the shame of one’s woman being raped – that is projected onto women.” (Samuelson 138) As was the case with the creation of Sarah Baartman and Krotoa’s new domestic image, shame is one of the main reasons why men are driven to commit such

¹³ According to Helen Moffett in ‘These women, they force us to rape them’, there is indeed “a disturbing pattern in which a woman is described as ‘asking for it’ because she has asserted her own will, answered back, moved around on her own, and so on. So it would appear that, in some cases, men are ‘forced’ to rape women because the latter dare to practise freedom of movement, adopt a confident posture or gait, make eye contact, speak out for themselves: in other words, when women visibly demonstrate a degree of autonomy or self-worth that men find unacceptable, they are perceived as sufficiently subversive and threatening as to compel men to ‘discipline’ them through sexual violence. What is more, if rape is believed to be deserved – if a woman is simply being ‘corrected’, or ‘taught a lesson’, it is somehow not considered to be a criminal activity. This rationale for rape is deeply familiar to anyone who grew up under Apartheid. This is the same script that was used during five decades of apartheid rule to justify everyday white-on-black violence as a socially approved and necessary means of ‘showing the “darkies” their place’. This is not so much a script of flat-out racial or gender rejection, as one that is violently punitive towards those members of a subclass that reveal (through body language, visible signs of self-respect, freedom of movement) that they do not recognise or accept their subordinate status in society.”(Moffett: 136)
horrible acts. However, this implicates that the rapists would be black or coloured – since white men obviously do not receive the same treatment – which is indeed a popular assumption. Helen Moffett explains how it seems that “South Africans of all races assume that perpetrators of sexual violence are black men, no doubt because of apartheid narratives they have internalised.” Such narratives basically explain that “apartheid and its ills (such as the migrant labour system) ‘emasculated’ black men, left them ‘impotent’ and experiencing a ‘crisis of masculinity’; and although these remarks are problematically embedded in unquestioned patriarchal discourses, they carry a grain of truth. But these explanations explicitly exclude white men, thus implying – however unwittingly – that they do not rape.” (Moffett 133-134) Obviously white males are equally capable of rape and this is illustrated by the narrator when Dulcie looks at her victimizers and sees both black and white hands. (Wicomb 179) The men who keep violating her are from all races and they all want to do the same thing: to show her what her position is in a male-centred society.

To make matters even worse, it is implicated several times that the torture was performed by her fellow comrades – and not by the Apartheid regime or members of other ANC units. The only time we ever hear her voice – through the mediation of David and the narrator – is when she tells David about an incident that is very indicative of her overall mistreatment.

“Dulcie told him of an incident in the desert of Botswana, as a young recruit, when rations were low and everyone was sick of bread and sheep’s fat. She suggested taking honey from a bees’ nest. David can’t remember why the others pooh-poohed the idea, mocked her, wondered if she were man enough to do it by herself. She took off her socks, twisted and knotted them, held a match until they smouldered and intrepidly stormed the nest wearing only a balaclava as protection. Her hands, eyes, mouth were stung; bees covered her face, bored through the fabric of the balaclava, but she carried on, had to, since it was a matter of honour, and managed to fill a basket with dripping honeycombs. She swelled up into a roly-poly, hands like loaves of risen dough, eyes buried beneath layers of swellings, mouth a drunken pout, face an undulating hillock of yellow-brown flesh. For several days she writhed in agony, unable to take anything except water. When she recovered sufficiently to try a honeycomb, she found that the others had eaten every scrap of it, had left her nothing. Dulcie leaned forward to show him the trace of her ordeal, a slight puckering of the eyelids, an excess of stretched skin, she claimed, although, even as he stiffly bent closer to look, he could see no evidence of that savage attack. But otherwise, she said, see how the body recovers and renews itself.” (82-83)
This story seems to be an allegory of what really happened: out of loyalty to the struggle she acts like the other men, only to be betrayed by them because of that. David saw no evidence of the bee attack and it is therefore very likely that this incident never occurred. It might have been Dulcie’s way of explaining to him the betrayal she felt – which was probably more psychologically damaging than the violation itself. Later in the novel, when the narrator describes one of Dulcie’s night visits, she describes how the perpetrators seem familiar to Dulcie: “She thinks that she recognises some of the voices, but recognition hovers just beyond consciousness. She hallucinates, turns them into friends, family, comrades. (…)For there is an ambiguity about these visitors, something that makes them both friend and foe as they tend to the cracks and wounds carefully inflicted on parts of the body that will be clothed.” (Wicomb: 179) The perpetrators could be members of the Apartheid regime, but in light of her ‘bee story’, it is more likely that she is not imagining these things at all.

One would assume that the torture would have ended after Apartheid was abolished, but that is not the case because of the post-Apartheid backlash that followed. During the struggle, men did not approve of female activism, but since they needed as many fighters as possible, they put up with the women and kept showing them their place by raping them. In the narrative present Apartheid has in fact ended and a project of re-domestication has come into being. All the women who were previously activists, were expected to resume their traditional roles of housewives and if they refused, they were severely punished. In the novel, Sally is one of those women who left the movement – or at least the more active part – to take up a more traditional role of mother and wife. This transition was not easy, as Denise Walsh and Pamela Scully explain in their article “Altering Politics, Contesting Gender”: “Not all women were opposed to this role, but many – particularly younger, urban, professional, educated women and those politicised by the struggle for liberation – chafed under the return to ‘traditional’ gender norms and their exclusion from political power.” (Walsh & Scully 1) And, indeed, we see Sally struggling with her new life in which she suffers from “an emptiness, a hollowness inside as if she had aborted”. And the narrator describes her as “an emaciated scarecrow of a woman with uneven, vegetal tufts of hair and liverish spots on her brown skin”. (Wicomb 14) Her new life as a housewife does not exclude all involvement in the Movement since she still attends UDF meetings (United Democratic Front), but this mixture of family life and a passive involvement in the struggle does lead to some resentment as we see her learning how to balance the two.

“It is a trick she has learnt some time ago, part of her training: to block out all else while she concentrates on physical tasks, on the minutiae of things that have to be
done. So, she thinks, and not without bitterness, it has not all been wasted, even for a
wife that training has its uses.” (31)

Dulcie, on the other hand, remains an important member of the movement and therefore has
to suffer the consequences. Denise Walsh and Pamela Scully point out that during the 1990s,
when the political situation was completely changing, women actually got more involved in
politics. “One result of southern African women’s greater political engagement has been to
intensify the pressure on traditional gender roles in both the public and private spheres. The
naturalisation of ‘maleness’ and ‘femaleness’ that continues to justify men’s domination and
women’s subordination is being challenged by women’s heightened visibility and activism in
public life.” (Walsh & Scully 1) Helen Moffett also recognizes the problem of keeping
women in their place if they show too much agency. According to her, women get raped
because men feel that they ‘ask for it’. These men not only refuse to recognise women’s
‘independent subjectivity’, but they actively punish such ‘independent subjectivity’. (Moffett
136) Dulcie remains important in the Movement and as a result the violations continue. The
men who rape her do not seem to understand that they can never break her.

“They do not understand that for a woman like her – who has turned her muscles into
ropes of steel, who will never be driven into subordination, who even as an eager girl
in the bush wars resisted the advances of those in power, resisted her own comrades,
having worked out that fucking women was a way of preventing them from rising in
the Movement, who has resisted all her life, who has known since childhood that
tyranny must be overthrown – for a woman like her, there is no submission. She
knows that she is tiring them out, that they are exasperated by her. Thus they
tiresomely repeat themselves; the knife above her throat hovers listlessly.” (178)

There is also a distinct possibility that Dulcie was only tortured during her stay in Quatro
and that the following rapes were in fact hallucinations or flashbacks. She was undoubtedly
traumatized by her treatment in the camps, since she describes the experience through the
mechanism of dissociation.

“Dulcie believes that there comes a time when physical pain presses the body into
another place, where all is not forgotten, but where you imagine it relocated in an
unfamiliar landscape of, say, bright green grassland cradled in frilly mountains. In
such a storybook place the body performs the expected – quivers, writhes, shudders,
flails, squirms, stretches – but you observe it from a distance. It is just a matter of
being patient. Of enduring. Until the need to relocate once more. Then you can run
through the vocabulary of recipe books, that which is done to food, to flesh –
tenderize, baste, sear, seal, sizzle, score, chop – so that the recitation transports you into yet another space. Keeping on the move, like any good guerrilla. Which brings a sense of clarity, as if the mind, too, is being held under a blindingly bright light, and clarity is conferred by the gaze of others And from that distance, that place, with the promise of further travel, it is possible to endure forever.”(178)

She describes the event merely as a witness, not as the actual victim; which, according to Cathy Caruth, would precisely be a symptom of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder. “While the precise definition of post-traumatic disorder is contested, most descriptions generally agree that there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event.” (Caruth 4) Dissociation at the moment itself could indeed lead to later, literal re-enactments of the event; this way she would be able to “bear witness to a past that was never fully experienced as it occurred.” (Caruth 151) The nature of the experiences, especially her knowledge about what is going to happen, suggest that they might be flashbacks.

“She wakes up and with every sense aquiver, mentally follows them over the fence, along the garden path, through the chosen window. Bessie, her old dog who barked feebly on their very first visit, was summarily shot. Now they come without a sound, but the stinging in the bridge of her nose [when she has to cry but she won’t] precedes conscious knowledge of their arrival. So that her sleeping body bolts upright as she waits the long seconds for fear to metamorphose.” (81)

This scene, in which she mentally follows her attackers, can be interpreted as a flashback; but, overall, it is more likely that the rapes continued after the struggle had ended and the re-domestication project had set in.

Very remarkable is the fact that the rapists do not refer to their actions in terms of rape.: “Not rape, that will teach her nothing, leave nothing; rape’s too good for her kind, waving the electrodes as another took off her nightclothes.” (Wicomb 179) This complicates the concept of rape since it is implied in this scene that they are torturing her with electrical equipment and are not raping her in the traditional sense. They also state that rape is too good for ‘her kind’, which most likely refers to her skin colour and not to her gender – since rape is the traditional punishment for women. As a coloured woman she finds herself in a difficult
position because she is not fully accepted by the resistance nor by the Apartheid regime. Black men might consider a coloured women all the more in need of punishment because she is somehow related to the white population. Her coloured skin definitely complicates the concept of rape as a simple punishment for women.

Women like Dulcie try to get out of the stereotypical roles and prove themselves man enough, even though they can never get the freedom they fought for. Zoë Wicomb not only contests their horrible treatment, but also questions the way women are represented and placed in stereotypical roles – which is of course the cause of the mistreatment in the first place. Through the narrator’s problems of grasping the idea of a female guerrilla, Wicomb shows how stuck people are on those stereotypical ideas of how men and women are supposed to act. The narrator is female but, just like the men, she fails to comprehend Dulcie: “I try to imagine a woman who takes that kind of thing seriously – protocol and hierarchy, the saluting and standing to attention, the barking of orders, the uniform. Someone who sees no contradiction between military values and the goal of political freedom. Such a woman does presumably not rifle in her handbag for a lipstick, does not pause briefly before a passing mirror to tug at her skirt or pat her hair into shape.” (Wicomb 79) The idea of a non-feminine woman is something that David fails to understand as well, since he alternately describes her as having female or male qualities: “She is not pretty, you know, not feminine, not like a woman at all.” (Wicomb 80) and later when the narrator suggests to turn her into a man, he immediately reacts by saying that she is “definitely a woman”. (Wicomb 200) His two descriptions of Dulcie illustrate the obstacles he encounters every time he tries to represent and understand her. Without realizing it, he discredits the stereotypical roles of men and women that he so strongly believes in. Dulcie is a complicated character who cannot be that easily categorized: she is not a typical women, but she is not a man either. The narrator comes to realize that not everyone fits into such a simplistic division between men and women, but David refuses to acknowledge this: “As with the preservation of all prejudices, he will no doubt go on clocking exceptions rather than question the stereotype and its rules. How many exceptions does an intelligent person have to come across before he sees that it is the definition of the category itself that is wanting?” (Wicomb 80) Wicomb challenges the stereotypical roles by seeing them as language and deconstructing them. Women like Dulcie illustrate the fact that these binary oppositions between men and women – men as strong fighters and women as helpless victims – are not based on reality. In fact, these oppositions are solely constituted in language or as Terry Eagleton explains it: they are “products of a particular system of meaning”. (114) This opposition is only needed to define oneself.
Eagleton explains that there is always a “first principle” which is “defined by what it excludes”. In this case, that would mean that men are only perceived to be strong because women are weak and vice versa. Men need these women in those stereotypical roles because they are “the image of what he is not, and therefore an essential reminder of what he is.” (Eagleton: 115) A patriarchal society like South Africa can only function if this distinction is kept in place. When women like Dulcie endanger the opposition, the men resort to extreme actions like rape and torture to keep the balance intact. In David’s Story, the idea of a military woman like Dulcie is Wicomb’s way of deconstructing and undercutting the stereotypical roles that are violations of the representation of women.14

3.1.2 Double bind between race and gender

From a Western perspective it is rather strange to see how women can be treated so badly on such a large scale without anyone of them trying to stop it or gain attention for the problem. Both Dulcie and Sally remain silent, which is physically reflected in Dulcie’s concealment of her scars. They not only refuse to speak about their rape, but they also seem to accept it as something completely natural. Sally calls it “the unspoken part of a girl’s training” (Wicomb 123) and Dulcie feels the need to comfort one of the doctors who is present during one of the rape attacks because, as an outsider, he does not understand what is going on.

“Occasionally a real doctor is brought along. He is uncomfortable in the balaclava and the black tracksuit, from which his white hands dangle pathetically; his movements are stilted, reluctant, shot through with self-hatred. He keeps his eyes averted, does not speak, but shame leaks from his fingertips into her wounds. Sometimes in the delirium of pain she wishes to say something soothing, comforting, for she knows that he does not understand the ways of the world, the ugly secrets of war, that he has stumbled upon them without warning, without training.” (82)

14 Not only Dulcie, but Sarah Baartman and Eva/Krotoa as well are victims of this rather arbitrary opposition which has no foundation in reality. For Dulcie and other ‘military’ women it leads to rape and betrayal. For Sarah Baartman and Krotoa it led to their complete misrepresentation as ‘Mothers of the Nation’. Her deconstruction of those nationalist images, is her way of commenting on the idea of nationalism as a whole.
They accept what happens to them because they grew up in a patriarchal society and realize that there is nothing they can do about it. However, Meg Samuelson explains that there are even more specific reasons for them to keep quiet: “Dulcie complies with this deception, veiling her wounds in clothing that symbolises her dedication to the cause of freedom, her belief in the necessity of violent struggle to effect it, as well as her refusal to advance this freedom by playing a woman’s part.” (Samuelson 131) The reason why women like Sally and Dulcie remain silent would be explained in Western psychological terms by denial or amnesia following a traumatic event, but in South Africa the explanation can be found in the difficult political situation. These women are stuck between a politics of gender and a politics of race: they are victims of the double bind between race and gender. To become part of the movement, they had to give up their female sexuality in order to unite with their male comrades in the struggle against segregation, against the racism that controls the entire political situation. Race had to be the number one priority. And according to Meg Samuelson the “loyalty to one’s struggle demands the silencing of another.” If they would publicly declare they were raped by their own people, they would betray the movement by destroying its representation. Therefore, the narrator sees Dulcie as someone who has sacrificed everything for the benefit of all her people; and she illustrates this with the story of Bronwyn the Brown Witch “who can do anything at all”.

“Oh, there are tests galore for her, the usual ones of three wishes, three trips into the woods, three impossible tasks. She passes them all. She uses her magical powers to get her friends out of scrapes, to feed the poor, to stave off hurricanes and earthquakes, to drive back the enemy, until one day her friends, the sticks in the forest, come clattering together, lay themselves down on top of each other until they are a mighty woodpile. There is no way out. Bronwyn the Witch must die on the stake. It’s only a wee little story, I say, as I watch his face crumple and his hands foolishly clutch at his person, patting himself, as if looking for a handkerchief or a gun.” (178)

In the narrator’s eyes, Dulcie could have avoided the rape if she had not put the Movement above anything else. She considers the torture and the following silence as Dulcie’s self-sacrifice for the movement. This way Dulcie becomes complicit in her own torture: she is no longer only an object, but an agent as well. Therefore, the narrator suggests to David that they should use “the middle voice” to talk about Dulcie. (Wicomb 179) The middle voice is

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15 The problem of balancing race and gender, is also present in South African literature. In Chapter One, I explained how Zoë Wicomb’s aesthetic voice is shaped by Feminism and Black Consciousness. This way she is able to express herself as a woman and as a coloured South African.
situated between the active and the passive voice. It is used when the subject cannot be categorized as agent or as patient but only as something in between. Furthermore, in the first scene we meet Dulcie, her complicitness is immediately suggested by her washing blood of her hands.

“Dulcie washes the sticky red from her hands, watches until the water runs clear and then shakes them vigorously; she does not like wiping them on a towel. When they are dry she rubs olive oil from the little Clicks bottle into her hands, but it won’t be enough; it will never be enough as the skin, washed over and over, laps greedily at the oil. Like Lady Macbeth, some would say, but that would be a poor comparison and there is no point in trying to explain, David says. You would get it wrong, quite wrong; besides, power has never held any lure for her. Or so he believes.” (18)

This scene suggests that she has committed crimes as well and therefore she is not that much better than her victimizers. She is also compared to Lady Macbeth, which indicates that she is guilty of something. David feels that this is a poor comparison because Dulcie – who he practically puts on a pedestal throughout his story – is not interested in any power. This assumption seems rather naïve since she must have some interest in power to put up with all the violations. Her loyalty to the Movement stops her from speaking up about the rape, but if she would take up a less active and less powerful job within it – like Sally did – then she would no longer be subjected to violence like that. So on some level she must like having so much power. Paradoxically, she is also a powerful person because she refuses to proclaim herself a victim of sexual abuse. “Were they to speak the violence to which they have been, and are, subjected, they would betray not only the Movement in which they worked, but also the revolutionary subjectivities they have fashioned for themselves.” (Samuelson 133) As a woman, Dulcie had to fight harder to gain an important position in the MK and she also had to give up her femininity. Therefore she found some way to keep the power she gained intact. “The collusion with her own violation, suggested in her silence and the covering of her wounds, is also paradoxically her means of resistance.” (Samuelson 134) In the movement these women are seen as men and by speaking up and admitting the rape, they would reduce themselves to helpless victims, the stereotypical roles they were always meant to fill. Their silence is in a way their victory. Collusion as a means of resistance also creates a link with the past: Rachael Susanna Kok has to obey her husband Andries/Andrew Le Fleur but she finds

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16 The middle voice is actually used in the final scene. After she has lost part of her text on the computer, four words appear on the screen: ‘This text deletes itself’. (Wicomb: 202) In English the middle voice means an intransitive verb that appears syntactically active but expresses a passive action.
ways to resist him. “Rachael Susanna’s inclusion in the story gives Wicomb the opportunity to stress both the woman’s own authority and her wifely submission: that she passes to Le Fleur the staff of office passed to her by Lady Kok means that his political power is dependent on her. (The staff of office, symbol of political authority, was granted to Adam Kok I by the Dutch East India Company at the Cape.)” (Driver 229)

Andrew married her because he saw “kindness, docility, and above all obedience” in her “which would ensure that history unfolded without a hitch and according to the vision.” (Wicomb 45) During their marriage, he keeps reminding her of her role as a woman: “You have a duty to me, to God, and to your people; your kind of thing is that duty and nothing else.” (Wicomb 2000: 47) And Rachael keeps doing what he says, keeps helping him wherever necessary – even though she constantly disagrees with what he says and does. Her “her slow sad smile of subterfuge” (63) is a clear illustration of how South African women have always been subordinated but she also illustrates how resistance can be found in complicity. There is a striking scene in which she is fed up with her husbands idiotic behaviour and she finds a way of ridiculing him:

“She noted the order – that he placed himself before God – but said nothing. Husbands and schoolroom talk, she’d had enough for one day. She developed the habit of holding out her bonnet strings like taut reins when he talked, and as he stopped, of tying them into a bow with firm clipped movements which, functioning like an amen, prevented him from starting up again. He took the gesture as a sign of her resolve to obey. She thrilled at the possibility of his wondering how they came to be untied whenever he spoke, but not once did he ask.” (48)

He considers her gesture a sign of obedience while she is actually manipulating him and thereby disobeying him. When David asks his grandmother why Andrew gave Rachael the nickname Dorie, she says that it was probably short for ‘dorinkie – little thorn’(50) This name suggests that she was not always obedient and that she could be a thorn in his side, just like Dulcie is a thorn in the side of every South African man who cannot abandon certain stereotypes.

Sexual violence in South Africa – and specifically in the Movement – is a very ambiguous matter in which the lines between victims and perpetrators are very blurry. Freedom in South Africa comes at a cost, especially for the women who, ironically, never can enjoy that freedom. David insistently repeats how the narrator – and by extension the reader – can never understand how ambiguity and freedom are intermingled: “Just as freedom is not the anaemic
thing for us that it is for nice, clean liberals, so violence, too, is not a streaming sheet of blood or gore. That is something you people can’t bring yourself to understand.”(Wicomb: 205) The women in South Africa are the victims of a patriarchal society, but there is always a possibility to resist. Dulcie exclaims: “Resist. No matter how rickety the boat, how choppy the sea, she would remain alive to resist tyranny, to cling with idealism – she knows it to be embarrassing – to that which they wish to break down.”(178-180)

3.2 Dulcie as the embodiment of David’s trauma

Dulcie represents the traumatic experiences that a lot of women have to go through. Her character is really the embodiment or representation of a collective trauma: the horrible treatment of female ANC members or South African women in general and all the other atrocities committed in the name of freedom. David, who may have been complicit in these affairs, is haunted by Dulcie and the traumatic experiences she went trough. She represents the trauma he has to relive every single day. Dori Laub explains in his essay “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening” how exactly he is haunted by his trauma: “While the trauma uncannily returns in actual life, its reality continues to elude the subject who lives in its grip and unwittingly undergoes its ceaseless repetitions and re-enactments. The traumatic event, although real took place outside the parameters of “normal” reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after.”(Laub 1992: 69) And indeed, the narrator comes to accept that “Dulcie and the events surrounding her cannot be cast as a story” because “there is no progression in time, no beginning and no end. Only a middle that is infinitely repeated, that remains in an eternal, inescapable present” (150). His traumatic memory disrupts our notions of time but also of narrative. David’s Story came into being as a result of David’s ‘need to tell’, his compulsion to talk about what happened to Dulcie and about the ambiguities in the struggle for freedom. But in the end it becomes clear that he is not able to talk about her and the trauma she represents: she remains a “protean subject that slithers hither and thither, out of reach, repeating, replacing, transforming itself….” (35)
3.2.1 David’s Complicity

It is rather odd that David would be traumatized by someone else’s trauma; but this can be explained by his feelings for her, his complicity in her torture – and possibly in the torture of other women as well – or by both. The relationship between David and Dulcie is never fully explained. The narrator likes to give the impression that they are in love; for instance in the scene where “her swollen heart hovers on the horizon then bursts to bathe the world in soft yellow light”, while at the same time “David would see that heart in the eastern sky and feel his own drawn into its embrace of light” and she turns it into a forbidden love in which David “will not be seduced by flirtatious light”. (115) The narrator romanticizes their relationship, but it is based on facts: David eventually admits that he loves her but he also adds that he did not have an affair or any physical relationship with her because “to indulge in such passion is to betray the cause, and there is far too much of that already”. The fact that he is married, does not seem to be his greatest objection to indulging in an affair with Dulcie: it is their commitment to the struggle and to the movement that seems to be the greatest obstacle for him. In her interview with Hein Willemse, Zoë Wicomb explains why she refused to add a love story to the novel: “I wanted to take out of it any physical business with David. They liked each other. There is no love scene, there can’t be. I suppose, I wanted to use it as a sign of the times. That this is the time when there is not time for that kind of thing. I thought of it as something emblematic. There is no time to indulge in, what he calls ‘the bourgeois affair.’” So they deliberately don’t, but of course she is obsessed with him, just as he’s obsessed with her. So I wanted to speak about that decision when there is no possibility of it getting physical in any way.” (Willemse 148) However, David mentions that he did touch her once with his hands on her shoulders and according to Gillian Gane, this scene is a clear indication of what she means to him: “In the new world of moral ambiguities, Dulcie provides David with a secure moral ground.” (Gane 108) And even though they never get physical, he does refer to her as ‘the beloved’. (Wicomb 114) Their ‘special’ relationship could be an explanation for why David is so traumatized by her ordeals: anyone would be shocked to find out their beloved was raped, tortured and possibly even killed. Maybe he was not even aware of the facts until she told him ‘the bee story’. He might also feel guilty if he was indirectly responsible for the rape through his relationship with her. Gillian Gane wonders if she “is being tortured because of their relationship – in a Movement increasingly conscious of race, are the two of them being singled out as coloureds, perceived as all the more threatening because of the bond between them?” (Gane 108) Her rape was the result of her rise in power,
but perhaps their relationship made her even more threatening and urged even more direct and drastic action.

At first the narrator has no clue about the identity of the perpetrators, though later she comes to understand that they were probably other MK members. The involvement of David himself, however, remains unclear until he starts giving – accidental – hints about his complicity.

“Once, thank God, once only – he looks up at me, into me, with irises a ghostly green line of light around pupils black and dilated, like those of a trapped animal, mute, distorted, and it is I who must look away and pray that he will say nothing. This is an intrusion, a weight that I cannot carry. That no amanuensis should have to carry, I later decide as I ponder the boundaries of my task.” (151)

“It’s here in close-up, before my very eyes, the screen full-bleed with Dulcie. Who? Is it you put it in my head? The terrible things happening to Dulcie? It’s here, in close-up – and he stumbles to his feet with a horrible cry, knocking me over as he charges out. (201)

These two scene are the only times that he opens up about what really happened and we can infer from them that he was at least once one of the perpetrators. In one of the ‘invented’ rape scenes, the narrator also implies that David was somehow involved in the violation of Dulcie’s body.

“She does not know why or how, but notes nevertheless: that this pretence of a relationship coincides with the visits by night; that the coincidence carries a meaning that she has not yet fathomed; that one is a recursion, a variant of the other: the silence, the torture, the ambiguity; and that in such recursions – for if on the edge of a new era, freedom should announce itself as a variant of the old – lies the hought of madness madness madness…” (184)

Later, when he places his hands on her shoulders, she compares his touch with the torture she went through.

“His fingertips pressed precisely into the wounds under her shirt, plunged intimately into her flesh, caressed every cavity, every organ, her lungs, liver, kidneys, her broken heart, with a lick of fire. She would not have been surprised to see those hands withdraw dripping with blood.”(199)
And if he really raped Dulcie, then it is very likely that he did the same thing to other women as well, since it was one of the standard punishments in the Movement. Subconsciously he might regret what happened, but he keeps insisting that everything is allowed in the struggle for freedom – which is probably his way of convincing himself that he did nothing wrong:

“Besides, what’s wrong with military values? See how far it’s brought us all, including the likes of you, who believe in keeping your hands clean at all costs, who reach for lace handkerchiefs at the thought of bloodshed, and choose not to notice that that fine thing, freedom, is rudely shoved through by rough guys in khaki.” (78-79)

He also keeps blaming a certain “they” for what happened to her and for making him one of their “agents”. In the scene where he scores out Dulcie’s name on the hit list, he starts to feel that he is violating her somehow:

“When the name is completely obliterated, he shudders at what he has done. Has he, the intended, been directed into acting, into becoming the agent for others? By way of making amends to Dulcie he writes her name on another clean sheet of paper. Below it he writes: It is they who obliterate her name. Which is surely imprudent. This they also occurs in other scribblings, but David does not answer my questions about who they are. Thus I can offer no substitute; I must stick with the pronoun. A person must, as David all too often says each trust to his own judgement. Or hers, as I often correct him.” (117)

The most likely explanation for his traumatisation is that he was indeed complicit – that he raped her at least once – but that he acted upon orders of his superiors who wanted to punish Dulcie. His complicitness can also be understood in the sense that he shares the same traditional views as other South African men and may also believe that these women “deserve to be raped”. (Moffett 136) On several occasions he expresses rather negative and degrading opinions about women, which makes it very hard for the reader and for himself to understand why he chose a female narrator in the first place and why he is so torn up about what happened to Dulcie. “There is, too, something David does not come to understand about his relation to women. He is able to interrogate Le Fleur’s racism but learns nothing from his attitudes to women. He neither asks himself about his own choice of a woman narrator, nor stops himself from trying to silence her, and he comes to no understanding about his obsession with Dulcie. Moreover, the novel suggests David has inherited a longstanding attitude towards women.” (Driver 231) Maybe, in the new South Africa, he unconsciously regrets that these traditional views have led to the mistreatment of his ‘beloved’ – though it is
rather odd that he is not tormented by Sally’s abuse. Overall, it is most likely that he is
complicit when it comes to sharing the same views as the rapists, and that he might have
indulged in such indiscretions once or twice, but that he now comes to regret it. His search for
a way to adequately represent Dulcie, might be his search to find out why exactly he is
haunted by her – something he struggles with until the end of the novel. It is therefore very
significant that, after he has opened up to the narrator more and more, he commits suicide at
the exact same spot the rapists told Dulcie to take her life. The realization that he was partially
responsible for her torture and possible death, might have driven him to that end.

3.2.2 The ‘Need to Tell’ versus the ‘Impossibility to Tell’

The purpose of his story – which is not the same as the novel that was eventually created by
the narrator – was to tell ‘his’ story; but throughout the novel it becomes clear that not he, but
Dulcie is the true protagonist of his tale. She is the embodiment of severe trauma: trauma he
wants to talk about but is not able to. In order to work through his trauma, to overcome the
after-effects of the traumatic experience, he had to transfer this experience to a narrative form.
Dori Laub explains the importance of articulating a traumatic experience when a person “is
not truly in touch either with the core of his traumatic reality or with the fatedness of its re-
enactments, and thereby remains entrapped in both. To undo this entrapment in a fate that
cannot be known, cannot be told, but can only be repeated, a therapeutic process – a process
of constructing a narrative, of reconstructing a history and essentially, of re-externalizing
the event – has to be set in motion. This re-externalization of the event can occur and take
effect only when one can articulate and transmit the story, literally transfer it to another
outside oneself and then take it back again, inside.” (Laub 1992: 69) Narratives are important,
but Dominick LaCapra also warns us not to expect too much from them: they help people
work through the trauma so that one can function better in life, but they are not the ‘cure’ the
TRC claims them to be.17 “I have already indicated that working-through need not be

17 “South African studies has often been dominated by more reductive notions of confession and the talking cure.
Indeed, it is tempting to see the TRC, which held public hearings from both confessed perpetrators and survivors
of apartheid violence, as a powerful instrument for restoring language and narrative to individuals.” (Graham 2)
And Shane Graham has to admit that “there are indeed some who gave testimony at the TRC and found relief or
healing there.” (Graham 3)
understood to imply the integration or transformation of past trauma into a seamless narrative memory and total meaning or knowledge. Narrative at best helps one not to change the past through a dubious rewriting of history but to work through posttraumatic symptoms in the present in a manner that opens possible futures. It also enables one to recount events and perhaps to evoke experience, typically through nonlinear movements that allow trauma to register in language and its hesitations, indirections, pauses, and silences. And, particularly by bearing witness and giving testimony, narrative may help performatively to create openings in existence that did not exist before.” (LaCapra 122) Unlike Ouma Sarie’s naïve belief that “everything is going to be just so nice-nice” one can never completely recover from trauma and leave the trauma behind. (Wicomb 8)

He wants the story to be written – by an amanuensis - but as the “exercises in avoidance” (33) indicate, he is not able to talk about Dulcie at all. When the narrator has finally convinced him to write Dulcie’s story down – instead of trying to talk about her and writing about Sarah Baartman and other historical figures – he comes up with a page which the narrator describes as “a mess of scribbles and scoring out and doodling of peculiar figures that cannot be reproduced here”:

“I know that it is his attempt at writing about Dulcie, because her name is written several times and struck out. Then there are beginnings scattered all over, and at various angles that ignore the rectangularity of the paper, as if by not starting at the top or not following the shape of the page he could fool himself that it is not a beginning.”(Wicomb 135)

Later in the novel, she finds another page which seemed to be filled with doodles and scribbles as well, which she later comes to recognize as his representation of Dulcie and what happened to her.

“There are the dismembered shapes of a body: an asexual torso, like a dressmaker’s dummy; arms bent the wrong way at the elbows; legs; swollen feet; hands like claws. There is a head, an upside-down smiling head, which admittedly does not resemble her, except for the outline of bushy hair. I have no doubt that it is Dulcie who lies mutilated on the page.” (205)

His representation of Dulcie clearly refers to the torture went through and Meg Samuelson also sees it pointing to ‘the violence of representation’ in general. (110) David’s Story and David’s attempts at representing Dulcie illustrate the difficulty or even impossibility of representing violence, while at the same time illustrating how an attempt at representation can violate the original experience or referent. As the narrator eventually came to realize, it is
impossible to “cast Dulcie and the events surrounding her as a story” (150) Dorothy Driver explains that “For David, Dulcie remains at a stage of unrepresentability, not least because certain aspects of her treatment cannot be faced, since facing them would force him to confront his own past not only as victim but also as victimiser.” (Driver 232)

If he does talk about her, it is with a great deal of admiration: he turns her into an almost mythological being, an untouchable hero. Zoë Wicomb describes Dulcie as someone who is ‘just very, very good’: “She’s courageous, she’s the best shot, she’s fantastic, and she can manage it. She’s in a way an Amazon figure. There are legendary things about her and that is exactly what brings her in conflict with certain sectors within the Movement, a very small sector within her cell.” (Willemse: 148) When the narrator suspects that Dulcie is “a decoy”, someone he has “invented to cover up aspects of his own story”, he tells her about their first encounter at a UDF-meeting in Kliprand. He describes her as a woman whose “legendary activities” were already familiar to him and who totally won him over with “her quiet, forceful manner, the way in which even the old people echoed her words and nodded.” (Wicomb 126)

However, despite his exaggerations and idealizations, he is determined to find the truth about Dulcie and what she means to him; what her importance is in his story. Dori Laub says in this regard that “There is, in each [trauma] survivor, an imperative need to tell and thus come to know one’s story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one’s buried truth in order to be able to live one’s life.” (Laub 2004: 63) The search for truth is an important motif in the text and at first he has the naïve belief that “the truth lies in black and white, unquestionably, in the struggle for freedom, for the equal distribution of wealth, for education for all, for every man and woman and child’s right

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18 I use the word ‘hero’ and not ‘heroine’ because he never talks about her in terms of her femininity. In the Movement she is considered to be ‘one of the guys’ – which leads to the backlash and the rape.
19 Dorothy Driver states that ‘the provisionality of truth’ is one of Wicomb’s major themes (Driver: 219) but Zoë Wicomb herself explains how the problematization of truth was just inevitable, it was not something she was deliberately trying to illustrate. “It’s narrative fiction itself that lends itself to questioning the notion of the truth, and has the capacity for showing truth as a complex, many-sided, contingent thing. My contemporary story about the suspension of certain values and beliefs during the period of struggle, about the topsyturvyness of that world, means that the “truth” about that period has to be problematised. Indeterminacy in narrative makes for equivocacy, which is surely not the same thing as jettisoning the notion of truth. For me, it’s what makes the difficult business of representing that period possible – the inevitable slippage from idealism to corruption – precisely because a liberation movement, driven to taking up arms, necessarily adopts the tactics of the enemy. My novel does assert that abominable things happen in the name of freedom – take the torturing of Dulcie – but it also at the same time casts her in mythological terms, hopefully to open up the idea of truth, to wrest it from the pieties of liberal humanism, and to assert a measure of unknowableness about that past. Nuances of truth, yes, and if it is possible to utter the words “postmodernism disposes of truth” I wouldn’t know how to represent such a notion in fiction. I’m beginning to wonder whether it’s not a tabloid reading of the issue: that the postmodern foregrounding of textuality necessarily amounts to a denial of history and of truth?” (Olver: 5)
to dignity…” (116) Unfortunately for him, he soon comes to realize that the truth is not that easily reached, “that truth is too large a thing even for those who take on vast projects like changing the world, that it can only be handled in tit-bits: something like a sheet of steel has since fallen between the truth about things in the world and the truth about himself.” (140-141)

“Truth, I gather, is the word that cannot be written. He has changed it into the palindrome of Cape Flats speech – TRURT, TRURT, TRURT, TRURT – the words speed across the page, driven as a toy car is driven by a child, with lips pouted and spit flying, wheels squealing around the Dulcie obstacles. He has, hauling up a half-remembered Latin lesson, tried to decline it.

Trurt, oh trurt, of the trurt, to the trurt, trurt, by, with, from the trurt

But there is no one to ask. (…) There are all the symbols from the top row of the keyboard, from exclamation mark, ampersand, asterisk, through the plus sign, then all are scored out. There is also a schoolboy’s heart scribbled over, but not thoroughly enough to efface its asymmetrical lines.

TRURT…TRURT…TRURT…TRURT…the trurt in black and white…colouring the truth to say that…which cannot be said the thing of no name….”
(Wicomb 2000: 136)

This passage also indicates that truth cannot be cast in language, since language is unstable and produces several truths – as I will explain in the following chapter. Throughout the novel several postmodernist techniques are used by the author to make the reader even more consider the (im)possibility of representing truth. “Rather than striving for the illusion of immediacy, the novel uses a first-person frame narrator to foreground acts of representation and mediation, and adds other angles of narration (David’s, Dulcie’s, and a neutral voice) to unsettle any authoritative access to truth.” (Driver 217) Eventually he gives up on truth, since there is no way one can ever be sure about what really happened. He is especially troubled by the concept of ‘false memory’ ever since he discovered that his memory of the toothless old man was probably not real because he later starts to remember it differently. And when the narrator tells him that it is possible “to correct a false memory, in the end to arrive at the truth
and find out what really happened”, he does not believe her: “Don’t you see that if I once believed the first version to be true, who knows whether this one is not another invention? Is there any way of telling, when I was once so clear about what happened, the sequence of events, and I am now equally sure about the new version? Why believe anything at all?” (143)

According to Dori Laub, it is indeed very common that “survivors who do not tell their story become victims of a distorted memory. (...) The events become more and more distorted in their silent retention and pervasively invade and contaminate the survivor’s daily life. The longer the story remains untold, the more distorted it becomes in the survivor’s conception of it, so much so that the survivor doubts the reality of the actual events.” (Laub 2004: 64)

 Apparently this doubt is infectious, since the narrator starts to doubt his stories as well: at a certain point in the novel she even wonders whether the hit list is reality or just a simple projection of his subconscious, his guilt about what happened to Dulcie:

“The hit list, a handwritten sheet of paper left under his chair, is an addition rather than a removal of something, so that in searching for an absence, he is disarmed.(…) but it is the one beneath his own that leaps out, as the name of the beloved always does. Just as that name uttered in any crowd leaps out of the murmur, breaking the continuum of sound, and, lifted, is carried on a higher crystal pitch, for all the world as if it were spelled aloud. So that for a moment he would stop in midsentence, as if he had been hailed. Here the name in writing takes on a different hue, lifts out from the rest of the girlish script and starts to tremble in a flush of red, the fancy strokes disintegrating, the letters separating as the colour grows deeper and deeper until they disappear entirely in a pool of blood. Dulcie’s blood. (…) Is he, David, responsible for her place on the list? And why, how can he possibly, and he buries his head in his hands with shame or anger or despair, how could he be thinking of he as the beloved!” (Wicomb 114)

The mention of Dulcie’s blood is just another indication of his complicity in her torture and possible death and the fact that he calls her ‘the beloved’ explains why he would feel guilty. It is, however, the description of her name as a sound that opens up the possibility of the hit list not being real. At a certain point he calls Dulcie “a scream echoing trough my story” (134) and here he states something similar, which makes it possible that the hit list is just another trick of his subconscious to remind him of what he has done.

The narrator’s importance in his attempt at representing Dulcie and finding out the truth should not be underestimated. In the preface to the novel, the narrator explains why David needed an amanuensis for his story;
“He was unwilling or unable to flesh out the narrative. I am not sure what I mean by 
unable; I have simply adopted his word, one which he would not explain. He wanted 
me to write it, not because he thought that his story could be written by someone 
else, but rather because it would no longer belong to him. In other words, he both 
wanted and did not want it to be written. His fragments betray the desire to distance 
himself from his own story; the many beginnings, invariably flights into history, 
although he is no historian, show uncertainty about whether to begin at all.”
(Wicomb 1)

He needed someone to write the story for him, so that he could distance himself from it – not 
so much from the story, but more importantly from the traumatic experiences that he cannot 
deal with. It is of course very foolish of him to believe that, by letting someone else write the 
story of his life, it somehow no longer belongs to him. This naïve belief in language seems to 
be a constant factor in his life and in his attempts at representing reality. A good example of 
his naivety is his love for new words: he “loves flicking through a thesaurus and finding one 
that captures precisely a meaning, which cuts down on explanations, on ambiguity and 
argument, on the struggle through forests of words and the attendant meandering of the 
mind.” (17) David is constantly scared that he will betray the Movement if he provides the 
narrator with too much information, but he is not aware of the power of inference and the fact 
that meaning can be found in-between the lines. When the narrator asks him about the 
conditions of female guerrillas, he says that such a thing is irrelevant because ‘in the 
Movement those kinds of differences are wiped out by [their] common goal. Dulcie certainly 
would make no distinction between the men and women with whom she works.” Without 
realizing it, he has given the narrator an important clue to the identity of Dulcie: “So I gather 
that, like him, she is high-ranking in the military wing, probably a commander. David appears 
to be surprised about this inference. It is impossible to know whether he has deliberately 
given the clue to the power she wields, whether he is genuinely naïve about language.”
(Wicomb 78) Despite the fact that he cannot distance himself from his story by letting her 
write it, she is still highly important to him. In order for him to talk, he needs a listener, 
described by Dori Laub as someone who is “both unobtrusive, nondirective, and yet 
imminently present, active, in the lead. Because trauma returns in disjointed fragments in the 
memory of the survivor, the listener has to let these trauma fragments make their impact both 
on him and on the witness [the traumatized person].” (Laub 1992: 71) Witnessing to trauma is 
a mutual process: the narrator/amanuensis and David have to work together for him to be able 
to talk about his experiences; and in the process of piecing together his story, they grow closer
together and she wonders: “Have the terms of our collaboration changed? Am I no longer to consider myself as pure listener and scribe? Am I now expected to offer interpretations?” (142) And, indeed, he needs her to lead him into the right direction because she understands the difficulties he has with telling his story: “I have come to recognize the symptoms: the desire to tell, the stalling, the attempt at withdrawal; thus I keep prodding and provoking.” (189) The amanuensis wonders whether the fact that their relationship has evolved into something deeper or closer, has any influence on his ability to talk about Dulcie and on her dealings with this trauma.

“We have never been close friends – possibly his very reason for choosing me as collaborator – although we have since developed a curious, artificial intimacy. I would hate a reader to think that my failure to provide facts, to bridge the gaps in the narrative, has something to do with the nature of our relationship.” (2)

In his essay on ‘bearing witness’, Dori Laub explains that the emergence of a certain form of intimacy is only natural when it comes to the sharing of traumatic memory with someone else. “The listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself.” (Laub 1992: 57) The fact that she continues to write the novel after David has deceased, indicates that she is either very interested in the story or has taken over part of the trauma - therefore needing closure herself. Since trauma often manifests itself in the form of intrusive hallucinations, the

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20 “The relation of the victim to the event of the trauma, therefore, impacts on the relation of the listener to it, and the latter comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels. He has to address all these, if he is to carry out his function as a listener, and if trauma is to emerge, so that its henceforth impossible witnessing can indeed take place. The listener, therefore, by definition partakes of the struggle of the victim with the memories and residues of his or her traumatic past. The listener has to feel the victim’s victories, defeats and silences, know them from within, so that they can assume the form of testimony. The listener, however, is also a separate human being and will experience hazards and struggles of his own while carrying out his function of a witness to the trauma witness. While overlapping, to a degree, with the experience of the victim, he nonetheless does not become the victim – he preserves his own separate place, position and perspective; a battleground for forces raging in himself, to which he has to pay attention and respect if he is to properly carry out his task. The listener, therefore, has to be at the same time a witness to the trauma witness and a witness to himself. It is only in this way, through his simultaneous awareness of the continuous flow of those inner hazards both in the trauma witness and in himself, that he can become the enabler of the testimony – the one who triggers its initiation, as well as the guardian of its process and of its momentum.” (Laub Bearing Witness: 57-58)
surreal vision of Dulcie at the end of the novel might be a symptom of the narrator’s secondary traumatisation – especially because she had never seen Dulcie before and had no way of knowing or even assuming that the woman in her garden was her.

“Only when I turn to go back to work do I see her sturdy steatopygious form on the central patch of grass, where she has come to sunbathe in private. She is covered with goggas crawling and buzzing all over her syrup sweetness, exploring her orifices, plunging into her wounds; she makes no attempt to wipe the insects away, to shake them off. Instead, she seems grateful for the cover of creatures in the blinding light and under the scorching sun. Blinking, she may or may not, through eyes covered by the hairy filaments of goggas, see a pair of shoes disappearing comically over the wall, a figure lifting itself over into the public street. She yawns and stretches in the warm sun. Is this no longer my property? I ask myself. I have never thought of Dulcie as a visitor in my garden.”(212)

In her vision she sees Dulcie’s body being violated by insects, while she does nothing to stop them. This is a reference to her silence and acceptance of the violations she suffered in real life. The most important statement, however, is how “she had never thought of Dulcie as a visitor in her garden”; and she wonders whether it is still her property. This could be interpreted as a reference to the trauma – embodied by Dulcie – that is not hers, but still invades her life and mind. Such a hallucination is a clear symptom of the narrator’s traumatisation as a result of her closer relationship with David. As a listener she remains an independent person, who expresses her own opinions, but she still partially takes over his trauma. Dominick LaCapra calls this “a vicarious experience”. As a result of what he calls “empathic unsettlement” – the narrator has to listen and feel empathy – some traumatic elements will be transferred to the listener and she undergoes a traumatizing event without ever being there. “In the virtual experience of trauma, one may imaginatively put oneself in the victim’s position while respecting the difference between self and other and recognizing that one cannot take the victim’s place or speak in the victim’s voice.”(LaCapra 125)

David needed a listener and amanuensis, but it is odd that he chose a woman to fill that position. Throughout the novel he expresses his rather traditional views on women and such an educated, independent woman like the narrator should go against all his beliefs. However, in the preface to the novel the narrator explains that “all he needed was someone literate and broadly sympathetic to the liberation movement” and that her “prattling, as he called it, about meaning in the margin, or absence as an aspect of writing, had nothing to do with his project, and as for understanding, he had no expectations of her. David believed it possible to father
his text from such a distance.” (2) As I already explained, it was impossible for him to
distance himself from the story, but eventually he also became disappointed in his choice of
narrator because she was too different, too Western:

“I gather that David wants to keep our association strictly businesslike, that he regrets
it having slipped into a casual warmth. I recognise a syndrome: He has told me too
much, which amounts to betrayal of his comrades, and now, disappointed in himself,
transfers the feeling of self-loathing to me. Indifference may in the beginning have
moved him to confide in me, but if the battery of speech has revved up our
relationship, it has also generated his contempt. He has little time for those who have
not immersed themselves in the struggle – Opportunists, cowards, he raves. Now I
watch his lip curl as he skirts about my questions: He has made himself vulnerable,
and to a creature who cannot imagine the complexities of political struggle, who
cannot understand that a conflictual model of the world is more than a fine phrase, that
it is natural for power struggles to erupt in oppositional social units… I switch off
when David speaks like a textbook. He is right, I have no stomach for this kind of
lecture. You wouldn’t understand the courage and commitment and inviolability of
someone like Dulcie, he says, thus placing her on a pedestal, beyond the realm of the
human. No, I say, but neither do I understand why Dulcie, like God, must fend for
herself.” (176-177)

He has exposed himself to a woman who has nothing to do with the struggle and in his eyes
this is a betrayal of the Movement. He has these sudden outbursts in which he pours out all
his frustrations about not being able to talk about Dulcie, especially to a woman who could
never understand.

“Keeping your hands clean is a luxury that no revolutionary can afford; there’s
corruption in every institution. It’s only you arty types who think of such problems as
something special, something freakish that can bring about a climax in a story. Stick to
the real world and you’ll find the buzz of bluebottles deafening. (…) There is no
justification for the likes of you to sneer. People who tend their gardens and polish
their sensibilities in the morality of art have no idea about the business of survival out
there in the bush with no resources. There things do get distorted and ideals do drift
out of sight. You who are too fastidious to use the word comrade, what would you
know about such things? Oh, you can talk about ambiguity or freedom, but you can’t
face putting the two together, not even from the sunny comfort of your garden chair.
That’s why you’ll never understand about Dulcie; hers is another world altogether.”

(196)

His frustration with her is in a way a projection of his own frustrations. He keeps trying to represent Dulcie and to understand why he feels the way he feels, but he is unable to grasp it completely, he is unable to reach the truth. He might blame the narrator for not understanding, but he is not doing much better either. When David says to her that she has no right to sneer about his comments on freedom and ambiguity, he is actually pointing out one of the reasons why Zoë Wicomb chose such a woman as the amanuensis. “When David tells his story it doesn’t quite make sense from a woman’s point of view. I know women are supposed to be illogical, but my experience of the world is that actually rationality resides in the feminine. That’s why it is always constructed and presented that women are irrational. My narrator is the rational one. Her function, more importantly, is that she ironizes David’s obsessions; she’s the sceptical voice. He’s quite taken by Le Fleur’s stories and she’s the sceptical, ironical voice.”

(148) Wicomb’s choice of a woman narrator goes against all the traditional views of the South African society, views that are responsible for the traumatic events in this novel in the first place. The use of a female narrator who constantly has to point out to the man that he is being irrational, deconstructs one of the basic foundations of such a patriarchal society. The narrator is, just like Dulcie, used to point out that the stereotypical roles in society are not based on any reality. Furthermore, the narrator’s ironical remarks on David’s irrational behaviour are recursions of Rachael Susanna Kok’s comments on her husband Andries/Andrew Le Fleur’s foolishness. Wicomb echoes her earlier statements about Dulcie, when she calls Rachael “the critical voice”, “the one who can really see what he is about.”

(146) David and the narrator fail to come to an understanding of Dulcie and the reader ultimately fails as well. Several postmodernist devices are used by the author to illustrate how one can never get to the truth, especially through language. The different layers of discourse and the different voices we hear are all mediations that make it impossible to ever reach the real Dulcie and to understand what truly happened. In her interview with Thomas Olver, the author explains why she chose such mediations: “It is after all a generic condition of prose

21In the same interview she also admits that there are similarities between her and the narrator – there is an autobiographical link. “I think it’s possibly inevitable because I’m writing the novel. So I think it is inevitable. I tried to make her more sceptical than me and certainly I wouldn’t like to think of myself as deliberately misrepresenting things, but there clearly is a connection, yes.” (Willemse 149)
fiction to be multivoiced; in this case I draw attention to the different voices.” (Olver 2) To make matters even more complicated, she also picked a very unreliable narrator. This woman repeatedly says that she has deliberately changed or erased things from David’s story because she did not find them suitable. When Hein Willemse pointed this out to the author and asked her whether the narrator was not betraying the deceased protagonist’s memory, she answered that that was indeed the case and that she is not “a figure to be admired or relied upon”. (Willemse 148) David is very occupied with researching his Griqua roots and repeatedly stresses the importance of Sarah Baartman and Eva/Krotoa for his story but the narrator left out his stories on these two women. Furthermore, even though he keeps repeating that there is nothing romantic about his relationship with Dulcie, she keeps inventing storylines in which they profess their love for one another. When he asks her to leave out these incorrect stories, she simply refuses to do that. Zoë Wicomb explains that the inventions were inevitable since “the amanuensis has too little to go by.” Because David is not able to articulate Dulcie and his traumatic memories, “she has in the end decided for herself what to omit or include, or how to arrange her material – in accordance with her own aesthetic project. Also because speech is not writing, so that this information has to be translated into that medium. So I hope the novel questions the practice of writing someone else’s story and foregrounds the practical and ethical problems inherent in collaborative autobiography.”(Olver 2) Despite her alterations to his story – especially after he died - and the fact that they were not able to fully come to terms with the traumatic past, she hopes that she has “not disappointed him in any way.” (3)

3.3 Meanings produced in the space between voice and silence

David is not able to talk about Dulcie; therefore she is not directly present in the novel and we never hear her voice. However, her presence can be found in the silences or absences in the text. In an attempt at representing trauma, Zoë Wicomb resorts to silence and there are various reasons for that. First of all, her representation of Dulcie – or lack thereof – is her way of questioning the possibility of representation in general; it is her way of illustrating that language always fails. In this regard she is influenced by the linguistic theories of post-structuralism. Terry Eagleton explains why post-structuralists came to the conclusion that it is
impossible to truly represent something.\textsuperscript{22} “Meaning is not immediately present in a sign. Since the meaning of a sign is a matter of what the sign is not, its meaning is always in some sense absent from it too.” Meaning is a “constant flickering of presence and absence together.” And also, “Language is a temporal process: meaning is always suspended.” As a result of this “no sign is ever pure or fully meaningful.” (Eagleton 111) Language is basically unstable and as a result of “the back and forth, present and absent, forward and sideways movement of language” texts gain a “web-like complexity”. (Eagleton 114) One of his conclusions is that it is impossible for signs “to reflect inward experiences or objects in the real world, to make present one’s thoughts and feelings or to describe how reality was.” (Eagleton 112) Based on these post-structuralistic ideas, it would be impossible to fully represent Dulcie and the trauma she embodies in signs and in language. Not only because reality cannot be represented completely in language, but also because “there is a continual flickering, spilling and defusing of meaning – what Derrida call ‘dissemination’ – which cannot be easily contained with the categories of the text’s structure.” (Eagleton: 116) In other words, a text is not determined. One can never identify ‘the’ meaning of the text, since the meaning is always put forward in the future. There is no real truth and all one can get is a juxtaposition of truths. Typically of a post-modern text is the self-reflectivity: several passages deal directly with the idea that language fails as a means of representing reality and traumatic experiences, especially the final scene, in which language fails completely. After the narrator has had the vision of Dulcie in her garden, a bullet is shot in her computer and “its memory leaks a silver puddle onto the desk, and the shrapnel of sorry words scuttle out, leaving behind whole syllables that tangle promiscuously with strange stems, strange prefixes, producing impossible hybrids that scramble my story.”(Wicomb 213)

Wicomb illustrates how impossible it is to represent trauma in literature, since it would never adequately represent the reality of the event. A second reason why the author preferred silence over speech is to avoid the risk of alienating an audience that can never understand the concept of rape and betrayal in a South African context. The narrator – who is educated and has a more Western point of view – struggles to understand the way of life in the Movement and the ideological background of the trauma Dulcie suffered. Wicomb seems to understand that it is better to stay silent if the right words cannot be found.

Wicomb’s choice to not represent Dulcie not only challenges our understanding of language as a means of representation, but also draws attention to all the other things that

\textsuperscript{22} Terry Eagleton based his explanations of post-structuralism on the views of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida.
remain unarticulated in this novel and in general discourse. “As a textual figure, Dulcie shifts our attention from the bodies of women to the body of the text, from their physical absence to ‘meaning in the margin, or absence as an aspect of writing’ Her body is thus an absence that draws attention to other absences, spoken through the silences of the text, such as that of the history of women in the struggle.” (Samuelson 130) Gillian Gane also understands the verbal power of silence: “Paradoxically, her very silence becomes a source of discourse. Questions of secrecy and silence reverberate beyond the violation of women as the novel struggles with truths that are unutterable and inadmissible.” (Gane 102) So “rendering the unspeakable act of rape (un)spoken may offer a representational means by which rape paradoxically speaks.” (Samuelson 123) The absence of Dulcie and the treatment she received “draws attention to the unspeakable things that are done to bodies, both male and female, in the name of freedom, as she deepens her engagement with the paradoxical subjugations that forward freedom.” (Samuelson 128)

To draw even more attention to the gaps in the story Wicomb inserted several echoes of Dulcie in the novel. David refers to her as “a kind of scream somehow echoing through my story” (134) by which he means that she is not fully present in his life-story, but that she is always there in the background, haunting him with the memories of a traumatic past. And even though the narrator does not appreciate his “abstracting her” – especially by symbolizing her as a scream, which is something Dulcie would never do because she “knows that there is only a point in screaming if you can imagine someone coming to your rescue” (134) – the idea of her as a sound, somewhere between speech and silence, mostly in the background but sometimes insistently present, seems to return on several occasions in the novel. Meg Samuelson notes that “The novel marks the (un)spoken with an indefinite buzzing that hovers between speech and silence: the ‘buzz of bluebottles’.” (Samuelson 126) And indeed, this buzzing sound keeps returning at critical points in the novel. For instance, after David has heard the story of Bronwyn the Brown Witch, he covers his ears because he hears “the buzz of bluebottles” (178) Furthermore, just like the novel is plagued by the buzz of bluebottles, David is plagued by a constant ringing in his ears – a condition called tinnitus. It is implicated that the tinnitus went away for some time – which indicates that he was able to repress the trauma for a while; that there was a period of ‘latency’ as Freud would call it – but that it returned when he attempted to talk. Eventually, even the narrator starts hearing this sound, which indicates that she is affected by the trauma as well – through ‘empathic unsettlement’, as I already explained. This ‘buzzing’ and ‘ringing’ is Dulcie’s constant reminder of what remains unspoken. It is a sound that keeps driving David crazy and that reminds the reader
that Dulcie’s presence is always lingering under layers of discourse. Paradoxically she is present and absent at the same time; she hovers somewhere between voice and silence.

The violence she was subjected too, is also reflected in the style of the text. Dulcie’s body was violated and as a result the text is violated as well. “Unspeakable violence may be represented through forms of textual violence, that is, violence performed on the formal unities of the text. The materiality of the text itself, when rent with the unspeakable, expresses precisely what it cannot utter.” (Samuelson 123) To Thomas Olver, Zoë Wicomb admits that the fragmentation used in the novel is indeed her way of showing that there can never be a definitive story and any attempt at representing the traumatic events will fail. “As for David’s Story, it’s fractured, yes, and the fragments are not short stories – they lack the classic lack-quest-resolution structure, and taken together, they resist coherence. There isn’t a central authoritative voice. My conceit of David fathering the story from a distance tries to capture the interrelatedness of the political and aesthetic concerns. The inchoate story, which for political reasons can’t be told, threatens to fall apart; only the reader can hold together some sense of the events.” (Olver 3) A disruptive subject like Dulcie and the trauma she embodies can only be expressed in a non-linear narrative form.

Dulcie’s absence is Wicomb’s way of problematizing the concept that language represents reality and that intense traumatic suffering could ever be explained in a novel without changing the realness of the experience and without alienating a readers audience. Instead of speech, she chooses silence to draw attention to the mistreatment of women which remains unspoken in general discourse. To mark the absences even more, she transforms Dulcie into a scream that haunts the protagonist – though it always remains a silent scream. According to Meg Samuelson, this novel challenges the reader to consider whether “representation can ever adequately re-present the ‘real world’, in which ‘you’ll find the buzz of bluebottles deafening’?” (Samuelson 136)
Conclusion

In the afterword to *David’s Story*, Dorothy Driver describes this novel as “the unwritten, pressing story of our times. Dulcie’s story is a story of what has not yet been said about violence and betrayal, political commitment and love, about writing and representation and truth.” (Driver 232) This is the perfect description of a novel that deals with the struggle against Apartheid and the suffering of the women who are directly involved in it. The transformation of Sarah Baartman and Eva/Krotoa into ‘Mothers of the Nation’ marked an important aspect of the South African patriarchal society: all women are considered mothers and there is no room for deviations. Women like Dulcie, who are strong and powerful, disturb the balance in such a society and are therefore punished in the most violent and humiliating way. The representation of all women as mothers is not based on any reality and can be considered a form of violence on the true nature of strong women. Reducing every woman to a stereotype is highly unfair to women who, in reality, are anything but the domestic type. Furthermore, as a result of society’s opposition between strong men and weak women, every woman who dares to step out of that role, is subjected to violence. Dulcie keeps getting raped because she refuses to declare herself a victim and to admit that she is weaker than men. The domestic representation of women always leads to some sort of violence: violence on a woman’s real character, or violence on her actual body.

Paradoxically, when David and the narrator try to represent the real Dulcie and all traumatic experiences she embodies, they end up violating the text. David’s attempts to represent Dulcie lead to the post-structuralist realisation that language always fails. Dulcie can never be adequately represented in language; the only thing David ever comes up with is a few pages full of scribbles and some fragmented stories. The only way Zoë Wicomb considers it possible to represent Dulcie is by not representing her. Dulcie’s presence can, paradoxically, only be found in the silences or the gaps in the novel. The women in *David’s Story*, resist all forms of representation since it always leads to some sort of violence. Ultimately, Zoë Wicomb chooses silence over speech.
Works Cited


Graham, Shane. “This text deletes itself”: Traumatic Memory and Space-Time in Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story*”


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