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REWRITING HERSTORY: WOMEN FROM MICRO-HISTORIES TO SOUTH AFRICAN FICTION

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Abstract: *The study examines the writings of three South African novelists (Zakes Mda, Yvette Christiansë, and Zoë Wicomb) who have turned to history in order to construct the female protagonists of their novels. The female figures brought from history to literature are portraits painted based on historical records combined with fiction, emphasizing the fact that the roots of contemporary realities run deep in the past. Zakes Mda's* The Heart of Redness *(2000), Yvette Christiansë's* Unconfessed *(2006) and Zoë Wicomb's* Still Life *(2020) focus on issues connected to female identity, slavery and oppression, voicing the silenced women who were fortunate enough to be recorded by the authorities of their time. The three novels, which can be described either as historical fiction and speculative biography, revive the stories of the prophetess Nongquawuse (*The Heart of Redness*), the slave women Sila van den Kaap (*The Unconfessed*) and Mary Prince (*Still Life*) using different techniques to rewrite history as her-story.*

Keywords: *female identity, oppression, slavery, South African history, post-apartheid literature*

1. Introduction

Post-apartheid South African writers have been deconstructing the issues common to apartheid literature, concentrating on more specific aspects rather than on the overall perspective of discrimination and oppression. During the apartheid period (1948 - early 1990s), novelists focused on the political, social, and cultural realities of segregation, the experience of prisoners and exiles, and on issues of identity, resistance, and the intersection of race. Apartheid literature, written mainly in English and in Afrikaans, often addressed the complex legacy of colonialism, underlining the tensions arising from unequal relations

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between the Black, the Coloured, and the white populations, which became a recurring motif in South African literature. The theme of resistance to oppression was central, and literature served as a voice against authoritarian policies and racial discrimination. Apartheid laws were abolished in 1991, and the first non-racial elections followed in 1994. Since the end of apartheid, South African writers have been exploring genres and topics that were not taken into consideration before 1991, while continuing to address the impact and legacy of apartheid. Post-apartheid writings investigate the lingering consequences of the system, such as economic disparities, corruption, and xenophobia along with more specific issue: the role of the writer in the new South African reality, the normalization of violence through mass media, the reconciliation with a violent past, or the cultural and economic effects of globalization on South African communities. Since the grand narrative of apartheid has become part of literary history, the new generation of authors now bears the responsibility of keeping South Africa visible within the sphere of world literatures. Post-apartheid South African literature is being shaped by more diverse narratives that focus on displacement, economic exile, migration, and the erosion of cultural and national identity. Since the 1990s, writers have switched focus from presenting the realities of a country whose political system discriminated against its people based on skin colour and religion to using various literary genres that give voice to African women silenced not only by the political system but also by the patriarchal society. The present study examines three novels published between 2000 and 2020 that have been labelled historical fiction since the main characters have been extracted from history and introduced in literary works.

However, the debate stirred by the question of how much history there should be in historical fiction has determined critics and writers to consider such novels speculative biographies. As Margaret Atwood (1998) observes “individual memory, history, and the novel are all selective: no one remembers everything, each historian picks out the facts he or she chooses to find significant, and every novel, whether historical or not, must limit its own scope. No one can tell all the stories there are” (1998, p. 1512).

The three South African writers have researched the lives of the women who are the main characters of their novels, but their purpose is not to paint an exact portrait. Zakes Mda, Yvette Christiansë, and Zoë Wicomb use the fundamental power of their stories to draw attention to how women have been silenced and enslaved by black and white patriarchal societies alike. The novels are not only literary accounts of women but also of women-slaves,

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thus being representations of the intersectional nature of South African society. The interconnected nature of social groupings (*e.g.* race, class, and gender) creating disadvantages was described by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1998. Crenshaw points out that feminist theories must be expanded, and antiracist politics must be taken into consideration when discussing African feminism by "embracing the intersection" (Crenshaw, 1998, p. 166). Black women from the colonial period are given a voice and a new representation in post-apartheid South African history and literature, as writers and scholars acknowledge the intersectionality of race, class, and gender while rejecting the assumption that all female experience is equal.

The first part of the present article highlights the role of women in South African history and literature as discussed in post-apartheid gender and literary studies. The second part focuses on three novels (Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*, Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed* and Zoë Wicomb's *Still Life*) that rewrite the narratives of Nongquawuse, Sila van den Kaap and Mary Prince, in an attempt to retell history as her-story.

2. From history to Her-story

The end of the apartheid regime is also seen as the end of the voiceless and silenced era for women. Although there were numerous acknowledged female literary authors in colonial and apartheid South Africa who made a vital contribution to the fight against oppression and segregation, the common opinion is that women in South Africa have usually been absent from the writing of South African history (Zungu & al., 2014, p. 7). In the late 1990s, several attempts were made to identify and give credit to women who played a role in South African history, regardless of their race or ethnicity, attempts made both by authorities and by literary writers. Various governmental and non-governmental organizations started to record the untold micro-histories of South Africans and to archive oral histories and testimonies. The testimonies released to the public by The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) became widely known, although they are not singular in world history.

The TRC of South Africa was established in 1995 to investigate the human rights violations that occurred under apartheid (from 1960 to 1994). The Commission's goal was to help heal the country and facilitate the reconciliation of its people by bringing forward both the victims' (or their relatives') and the perpetrators' testimonies. Although it was initially mandated to run for two years, the commission's work was extended to 2002. Its reports

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contain victims'/ survivors' stories of abuse, sexual violence, forced abductions, and forced pregnancies, to name just a few. The TRC also provided amnesty for politically motivated violence as perpetrators were not convicted in case they disclosed the truth about their role in these abuses (Copelyn & Manjill, 2021).

An apparent benefit of recording oral histories is the fact that past injustices can be easily addressed by the victims' relatives, journalists, writers, and historians, who can access archives and bring micro histories to light, thus recognizing women's everyday struggles and drawing attention to the few women who have been in leadership positions. As Mthunzi Zungu underlines, "there are countless women who are not given the necessary focus and remain invisible" due to societal constraints that "have led to the silence around many stories of remarkable women" (Zungu et al., 2014, pp. 7-9). Moreover, the unequal societal power relations enable researchers to choose who to document and (re)present, thus leading to a noteworthy absence of women's roles from history, which tends to "take precedence over HERstory" (Zungu & al., 2014, p. 9). Thus, historical fiction or speculative biography (some scholars argue this would be a more appropriate name for this genre; see Lee Brien & Lindsey, 2022) has made its way into South African literature, with writers revisiting archives, documenting women's lives, retrieving information and finally voicing their stories. Women are finally seen to have played a role as significant as men in historical events, and their position as mere subordinates has been reconsidered. Fiction writers provide women with the status of key figures by shaping pre-colonial and colonial women's lives for the 21st century reader. However, "writing women into history does not only include narrowing the gaps and giving them a voice, but it also involves redefining and enlarging traditional notions of their historical significance" (Zungu & al., 2014, p. 7). Although male figures remain part of the story - history -, the prophetess, the woman slave and the freed slave now have the opportunity to offer their stories as herstory.

Nevertheless, dealing with women's silences in South African history is not an easy task, and the three writers chosen for the analysis have three different methods of recovering past female voices, which are analysed in the next section. The drawbacks of using literary narratives when rewriting the past are emphasized by Isobel Hofmeyr who warns that "bereft of its intellectual content, much contemporary historical narration is a type of bricolage gone so mad that it often approaches farce" as writing in the postcolonial and post-apartheid South Africa is also influenced by "the processes of dispossession, fragmentation and political

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restructuring" (1992, p. 48). Hofmeyr also notes that "one of the most enduring stereotypes in southern African oral literary studies is that of woman-as-storyteller" which she interprets as "institutionalized silencing that characterizes women's subordination in pre-colonial southern African societies" (Hofmeyr, 1992, p. 39). This is the case of the three women whose presence in history was recorded by men and whose stories were retrieved by Zakes Mda, Yvette Christiansë, and Zoë Wicomb. Nongquawuse, Sila van den Kaap, and Mary Prince told their stories to the men who governed their lives in pre-colonial and colonial South African society and these men (Nongquawuse's uncle, Sila van den Kaap's warden and Mary Prince's master) informed the British officials or kept written accounts that have resurfaced in historical fiction or speculative biography.

Although South African researchers are making big steps toward mapping women's positions and roles in past and present history, the integration of their findings into the conceptualization of society is far from being recognized. The main reason is "the absence from the historical record of women's voices, most pronounced in the case of black women", the accounts being recorded mostly by male missionaries (in the precolonial period) and male colonizers (Van der Spuy & Clowes, 2007, p. 214). Documenting women's lives and giving them a voice through literary works may be an important gain for African feminism, but it may also be "insufficient if women are to relocate from the margins of historical meaning to meaningful recovery of women's lives" (Van der Spuy & Clowes, 2007, p. 235). Relocating black women's stories from the periphery to the centre of history means leaving behind the trend of "digging up the foremothers" (Landman, 1996, p. 6) and voicing the silenced women from history. Moreover, African feminism takes into consideration the "constraints and conditions that characterize racial subordination" and reflects not only women's needs but also the black women's status as slaves or subordinates, including a racial and social component "to express the aspirations of non-white women" (Crenshaw, 1998, p. 166).

The analysed novels give voice and visibility to three different women whose stories have contributed to the legacy of women's activism. Although historical gaps are not closed by literary works, they are filled with different perspectives on women in history based on multiple points of view rather than on a single account. The novelists' intention is to revisit certain moments in women history and to rewrite the women's presence which is seen as "the symbolic figurehead of the vehicle of remembrance employed to ferry the nation across the temporal divide" (Samuelson, 2007, p. 4).

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2.1. Nongquawuse: The voiceless prophetess

Zakes Mda's novel *The Heart of Redness*, published in 2000, brought to the readers' attention the story of Nongquawuse, the most famous Xhosa prophetess, while involving Zakes Mda in a literary scandal, as he was accused of plagiarising a historical book, *The Dead Will Arise,* published by Jeff Peires in 1989. Nongquawuse enters historical records in the second half of the 19th century, after oral stories told by her uncle are recorded by the British officials. After having returned to her village, Nongquawuse claimed that she had met the spirits of three of her ancestors who transmitted the message that the Xhosa people should destroy their crops and kill their cattle. In return, as a reward, the spirits would drive the British settlers away, new crops would grow, more cattle would be raised, and their world would become pristine again. Various stories recorded the fact that her persuasive powers caused the leaders to make people obey and follow the prophecy and kill between 300,000 and 400,000 head of cattle. The result was not the expected one: British people survived as they had food supplies, but many of Nongquawuse's tribe died of starvation, leading to a significant drop in the number of people in the area and providing an excuse for the British to confiscate large tracts of land. Finally, the so called "prophetess of doom" was imprisoned by the British authorities only to be released after a few years.

The Heart of Redness presents two narratives: one that takes place during the 1850s and another one that takes place in post-apartheid South Africa. The novel draws a comparison between the Xhosa community that followed a prophecy in 1856 and the community that lives on the same land at the end of the 20th century. The 19th century community was divided into Believers and Unbelievers and this division has continued over centuries, clearly marking a characteristic of contemporary society that has the right to protest and to follow different leaders, which was hardly the case in 1856 (when rebellion was punished by imprisonment or death sentences). The 19th century Believers were grouped around Nongquawuse and her prophecy, claiming that its fulfilment could only be achieved by literally following the divination. The 20th century Believers focus on traditional values, bearing the burden of their ancestors' history and doubting the fact that Europeans and Americans could bring economic development.

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The novel portrays a community that revolves around Nongquawuse's character and on her prophecy. Some of the characters fight to forget her and the memories of past sufferings whereas others fight to reconciliate with the past and take advantage of the history lessons transmitted from generation to generation. Zakes Mda recovers Nongquawuse as a meaningful character both for the history of the Xhosa and for the empowerment of women in her community. According to Renee Schatermann (2008, p. 277), there are numerous questions that remain unanswered not only after reading the novel but also after reading the historical accounts that have been translated from Xhosa into Afrikaans and English:

> Should Nongquawuse and other girls be seen as perpetrators of a great lie or as victims of factors outside their control? Can the Xhosa be blamed for following such a harmful course of action given the circumstances? Should the prophecies be looked upon with befuddlement, shame or respect? (2008, p. 277).

Such ambiguities are prolific for fiction writers who can speculate on these questions. Although Nongquawuse is the main character of the 19th century story in Zakes Mda's novel, she only speaks to her people at the beginning. In Mda's novel, it is her uncle who voices her prophecies to the other members of the Xhosa community. People are convinced by her uncle to believe in her prophecies, and they can only hear the girl whispering or whistling the spirits' messages. The messages which are interpreted, transmitted and perhaps even

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translated by the girl's uncle also refer to the fact that many animals have a lung-disease which spreads extremely rapidly and there seems to be no cure for it. Most of the times, Nongquawuse is described as "confused and disoriented", and Nombanda, a second prophetess has "a distant look in her eyes" (Mda, 2000, p. 211).

Zakes Mda prefers to voice the young woman's prophecies using the men around her as media for the transmission of her messages for two reasons: first, giving Nongquawuse a voice would mean that she can be blamed for the series of unfortunate events that follow and that she should be offered an opportunity to defend herself by explanations that are difficult to construct; secondly, he respects historical accounts that claim women were only taking care of house chores and of crops, not being allowed to handle the cattle and, therefore, the killing of the cattle must have been done by men only. Furthermore, as Litzi Lombardozzi observes, "Mda's female characters are created and portrayed within a political and universal system which perpetuates their exclusion from power and keeps them in servitude. […] Mda's women characters are neither wholly traditionally African, nor modem-Westernized, but an amalgam of both" (2005, p. 213). The South African author empowers his female characters by taking them out of their domestic setting, out of the patriarchal system and projecting their struggle to change their communities.

In this respect, the novel also presents a second narrative that takes place in post-apartheid South Africa where the main characters are two young women whose roots can be traced back to the time when the Xhosa people were divided in the two groups of Believers and Unbelievers. Xoliswa Ximiya is the perfect image of the post-apartheid South African woman who embraces European and American cultures and is prepared to move "away from the uncivilized bush and the hicks who want to preserve an outdated culture" (Mda, 2000, p. 88). She is seen as a prophetess and a leader in her community, fighting to make her people understand that they should reconciliate with the past and embrace progressive views. She chooses a career over a husband, she refuses male protection but, in the end, she is labelled as a spinster although she is in her twenties. Xoliswa gathers the women of her village around her and explains that they should speak for themselves and refuse to become objects for the tourists who come to see them "frolicking about topless, wearing only traditional skirts" (2000, p. 150). She also speaks to the men of her village, pointing out that educated people should not "reinforce barbarism" and should give up superstitions in order to make tribal communities "join the modern world" (2000, p. 150).

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She stands for civilization and progress and she leaves behind "shameful practices and uncultured modes of dress" (2000, p. 261). She will not "wallow in redness" (2000, p. 261), and finally she leaves her community and her followers for a job in the Department of Education in Pretoria. "The scars of history" on her body will always be a reminder of her-story, although she seeks cure for a skin disease that her people call "ancestors' flagellation" (2000, p. 261). Undoubtedly, Xoliswa bears a close resemblance to Nongquawuse: she is isolated when her promises of a better future are not fulfilled due to the fact that investors decide to build the resort somewhere else. However, there are numerous tourists who come to visit the place where Nongquawuse made her prophecies, and the small community is slowly transforming into a tourist attraction, as women are no longer valued for their ability to give birth and raise children but for their sexuality:

> Wombs. however, became less central to manhood as southern African peasants were conquered, dispossessed, extruded into a colonial order. […] Women were increasingly valued not for their fertility but for their sexuality. This historic shift was reflected in representations of Nongquawuse, as tropes linked to birth faded into the background. (Bradford, 2007, p. 47).

The second portrait of a feminine character is Qukezwa, who believes that Xoliswa and her followers "have been damaged by the white man's education" (Mda, 2000, p. 104). Qukezwa represents the indigenous culture and traditions while opposing the idea of progress. She is convinced that quick development does not solve her people's problems and proves that small businesses have a positive impact on people's welfare. She has a baby in her teens, and she later sets up a local women's cooperative to make and sell traditional Xhosa clothes to tourists who collect souvenirs.

Mda's portrayal of Nongquawuse is not that of an empty container that is filled with the words of others, even if she is silent: her non-verbal behavior and her actions are powerful enough to justify her presence at the centre of her community and her legacy for future generations. In a 2018 interview, the South African writer stated that his characters "have agency and psychological motivation but are influenced by events in the historical record. I place characters in the context of history, but their actions are their own". The historical perspective is essential for women's entry into the public sphere, as a "feminine perspective on historical events" will contribute to rewrite history as her-story (Mda, 2018).

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2.2. Sila van den Kaap: A slave's tale

Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed* (2006) marks a "turning point in the production of South African fiction about slavery" (Boswell, 2020, p. 146). The reimagined life and experiences of Sila van den Kaap, an enslaved woman sentenced to death in April 1823 in Cape Town, imprisoned on Robben Island until 1825 for infanticide and granted full pardon in 1825 by King George IV, through the intervention of the Superintendent, are woven in a tale of captivity and resistance that draws attention to the condition of women and slaves in colonial South Africa.

The novel follows Sila from the moment she is discovered alive and having a baby in a jail in Cape Town, although she had been sentenced to death a year before. The history of slavery at the Cape is also rewritten by Christiansë through the story of Sila, who has been incarcerated for the murder of her son Baro and has given birth to Meisie in prison. The author's note at the end of the novel places the narrative within a context of the colonial archive in the form of court records that Christiansë uses to document and rewrite the life of a woman slave who was captured in Mozambique and traded as a slave by different Afrikaner or British families in Cape Town. It is the story of a woman sold specifically for her child-bearing capacity who fights to gain freedom both for herself and for her children but finds herself in an oppressive environment where she kills Baro, one of her sons. Although she is sentenced to death, she is kept in prison alive as she is forced to perform sexual services. As Bradford (2007, p. 47) remarks, colonialism brought a new perspective on women who are valued for their sexuality instead of their fertility.

After her death sentence is turned into a prison sentence she is urged to confess the murder of her son and convert to Christianity. Sila refuses to confess (hence the title of the novel) but she imagines her dead son, Baro, living in prison with her and her memories are confessions made to him. These memories reflect on Sila's life as a woman and as a slave prior to the death of her son. As Meg Samuelson underlines "Christiansë […] both salvages the slave woman Sila from her sentencing in the colonial archive and then allows her to summon back the son that she had killed" (Samuelson, 2008, p. 41). Sila refuses to play some of the roles assigned to her in the construction of the written records surrounding the case: she refuses to be a slave and criminal but she is forced to be a mistress and a sex worker, roles

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that she is has “no energy to deny”, as she is “a prisoner in the country of lies. Truth was a foreign language here” (Christiansë, 2006, p. 3).

However, the narrative is pointing out to the fact that slavery at the Cape was only a stage in the development of colonialism and racial segregation. Enslaved women were the centre of the politics of slavery, due to colonialists’ fear that slave populations would eventually no longer be traded along the century-old routes. Thus, women were seen as the only method to “replenish a declining slave stock” (Boswell, 2020, p. 149). Paternity was not questioned if the baby was born to a woman slave: children would become slaves themselves. The matrimonial birth lines were the centre of the political economy of slavery. Both the enslaved woman and the reproductive rights were claimed by the owner, so that “bodies became instruments to create more slave labour, perpetuating the system” (Boswell, 2020, p. 149).

In prison, Sila finds a woman partner that comforts her body after the aches and pains of rape and forced labour: “you make a place for my back to rest and all aching stops, and when my face relaxes I know that I was pulled up, strained. You are my good day, and my quiet, Lys” (Christiansë, 2006, p. 198). The oppressive space is set in opposition with a queer space where the two women can escape the world of slavery and prison life. Only in recent years have scholars pointed to the fact that “the degree to which ‘age-old’ traditions concerned with gender and sexuality in Africa are colonial inventions arising from the imposition of European gender binaries” (Quirk & Rossi, 2022). Consequently, women of the Global South were portrayed as a “homogeneous, undifferentiated group leading truncated lives, victimized by the combined weight of their traditions, cultures, and beliefs and ‘our’ Eurocentric history” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 192).

Christiansë’s narrative is related almost entirely to Sila’s fragmented life retrieved from the archives to provide a detailed representation of trauma caused by slavery, rape and silence: “Sila is structurally muted in that, although we have words from her, the state never granted her full subjectivity, and her utterances remained for them, utterly illegible” (Christiansë, 2009, p. 1). That is why simply placing Sila’s court records into a history of slavery in South Africa, as a mere historical fact, lacking personhood and out of the colonial context would be insufficient. South African slave history implies more than “mere recollecting, recalling or reconstructing – re-memorying is itself a commentary on the disjunctures between memory and dominant narrative of history” (Boswell, 2020, p. 162).

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Sila's message for future generations, that her children should also pass on, focuses on the burden of slavery in Southern Africa: "we are trapped people, we are wounded people, we long for freedom, we long for things we have been taught to admire and desire, we long for the courage to desire such things" (Christiansë, 2006, pp. 179-180). Narrating historical facts and filling in the gaps with a story is a compensation for centuries of silence, a bridge for transitioning from colonial to post-colonial South Africa and from history to her-story.

3.3. Mary Prince: The tale of a freed woman

In her 2020 novel *Still Life,* Zoë Wicomb uses a different technique, playing with readers' perception of time while telling the story of an author struggling to write a biography of the almost-forgotten Scottish poet Thomas Pringle, whose South African legacy is that he is still named the 'Father of South African Poetry'. Pringle was born in Scotland in 1789, moved to South Africa's Eastern Cape in 1820 and became famous in Great Britain for defending the freedom of the press. He and his wife Margaret Pringle were abolitionists who could not find a fertile ground in the South African slavery establishment, which led to their moving to London where they continued to advocate against slave labour. Wicomb points out that rewriting history also means reading his poetry from a colonial point of view or attaching a new adjective to his nickname: "Father of Colonial South African Poetry" (Wicomb, 2020, p. 66).

In her efforts to resurrect Pringle, the struggling novelist summons the specter of Mary Prince, along with Hinza, Pringle's adopted black South African son. They are accompanied by Sir Nicholas Green, a time traveler (and a character from Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*), in their expedition across space and time to reveal fragments from Pringle's life, and to explore colonial history and racial oppression in South Africa. Mary Prince is the West Indian slave who was the first black woman to publish (with Pringle's help) a history of her years of slavery (Wicomb, 2022, p. 24). Zoë Wicomb was inspired to connect all these characters in a novel by an archived letter in which Pringle asked to be permitted to take Hinza Marossi, a Tswana boy, to London and by the slave narrative written by Mary Prince and published by Thomas Pringle. The Scottish writer's life is used as the reason to investigate the colonial South African history, since telling the story of one person implies telling the story of many others who are fragments of the same narrative. Wicomb's *Still Life* can be described as a

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novel about writing a historical novel. Characters speak to the author and they all participate in the process of character development, which makes Wicomb's writing seem like a surreal autobiography.

Unlike Nongquawuse and Sila van den Kaap, Mary Prince's voice was heard and her memories were not only recorded but also made available to the 19th century reader. However, in the context of the 21st century slave narrative, the retelling of known histories in order to fill the gaps of others' stories is significant. Mary's voice in Wicomb's novel remembers the scars of slavery: "bodies may have been abused and broken, may also be practiced in recovery, but your minds have not been exercised in the ways that a new kind of living will demand of you" (Wicomb, 2020, p. 28). Freedom for Mary Prince, the slave, means not having a master, although she can remember her owners in each scar on her body. For Mary Prince, the woman, freedom means to have the attic to herself, "savouring the safety of a private space" (p. 30). For Mary Prince, the freed slave, freedom means "avoiding the white stuff to which slavers are addicted […] the sugar [or] the demon salt" (p. 31).

When retelling Mary Prince's story, Wicomb also underlines the obvious practice of renaming colonized people, settlements, or territories in order to erase identities or histories, "to save it from being what it was through renaming" (p. 48). The use of new names that can be pronounced and manipulated by colonizers has been a common practice and it is still used nowadays. The first time her African identity is rewritten is during her childhood when she is sold multiple times as a slave and she is given the new British name; the second time her identity is revised is in 1831 when her book is published and she tells her story as a free woman: *The History of Mary Prince*. The third revision of her identity is in contemporary times when a plaque is displayed on the walls of a house:

> Mary Prince
> 1788-1833
> Abolitionist and Author
> Lived in a house
> Near this site
> 1829 (Wicomb, p. 102).

Although the book was ghostwritten and Mary Prince was not the sole author of this text, which is a significant work in early Black writing and a key historical document that has

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influenced the Abolition of Slavery Act of 1833, Pringles gives her full credit as he considers himself an editor, not an author. Mary Prince's autobiography was one of the first slave narratives and the first account of a Black woman's life to be published in Britain.

Wicomb's Mary Prince needs different facilitators "to allow her to speak from the pondok to which history has confined her" (van der Vlies, 2022, p. 51): Thomas Pringles, Susanna Strickland (the ghostwriter), the narrator in *Still Life*. As Andrew van der Vlies observes, the latter manages to give a more independent voice to Mary Prince, as she is revealed to be devoted to Pringle and aware of the fact that she must rely on a man who is able "to facilitate her entry into civic subjectivity" (p. 51). Although the legacy of colonialism is complex, and the re-writing of history into her-story is not an easy task, it becomes evident that "strange dark views […] could not survive in the bright light of Africa" (Wicomb, 2022, p. 141) and the role of the Black female slave is being acknowledged and rewritten. Voices from the colonial past are discovered, recovered and given more power so that they become visible in the new common his/her-story that both fiction writers and historians are revising.

4. Conclusions

Nongquawuse, Sila van den Kaap and Mary Prince are brought back from history by Zakes Mda, Yvette Christiansë and Zoë Wicomb to contribute to the legacy of women's activism. Although their rewritten stories cannot close historical gaps, they can fill in some conspicuous disparities using multiple viewpoints rather than a single account. The novelists' return to South African history to revise and rewrite it by including her-story without excluding the others' stories is a bridge across the temporal divide.

By recovering fragments from Black women's past lives and rearranging them into historical fiction, South African writers move marginalized histories to the centre, challenge dominant narratives, and reconstruct Black women's experiences, as their novels are not only literary accounts but also representations of the intersectional nature of South African society. Nongquawuse, the prophetess, Sila van den Kaap, the slave, and Mary Prince, the freed slave, are examples of how women have been silenced by black and white patriarchal societies alike. Some historical gaps are filled as the writers are drawing clearer, less blurry portraits of the three female figures who are no longer bearing the mark of the subordinate. Nongquawuse is no longer the 'prophetess of doom', she becomes a construct of the Xhosa community and of

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British colonialism; Sila van den Kaap is no longer a slave imprisoned for infanticide, she is the woman slave who survived a capital punishment and physical abuse; and Mary Prince is no longer a freed slave, she is an abolitionist and an author.

The multiple perspectives that focus on micro-histories recognize women's struggles and draw attention to the countless Black women who remain invisible due to societal constraints that have led to the silence around their stories that, are in fact, her-story.

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