

Humour as a postcolonial strategy in Zakes Mda's novel, The Heart of Redness

By

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ABSTRACT

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In this MA mini-thesis, I investigate the role of humour in promoting postcolonial themes in The Heart of Redness by Zakes Mda. I establish that the author has used humour to achieve a variety of strategies. In the first chapter, I argue that there are several instances of humour that appear to be constructed as a direct challenge or answer to nineteenth century colonialism, the frontier mentality and racism in contemporary society.

In the second chapter, I examine Mda's revisiting of the famous cattle killing movement of the 1850s. Little about the cattle killing is humorous, but Mda turns his focus on the schism wrought in Xhosa society by the tension that built up between those who believed in Nongqawuse's prophecies and those who did not. Part of Mda's humorous strategy here is to show how these schisms have translated down over the generations and are apparent still today. He uses humour, however, not to heal these schisms, but to translate them into commentaries on ecological and developmental issues in South Africa.

In my third chapter, I look carefully at the humorous focus Mda turns on elements within the "new South Africa" and I demonstrate that some of the humour in The Heart of Redness functions to transform the formerly silent, in particular Xhosa women, and give them a voice in the postcolonial society.

In my final chapter, I examine Mda's rehabilitation of traditional Xhosa beliefs, and show that humour is a tool which forces us to critically re-examine certain traditional Xhosa beliefs, specifically with regard to the role and status of women in a patriarchal society. My conclusion suggests that Mda uses humour to affect his agenda of reconciliation.

DECLARATION

I declare that **Humour as a postcolonial strategy in Zakes Mda's novel, The Heart of Redness** is my own work, that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

Michael Eric Hagemann

15 November 2005

Signed.....



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DISCLAIMER

This thesis: **Humour as a postcolonial strategy in Zakes Mda's novel: The Heart of Redness**, is the work of the author, Michael Eric Hagemann, and the opinions expressed herein are not those of the National Research Foundation.



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Introduction: Nervous laughter: humour and the postcolonial

David Attwell's review in the Sunday Independent of Zakes Mda's novel The Heart of Redness includes this generous critical acclaim: "The Heart of Redness is the most ambitious work of fiction by a black South African writer in well over a decade." (2001: 14). Attwell praises the technical innovations that Mda has worked into the narrative, but he is particularly impressed with the postcolonial themes that are addressed in the novel. South Africa post-1994 offers a vastly different literary landscape to that previously available to South African writers. A society that has undergone such radical transformation since the transition to nonracial democracy presents entirely new sets of social issues that need discussion and challenging. The Heart of Redness is remarkable for the depth of the critiques it offers, but also what is noteworthy is the sustained and articulate use of humour as an authorial strategy. I will argue in this thesis that Zakes Mda has deployed humour as a conscious authorial strategy to achieve larger postcolonial purposes.

Linda Hutcheon, in Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony, (1994:26) notes that "there has been a paucity of major scholarly work on the language of humour." Similarly, Graeme Ritchie (2003) contends in The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes that there is no current theory on the precise mechanisms of humour and that the only practical methodology available to scholars of humour is the rigorous analysis of texts considered to be humorous for whatever reason.

Satire, parody and bawdy episodes are well enough recognised forms of humour but literary critics have not focussed much attention on the role of humour in a literary text. Louis Rubin, in his editorial preface to The Comic Imagination in American Literature, accurately sums up the difficulty inherent in any serious discussion of the role of humour in literature:

Writing about humor and humorists is perforce an awkward business. For after all, the humor is funny; it is aimed at the risibilities, designed to make the reader laugh, not think. So when one sets out to think about it and to

subject it to analysis, there is always the lurking suspicion that, in doing so, one is not only responding improperly, but behaving just a trifle ridiculously. (1963:iv)

The first difficulty is describing what constitutes humour. A neat explanation is that offered by Bremmer and Roodenburg (1997:1). They suggest that humour is

the most general and neutral notion available to cover a whole variety of behaviour; from apophthegms to spoonerism, practical jokes to puns, farce to foolery. In other words we see humour as any message – transmitted in action, speech, writing, images or music – intended to produce a smile or a laugh. This definition allows us not only to extend our investigations to antiquity, the Middle Ages and the beginning of the early modern period, but also to pose questions of interest to cultural historians: who transmits what humour in which way to whom, where and when?

Defining humour is difficult, largely because terms such as joke, wit and humour are so much a part of everyday interactions that we often assume that the meanings and nuances of the various terms are clear to all parties. It may be more helpful to regard these terms as representing points along a continuum that is humour, and rather to examine this continuum with the purpose of discovering what imparts the quality of humour to a particular instance. It is the mechanisms that are important rather than the terminologies in use. Reichl and Stein note:

laughter has always been seen as arising out of some kind of incompatibility or some incongruity... The concrete manifestations of laughter arising from such a constellation range from subversive laughter, carnivalesque exhilarations, wry smiles, self-deprecation, gallows humour, or black humour to more conciliatory and healing humour, or to the wild and eerie laughter of the otherwise silenced “madwoman in the attic.” All these reflect a struggle for agency, an imbalance of power, and a need, a desire, for release. (2005:9)

Clearly, humour (even crude bawdiness) is not a random spread of self-contained sub-texts. Humour is not frivolity for its own sake. In any humorous context, there appears to be a larger dynamic at work propelling the humour.

Some kind of cultural exchange occurs that contributes an ephemeral synergy which gives the moment of that larger context (however transient) a heightened meaning. Without this subtle exchange, without this shared sense of reception, humorous moments would be clumsy at best or simply collapse into misunderstanding.

John Morreall in his 1997 paper: "Humour in the Holocaust: Its Critical, Cohesive and Coping Functions", writes:

Tragedy, on stage or in real life, is serious, even sublime, while humor and comedy are "light." In drama, when comedy appears within tragedy, it is usually discounted as mere "comic relief." But the ancient Greeks, Shakespeare, and other dramatists took their comedy more seriously than that. They realized that comedy is not "time out" from the real world; rather it provides another perspective on that world. And that other perspective is no less valuable than the tragic perspective...Not only do tragedy and comedy look at the same world, but they both focus on its problematic side. Here they share a similarity with religion. Most problems involve evils of some kind, and a major function of religion, comedy, and tragedy is to help us deal with evil. Many people think of comedy as irrationally optimistic and therefore frivolous, but that is a misconception. (http://www.holocaust-trc.org/holocaust_humour.htm - accessed 10 September 2005)

We thus have a preliminary framework on which to begin constructing a literary theory of humour. Morreall is right. Humour is not about joking and frivolity for its own sake. A core concept then, is the observation that humour is a vehicle for catharsis. Broussine, Davies and Scott in their 1999 paper: "Humour at the Edge", document the long subversive tradition implicit in humour. They suggest that subversion and reinterpretation of situations and contexts are the primary functions of humour. They suggest that humour functions as an adept instrument that expresses resistance to and / or subversion of a dominant social order, keeps control of challenging or stressful situations and allows people to work with life situations that are shot through with ambiguity, paradox or incongruity.

While humour is often panhuman, it is also, as linguist Victor Raskin (1985:180) notes, sometimes paradoxically culture bound. He suggests that ethnic humour is the finest demonstrator of this cultural phenomenon because:

It [ethnic humour] is based on a number of scripts and oppositions which have to be internalized by the speakers and hearers of ethnic jokes. The specific scripts are not part of the native speaker's semantic competence, nor are they part of the native speaker's knowledge of the world. They have to be acquired separately from linguistic competence and in this sense, they are similar to encyclopaedic knowledge.

If we accept, though, that humour functions as a marker of culture, we need to ask the question: what is culture? One of the well-accepted concepts or definitions of culture is that advanced by Ward Goodenough (1971:25). Goodenough suggests that culture is not a material phenomenon, but rather a hierarchy or organised taxonomy of shared sets of beliefs, standards and norms that groups of people have in mind when they perceive, interpret and relate to the world around them. Simple text exegesis is not sufficient for our purpose in unpacking the text of The Heart of Redness. To appreciate the efficacy and significance of the major humorous episodes we need to move into the eclectic territory of cultural studies, in particular postcolonial theory, to understand the issues that Mda is raising. Again by way of groundwork, it is necessary to clarify what is commonly understood by the term postcolonial theory.

Jeremy Hawthorn (2000: 69), makes the substantive point that post-colonialism is "probably the most fashionable, varied and rapidly growing of critical or theoretical groupings." A precise definition of postcolonialism is tricky. Sardar and Van Loon (1997:115) offer this multi-faceted definition of postcolonial discourse and postcolonialism:

Postcolonial discourse analyses how the historical fact of European colonialism continues to shape the relationship between the West and the non-West after former colonies have won their independence. Postcolonialism describes the continuing process of resistance and reconstruction by the non-West. Post-colonial theory explores the experiences of suppression, resistance, race, gender, representation, difference, displacement and migration in relation to the master Western discourses of History, Philosophy, Science and Linguistics.

Thus for our purposes, when we speak of postcolonialism, we look for indicators and artifacts of a substantial shift or transformation that takes place against the historical background of a nation experiencing the decline or overthrow of colonial domination. Postcolonialism is thus a complex series of political and socio-historical happenings and it involves a realignment of culture and cultural preconceptions in the nation that has undergone a postcolonial transformation. The Heart of Redness, published in 2000, is contemporary with the collapse of Apartheid and South Africa's peaceful transformation into a non-racial democratic state. The novel's historical context and its themes which see the author taking a stance against former colonial power relationships and dissecting issues such as contemporary attitudes to tradition and the shifting, uneasy identities of men and women in South African society help to establish The Heart of Redness as a postcolonial artifact.

The Heart of Redness is a sweeping narrative that floats, seamlessly, between the past and the present. On one level, it is the story of an exile, Camagu, who returns to South Africa after the demise of Apartheid and who subsequently experiences enormous difficulty finding a sense of identity and community. Into this modern day story is woven the documented story of the cattle killing movement in the 1850s, inspired by the apocalyptic visions of the Xhosa prophetess Nongqawuse. Mda's narrative slips across time in a rich parade of idiom and satire and alternately visits historical events and the daily patterns of life of the villagers and visitors in modern Qolorha. This subject matter, the larger themes and aspects of the plot, offer a substantial examination of issues such as racism, gender and difference that we come to associate with postcolonial fiction. The Heart of Redness, with its distinctive elisions between historical narrative and the present, echoes the "magic realism" mode of writing popularised by Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Gunter Grass and John Fowles. Mda, however, has consistently dismissed any suggestion that he is consciously working in the magic realism mode, preferring to see his writing as located within an indigenous South African tradition. In an engaging online

interview with Boniface Mongo-Mboussa, he explained how his work differed from the established magic realism tradition:

Well, I've had that question so many times. It's a very current question. Let me tell you this: even for that one I will say both. I'll explain that. Long, long before I even heard of those Latin Americans, I was creating works with this magic that you were talking about. But I want you to know that I have reservations about the word magic itself, when it comes to my work. I agree with this magic in my novels and in my plays that I wrote at the times of the high school and so on, not knowing anything about this Latin American literature. I used that magic, and why I used that magic, it is because it is this magic that I find in the society I'm writing about. (http://www.africultures.com/anglais/articles/int_mda.htm - accessed 1 September 2005).

The Heart of Redness shifts from the realist and polemic style that was formerly the preferred mode for writers engaging with apartheid and / or a dysfunctional fractured society in South Africa. In thematic considerations, narrative construction and other literary devices, the work is a bold and conscious step in a new direction. In addition to asserting The Heart of Redness' status as a postcolonial work, I want to demonstrate that this novel, with its deliberate and sustained use of humour, is a pioneering work. It is firmly located within a newly evolving canon of South African postcolonial writing, one that looks to a newly defined (post-1994) sense of nationhood and which breaks with the anti-apartheid polemic of much previous South African writing. I hope that my study will contribute significantly to the growing body of critical opinion that responds to postcolonial South African writing. Throughout these discourses, The Heart of Redness is noted for its many instances of humour. These range from the mildest of gentle satire¹ to incidents that are grotesque². Whilst the humour makes the novel a pleasurable and enriching experience for the average reader, literary critics recognize that humour fulfils a far deeper function than the one of increasing a novel's marketability to a book buying public. The use of humour is

¹ For our purposes, satire can be construed as the deliberate use of irony and ridicule to draw attention to folly or evil practice.

² In the discussion that follows, I suggest that grotesque can be construed as things that are distorted fantastically to the point of being distasteful.

a definite, powerful strategy deployed by a postcolonial writer that goes far beyond the subversion of irony and wit.

Given that postcolonial writers have a broad agenda to critically analyse relationships between coloniser and colonised and to focus on attitudes of resistance and identity formation, I wish to use postcolonial theory and thus focus my examination on the role of humour in The Heart of Redness with a view to first posing the vital initial question: what, at any particular moment, is being brought under humorous focus? I wish, however, to move far beyond mere comment on the bare mechanics of these identified instances of humour and their effectiveness in fuelling the narrative. Instead, I will proceed to answer the begged question of *why* Mda would be wanting to employ humour as a conscious authorial strategy.

Part of the answer lies in clues given to us by Mda himself. On a number of occasions he has articulated his sense and desire to contribute, through his writing, to reconciliation and the quest for a new sense of national identity. In 1994, Mda delivered a paper with the prophetic title “The Role of Culture in the Process of Reconciliation in South Africa”. Although he was speaking in the main about dramatic work and dramatic performance, his comments apply quite equally to his novels too. Mda suggested in this paper that

There is no doubt that for this country to survive and prosper, reconciliation is absolutely essential. *But true reconciliation will only come when we are big enough to confront what happened yesterday, without bitterness* [emphasis added]. We cannot just sweep it under the carpet, and hope that all of a sudden we shall live in brotherly or sisterly love, in a state of blissful amnesia.

Available: <http://www.csvr.org.za/papers/papmda.htm>. [Accessed 25 July 2002].

This is the clue we have been looking for. Mda, determined to drive forward the process of reconciliation, understands the potential of humour as an authorial strategy that is quite capable of initiating healthy confrontation that in turn provokes discourse.

Initially, we need to establish what **subverting functions** these instances of humour might have. Here I will be looking for evidence that Mda is deliberately seeking to undermine or debunk any beliefs, practices or attitudes specific to one or more of the participant groups in the postcolonial narrative. Thereafter, the analysis will shift to establish what **transforming functions** might be present or implicit in these instances of humour. Here I am particularly interested to link the humorous episodes to Mda's stated agenda of addressing a wide range of issues with a view to achieving reconciliation via the process that he has already so carefully mapped out for us above.

A significant thrust within postcolonial studies examines the attitudes of resistance exhibited by the colonized, by the others and their attempts to assert a separate identity. This concept, first described by Salman Rushdie, is known within postcolonial studies by the phrase "the Empire writing back" and I will seek to demonstrate in this study that humour and the grotesque are the primary tools by which Mda achieves his postcolonial strategies of "writing back" – that is, of asserting an identity in the face of colonial pressures, apartheid and the growing selfishness of many in the new, post-democratic South African society.

Chapter One: Laughing at the past: confronting racism and prejudice

The cover blurb to the 2000 Oxford edition of The Heart of Redness claims “it is Mda’s resilient, lyrical and exultant prose and his refusal to allow any of his characters to sink to playing the victim game that makes The Heart of Redness such a heartening read.” There is an element of truth to this promotional text. because the narrative slides between the turbulent world of nineteenth century colonial expansion and post-1994 South Africa and the strength of The Heart of Redness is contained in the fact that Mda is working in contested space – the historical section of the narrative is concerned with the conflict engendered by the aggressive expansion of British colonial interests into Xhosa territory, and the contemporary section of the novel is located in the turbulent world of post- 1994 South Africa. Mda populates this space with characters who are thrown into conflict, and it is within the parameters of this conflict that their various identities are described.

The Heart of Redness is noted for its intertextuality and sustaining it are the archival records dating from colonial times which bear witness to the events and peoples under discussion. Mda’s energy derives from what Hans Bertens suggests is the manifest agenda of postcolonial critical theory – a determination that “radically questions the aggressively expansionist imperialism of the colonising powers and in particular the system of values that supported imperialism...” (2001:200). As Jenny Sharpe notes, it is an historical fact that the catalyst of colonialism was not solely commercial exploitation, it included “*the idea of colonialism as a moral obligation to spread Western civilization*” [emphasis added] (1989:99). Mda seeks to examine these deeply contested ideas with surgical precision.

The Heart of Redness could well have been a polemical, bitter work that aggressively sought to deconstruct the frontier mentality, nineteenth century colonialism and racism in contemporary society. Mda confronts these issues, but he chooses to do so in ways that are often either humorous, ironic or even manifestly grotesque, for he sees identity construction as inextricably intertwined

in a contested landscape. Edward Said (1978) suggested in Orientalism that the Western world has consistently, over time, rewritten the identity of the East to match a Western fictional construct. The emphasis in Said's work is the recognition of difference as rooted in ideas of hegemony – that the West has somehow seen itself and its cultural institutions as superior and the pervasive filter through which all aspects of non-western culture are defined and explored. Homi Bhaba sees these interactions differently. In his essay “Signs Taken For Wonders”, Bhaba suggests that

The discriminatory effects of the discourse of cultural colonialism, for instance, do not simply or singly refer to a person or to a dialectical power struggle between self and Other, or to a discrimination between mother culture and alien cultures... the effect of colonial power is seen to be the production of hybridisation rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority. (1995:34)

Bhaba thus interprets the confrontation between coloniser and colonised as inherently paradoxical. In the Hegelian notion of master and slave, the colonial figures become, in a way, dependent on their subjects and in attempting to deny or resist this dependence, they seek to express superiority through stereotypes and stigmatisation. The colonised, on the other hand, while submitting grudgingly to colonial authority, begin creating a hybrid identity that is in opposition to that imposed on them by the colonial outsiders. Mda uses humour as Bhaba suggests, to critically analyse and question any notions of colonial cultural superiority and to undermine attitudes that are patently false and liable to continue generating conflict if not confronted and stripped of their illusory power.

Notably, one of the first racial stereotypes that Mda confronts head on is the archetypal image of the truculent and arrogant white person who lives at arms' length from his black community. Readers see this when they meet Dalton for the first time. Note how Mda toys with his readers in his description of Dalton. The man's clothing and physical features initially summon archetypal “AWB-boer” figures to mind and then Mda, having led us one way, promptly upends us:

Dalton is stocky and balding, with hard features and a long rich beard of black and silver grey streaks. He always wears a khaki safari suit. He looks like a parody of an Afrikaner farmer.... Dalton is a white man of English stock. Well, let's put it this way: his skin is white like the skins of those who caused the sufferings of the Middle Generations. But his heart is an umXhosa heart. He speaks better isiXhosa than most of the amaXhosa people in the village. In his youth, against his father's wishes, he went to the initiation school and was circumcised in accordance with the customs of the amaXhosa people. He therefore knows the secret of the mountain. He is a man. (2000: 7)

The initial humour is contained in the clever joke that Mda pulls on his readers, but the purpose of the humour in this episode reaches far deeper than an author tricking his readers. In this single episode Mda makes it clear that there are white South Africans who value and appreciate cultures different to their own, hence the emphasis on Dalton's Xhosa lingual ability. The fact that Dalton has also undergone traditional Xhosa male initiation has a particularly strong resonance. Mda constructs his readers as sympathetic to postcolonial issues, so Dalton's absolute respect for Xhosa culture helps to break down any sense of otherness that postcolonial readers might otherwise have been inclined to attach to Dalton because he is a white South African. Linda Hutcheon suggests that instances like this one may well serve an ironic purpose because they function, also to "specifically target the black internalization of white racial stereotype" (1994:20). It appears that this is Mda's larger purpose here. In debunking the archetypal white stereotype, he suggests that in a postcolonial landscape the continued presence of white people is legitimate and a necessary part of any national agenda of reconciliation. Dalton's wife, on the other hand, is not dealt with as kindly. In introducing her character, Mda holds her up to some ridicule and paints an unflattering portrait:

Fortunately Missis understands no isiXhosa. She is a Free State Afrikaner. Dalton met her when he attended the Cherry Festival in Ficksburg many years ago. She was the Cherry Queen, although it would be hard to believe that now – what with her rotten front teeth and all. The trouble is that she eats too many sweets. Her saving grace is that she

hardly ever smiles. She still finds it difficult to understand her husband's cosy relationship with these rustics. (2000:8-9)

Her cartoon-like character is humorous in terms of the visual imagery conjured up by the description of the former beauty queen now gone to seed through gluttony; but Mda's humour works on a far deeper level than the witty description. The portrait of "Missis" Dalton is satirical and shot through with irony. The honorific "Missis" is itself deeply ironic - we see absolutely nothing in her character to warrant this marker of her assumed superior status. In fact, quite the opposite; she is shown up to be a racist who deliberately lives her life aloof and separate from the community her husband is such an integral part of. She cannot speak Xhosa and we assume has no interest in learning the language because she feels in every way culturally superior to the Xhosa people. This stands in stark opposition to John Dalton and cements our understanding of her character as unfortunately true of too many white people in South Africa. That Mda has chosen to show "Missis" Dalton in such a ridiculous light clearly suggests a larger purpose behind the portrait. Elder Olson in The Theory of Comedy, suggests that



we can learn something about its [ridicule's] nature by considering what happens when we ridicule someone. Ridicule is a particular kind of *depreciation*. We cannot ridicule someone by showing that he is extremely *good*, or *better* than most, or *even ordinary*; we must show that he is *inferior*, either to the ordinary, or at least inferior to what has been thought or claimed about him, by himself or others. But we do not ridicule someone simply by showing that he is bad; for example, that the pretended saint is in fact a mass murderer, or that the mass-murder is really only the murderer of a few, for he would even then be the object of serious concern. And we cannot ridicule simply by showing that he is not the object of serious concern; we must exhibit the *sheer absurdity of taking him seriously at all*; in other words, we must establish not the contradictory of the serious but the contrary of it. (1968:12-13)

This is precisely what Mda is doing here. He is demonstrating, quite convincingly, that racism is an unacceptable and invalid way of interacting with the world. "Missis" is virtually written out the novel at this point; her character is

as insignificant to the plot as the views she represents to the new postcolonial society she lives in. The wider implication is clear: people with such myopic, absurd attitudes cannot be taken seriously and they have excluded themselves from any positive role in this newly democratised society.

The Heart of Redness slips seamlessly between past and present and early in the novel's course, Mda uses a grotesque episode to thoroughly dissect nineteenth century viewpoints. The context of the episode is a clash during one of the frontier wars. The Xhosa warriors Twin and Twin-Twin creep up on John Dalton and a detachment of troops. The Xhosa men are witness to an episode that is grotesque:

Then to the horror of the men watching, the soldiers cut off the dead man's head and put it in a pot of boiling water.

"They are cannibals too," hissed Twin-Twin.

The British soldiers sat around smoked their pipes and laughed at their own jokes. Occasionally one of these soldiers stirred the boiling pot, and the stench of rotten meat floated up to the twins' group. The guerillas could not stand it any longer. With blood curdling screams they sprang from their hiding place and attacked the men of Queen Victoria. One British soldier was killed, two were captured, and the rest escaped.

"It is our father!" screamed Twin. "They were going to eat our father!"

It was indeed the headless body of Xikixa.

"We were not going to eat your father," said John Dalton, prisoner of war, in his perfect isiXhosa. "We are civilised men, we don't eat people."

"Liar!" screamed Twin-Twin. "Why would you cook anything that you are not going to eat?"

"To remove the flesh from the skull," explained Dalton patiently. He did not seem to be afraid. He seemed to be too sure of himself. "These heads are either going to be souvenirs, or will be used for scientific enquiry." (2000:21)

The semi-domestic tranquillity of men sitting smoking around a fire supporting a bubbling pot is grotesque. John Clark offers a suggestion why writers would employ the grotesque as a deliberate strategy. He details that

[because] much of the grotesque manner appears startling, demonic, disorderly and depressing, it is not surprising that its deployment has frequently discomfited... [and so] The satirist usually fosters the grotesque as a mirror held up to chaotic and distraught generations. (1991:21)

The stomach-churning scene we have been privy to is all of the above. Dalton's indignant response and his justification of the soldiers' barbarism neatly upends the popular colonial motif of the Victorian gentleman advancing the boundaries of knowledge and science and it also very neatly inverts the colonial stock image of the cannibal feast. The horror of this episode functions as the mirror through which Mda show us that the self-professed civilising mission of nineteenth century imperial agents was so riddled with contradictions, jingoism and racism that any sense of its innate superiority over the indigenous African cultures it swamped is ridiculous and therefore worthless. Mda similarly pokes fun at most of the white colonial heroes mentioned in the novel. He reminds us of the role the Russians had in the demise of Cathcart and constructs a witty and ironic comment on Cathcart's successor, Sir George Grey. Mda writes:



The Man Who Named Ten Rivers was Sir George Grey, the man who had taken over as governor of the Cape Colony after Cathcart's death. He had arrived with great enthusiasm with a mission to civilise the natives... He had been a governor in Australia and New Zealand, they said, where his civilising mission did many wonderful things for the natives of those countries. Of course he had to take their land in return for civilisation. Civilisation is not cheap. (2000: 95)

Again the humour, heavily laced with irony, is evident. The rivers had names before Grey arrived and this "civilising mission" brought with it measles, dispossession, poverty and generations of "otherness". This is the price indigenous people paid for the dubious gift of being "civilised". In writing back to the empire, Mda's conscious choice of comic fictions offers, as Mariët Westerman suggests, "alternative modes of addressing urgent social concerns" (1997:163). Readers are left in no doubt that nineteenth century colonialism was, as R.W. Connell notes, a hegemonic relationship in which "a group claims

and sustains a leading position in social life” (1995:77). Mda’s humour does more than simply ridicule or point to logical inconsistencies; it reveals the flimsy moral base of nineteenth century imperialism and debunks any sense that colonialism was a civilising mission.

Nineteenth century colonialism depended for much of its energy on the missionary zeal of the various Christian denominations that sought to bring the civilising mission of the gospel to “heathens”. Some of the funniest episodes in The Heart of Redness are those that turn the focus on aspects of misplaced missionary zeal. Maureen Isaacson, writing in the Sunday Independent, notes of Mda that “neither his penchant for forgiveness nor his former life as a Catholic altar boy makes him a Christian” (22 September 2002:18.) This is not to say that Mda has a particularly antichristian agenda; instead, he sees through the dualisms and the illogicalities underpinning the theology that supported nineteenth century colonialism. Mda exploits to marvellous satiric effect, the awkward tension between Christian belief and Christianity in practice. We note, for instance, that



Grey was a great reader of the Bible – the big book that talked about the true salvation that would come through the blood of the son of the true god. Grey believed all men were equal – well almost equal – as long as they adopted a civilised mode of dress and decent habits... Grey was a wonderful man whose only motive for coming to and ruling the land of the amaXhosa was to change the customs of the barbarous natives and introduce them to British civilisation. The land that he grabbed in the process was really a very small price to pay for the wonderful gift of civilization. (2000:96)

M.H. Abrams argues that satire derives its edge from using ridicule as a strategy to underline an unattainable or untenable position or to correct “human vice and folly” (1971:154). Mda’s satire does precisely that and his purpose is to demonstrate quite clearly that the actions of colonial heroes like Sir George Grey were fundamentally at odds with the principles of the religion they so ironically espoused and used to justify the very processes of dispossession and repression in colonialism.

Sir George Grey's character is ridiculed several times in the course of the novel. There is a single hugely funny moment where the sense of deflation is total:

"I fear for his Excellency's health," said Gawler. "This trip has been quite rigorous."

The Man Who Named Ten Rivers was irritated. He felt that the young upstart was undermining his manliness and vast experience as an English explorer who had pioneered some of the most dangerous places in the new world, who had walked uncharted territories in Australia and New Zealand, and who has given his name to ten rivers. Gawler apologised and assured his Excellency that he had not meant to be disrespectful.

Perhaps the governor should have heeded the magistrate's friendly warning. Before his rounds on the wild frontier were over, he suffered a nervous breakdown and had to be sent back to Cape Town hallucinating and blubbing. (2000:146)

The effect of this piece is to destroy any heroic notions attached to this colonial conqueror. What emerges, instead, is a picture of a man who is something of an ass: he is drunk on his own jingoism and thoroughly corrupted by his colonising zeal. A bitterly ironic piece a little further along in the novel further exposes the character and motives of this man:

In New Zealand, he had had similar success. He told the genteel folks amid sighs of admiration how he had disciplined a Maori chief called Te Rauparaha. He had been getting too big for his boots and was surely going to give the settlers some problems in the future, so Grey had accused him of plotting to kill white settlers and rape their women. The chief was arrested, and was released only after his people agreed to hand over three million acres of prime land for white settlement. This added more land to the millions of acres that Sir George had gained by various means from the Maori, including court-martialling and executing their unco-operative leaders and transporting some of them to Australia. (2000:156-157)

Ridicule has been Mda's chief purpose in constructing these pieces involving Sir George Grey. He is shown to be a despicable, amoral and arrogant man for whom manipulation, false accusations, down right lies and violence were justified in the name of the empire. Yet Mda is not after the person of Grey so much as

demonstrating to his readers that colonialism was an intrinsically corrupt and ethically unsustainable philosophy. The theology underpinning nineteenth century colonialism is also feebly transparent.

While the novel looks in broad terms on the impact of Christianity on the indigenous peoples, the effect of Christianity on individual Xhosa people also falls under the spotlight. Mda would have us see the hypocrisy of the nineteenth century missionary Christians who under-girded the advance of colonialism by actively proselytising to the indigenous peoples and causing them to abandon their traditional beliefs. A significantly humorous thread in the novel concerns the character Mhlakaza, also known for a while as Wilhelm Goliath. Mhlakaza abandoned traditional belief systems and converted to Christianity. His public admission to the faith is humorous:

[He was initially] baptised in the Methodist Church...But soon enough he deserted his Methodist friends and threw in his lot with the Anglicans. The Methodists, he said, told their hearts in public. He preferred the private confessions of the Anglicans. Also the Anglicans wore more beautiful robes. (2000:52)



Mhlakaza is so easily swayed that he swaps one denomination for another for the flimsiest of reasons. A little later, Mhlakaza (known as Wilhelm Goliath whilst a Christian) becomes a wholly ridiculous figure who assumes, unconsciously, the role of fool to an amused audience of Xhosas. The narrative relates:

Wilhelm Goliath boasted that he was the first umXhosa ever to receive the Anglican Communion. He would recite the Creed, all Ten Commandments in their proper order, and the Lord's Prayer. He spoke the language of the Dutch People too, as if he was one of them.

Sometimes he would break into a fit of preaching, "I urge you, my countrymen ... change from your evil ways, for they are the ways of the devil. Do away with ububomvu or ubuqaba, your heathen practices, your superstitions ... and become amaGqobhoka ... civilised ones ... those who have converted to the path that was laid for us by Christ. Throw away your red isikhaka skirts! War dresses! For our Lord Christ died for is on the cross, to save us from eternal damnation. These were utterances that were guaranteed to cause a lot of mirth among his listeners. They found it funny that the way to the white man's heaven was

through trousers and dresses. In any case, this Goliath looked hilarious in his ill-fitting black suit that used to belong to Merriman. (2000:53-54)

Wilhelm Goliath looks absurd in his hand-me-down clothes; but the purpose of this ridiculous portrait is to challenge the absurd theology picked up from his white masters and reflected by Goliath in his impromptu sermons. That the high notion of spiritual salvation could, in any way, be linked to the clothes a person wears is not only untenable but also preposterous, and Mda would have us see it as such. Nicholas Thomas in his essay “Colonial conversions: difference, hierarchy and history in early twentieth century propaganda”, notes that

Christian missionaries saw appropriate clothing as an extension of their mandate to promote the colonial culture in their gospel preaching: great emphasis was placed especially on sewing and garment making, which was directly linked to conversion because those who attended church necessarily did so attired in fabric skirts and blouses or sarongs rather than in heathen dress. (2000:317)

This is where we realise that nineteenth century missionaries too often misused the gospels to impose their western ideals of dress and conduct on indigenous peoples and rode rough shod over their cultural concerns. In a bleakly funny episode Goliath, struggling under the load of Merriman’s baggage he has to carry, is warned by Merriman “against the sin of laziness” (2000:53). The irony of this single episode expands, however, to highlight the fact that whatever they may have preached, nineteenth century Christian missionaries championed the advance of western culture tended not to regard black converts as true brothers in the Lord. Far from embracing them as equals in the Christian faith, white missionaries generally exploited and suppressed black converts, laying the foundations for a climate of social and political repression that characterised the South African social landscape until recently. That misplaced Christian evangelism in the nineteenth century wrought much harm is now beyond any doubt, and the ill effects are a ghastly truth that contemporary South African theologians acknowledge. Maria Ericson suggests in her essay: “Reconciliation and the Search For A Shared Moral Landscape: Insights and Challenges from

Northern Ireland and South Africa” that “any initiative for *reconciliation* rests upon the conviction that present relationships are flawed, and that wrongs or injustices have been committed” (2003:20).

Ericson has pinpointed, unwittingly, the postcolonial purpose of Mda’s humour that targets attitudes of racism and misplaced colonising zeal. The humour encourages readers to question the belief systems that led to the various events and conflicts in the novel. Laughter thus becomes more than a cathartic device; it requires the reader to respond to these aspects of the text and acknowledge the existence of huge historical injustices.

While much of the humour targets attitudes that perhaps belong in the colonial past, Mda is careful not to allow any sense of residual racism and bigotry to remain unchallenged. There is an extended satirical piece that targets people whom John Dalton identifies as white liberals. It begins with this penetrating deconstruction:

John Dalton’s friends think that memory is being used to torment them for the sins of their fathers. Sins committed in good faith. Next week two of them are leaving. One for Australia, the other for New Zealand. One owns a cottage at Qolorha-by-Sea and the other lives in Port Elizabeth. Today they and a few other cottage owners gather in the garden of the emigrant, braaing meat on an open charcoal stand and drinking beer. (2000:157-158)

The reader easily discerns that unresolved racism and an inability to embrace change are the reasons why these emigrants choose to go. The offhand comment about “sins of the fathers... committed in good faith”, is something of a rebuff towards the public goal of national reconciliation first articulated by Nelson Mandela in the wake of the first democratic elections in South Africa. It is also a telling comment about the characters of people who, when faced with all the evidence of a great injustice, choose not to acknowledge any part, however passive, they may have played in perpetuating systems of oppression. Mda uses a clever authorial device to play out the satire and expose the shallowness of some white liberals. The focaliser disappears and instead we have John Dalton,

the white man with an “umXhosa heart” (2000:7) who speaks. Dalton responds to his friends who have passed cynical asides about South Africa’s future prospects under black rule:

Dalton is now getting angry. Against his better judgement, he raises his voice and says, “The Afrikaner is more reliable than you chaps. He belongs to the soil. He is of Africa. Even if he is not happy about the present situation, he will not go anywhere. He cannot go anywhere... You call the Afrikaner racist when he wants a homeland for his own people. You laugh at his pie-in-the-sky Orania homeland as a joke – which it is – but you are not aware that you yourselves have a homeland mentality. Your homelands are in Australia and New Zealand. That is why you emigrate in droves to those countries where you can spend a blissful life without blacks. (2000:160)

Dalton’s tone is vicious, but Mda exploits the situation brilliantly. Dalton’s friends protest that their attitudes are justified by conditions characterized by “crime, violence, affirmative action and corruption” (2000:161). Dalton exposes the treacherous attitudes that some white liberals maintain. He challenges:



“Yes you prided yourself as liberals.” admits Dalton. “But now you can’t face the reality of a black-dominated government. It is clear that while you were shouting against the injustices of the system, secretly you thanked God for the National Party which introduced and preserved that very system for forty-six years.” (2000:161)

The men are nonplussed by Dalton’s outburst, but it is the final remark one of them makes that proves Dalton correct, despite his angry outburst. A character identified only as “the second emigrant” remarks: “The man [Dalton] has mastered the art of licking the backsides of the blacks. He has even joined the ruling party.” (200:161). The second emigrant, significantly, has no name. Perhaps he is meant to function as a type; reflecting an unpleasant reality in white South African society. Mda ridicules this character and the reader shares the sense of dismay that such opinions can still flourish in the wake of TRC hearings and the peaceful transition to democracy. Mda could have issued threats or blunt warnings to people harbouring such attitudes. Instead, through

the vehicle of satire, he has neatly shown that such attitudes are incompatible with the democratic, humanist values in the new South Africa. There is a fundamental need for people like that to transform their attitudes or remove themselves from this new society because they do not share its new core values and thus cannot play any constructive part in it. Henk Driessen (1997:226) notes that

matters of humour speak to larger issues in the societies involved, to dominant interests, attitudes and values regarding identities (for instance gender and ethnicity) and their counterpoints, contradictions and ambivalences. (1997:226)

Mda has achieved precisely this in his use of humour as a conscious authorial strategy to confront racism and bigoted thinking. The initial euphoria of the peaceful transition was destined to be transient; it takes the courage of people like Mda to address those issues in our society that need to be confronted and dealt with if democracy and multiculturalism are to be entrenched in our new society.



Chapter Two: Nothing to laugh about ? Revisiting the Cattle Killing

Readers with a firm grasp of South African history soon discover that much of the narrative of The Heart of Redness leans heavily on Jeff Peires's groundbreaking historical work: The Dead Will Arise. Peires's book was initially published in 1989 and it won critical acclaim because Peires took an episode of history – the Xhosa Cattle Killings – that most South African histories had given scant or simplistic attention to and produced a text that, engagingly non academic in style, brought together for the first time all the accumulated evidence, written and oral, and fleshed out this complex and bitterly sad episode of Xhosa history in early colonial times. Mda clearly acknowledges his debt to Peires and that debt is a considerable one. Quite why Mda would borrow so heavily from this single source is initially mystifying. Peires attached a list of frequently asked questions to The Dead Will Arise, and one of the questions addressed is: “Is it likely that we shall ever know more about the Cattle Killing?” In response, Peires wrote:



This book is based on private and official papers, on interviews with the elderly and knowledgeable Xhosa, and on a wide range of English and Xhosa books and newspapers. The reader is referred to the bibliography for further details. But one cannot read every newspaper and one cannot interview every elderly person. It is altogether possible that further research will bring further information to light, though I doubt that we shall learn more about the inner history of the prophetic circle at the Gxarha River. (1989:341)

It is highly possible that Mda felt the subject of the Cattle Killing had been so thoroughly documented in the Peires book, that it was beyond the scope of his work of fiction to add anything of substance to the historical record. A more likely scenario is that suggested by David Attwell who notes that

intertextuality... is an explicit instance of the movement of modernist practice across the racial divide of authorship in South Africa. (2005:170)

As Attwell has suggested, Mda favours this strategy and because of this heavy intertextuality, The Heart of Redness could be regarded as a work of creative non-fiction.

Mary M. Talbot in her book Fictions at Work: Language and Social Practice in Fiction, suggests that “One way of using fiction to empower readers is to hijack well known texts and produce challenging new readings of them.” (1995:146). What Mda has done here is not to attempt a critical rewriting of the Peires text so much as set to absorb and graft substantial sections of Peires’s work into The Heart of Redness. The intertextuality Attwell has pointed to thus underpins this work of fiction. What does become significant, however, is what Talbot is hinting at here - that writers adopt particular strategies to engage their readers in new or alternative discourses and that some works of fiction are created with a certain audience or type of readership in mind. This matches the reader’s experience of the encounter with The Heart of Redness, and it is backed up with Mda’s own explicit admission of this strategy. In a recent online interview with Julie Wark, Mda stated:



When this character you cite talks of African culture as not being amenable to private reading is he talking of African culture as it was or as it is? African culture like all the cultures of the world has not remained static. Africans all over the continent read books about Africa by Africans. *And incidentally I write my novels primarily for the South African audience.* That is why they are always published there first before I can sell the rights to the international community. And when I sell the rights to the world I do not adapt even those linguistic and cultural codes that are particularly South African to suit the needs and even the tastes of American or European readers. I once quarrelled with an editor at Oxford University Press who was insisting that I change certain expressions because they were “too South African” and my “overseas readers” would not understand what was meant. I told her that my “overseas readers” were not morons. If they didn’t understand South African expressions in a South African novel they would go and find out. (http://www.zakesmda.com/pages/Interview_Wark.html - accessed 10 September 2005) [emphasis added]

It is clear from this extract that although Mda writes with a South African reading community in mind, but expecting, as he does, his overseas readers to

understand South African expressions, then we can assume that he similarly requires these readers to have some knowledge of recent South African history and an understanding of the contemporary South African socio-political issues that form the background to his work.

In working with the events of the Cattle Killing, Mda's novel is substantially similar to Peires's work. Both writers offer a penetrating yet ultimately sympathetic picture of the Xhosa nation caught up and fatally divided during the Cattle Killing. Both writers roundly condemn colonial ideology and its agents for the inhumane and manipulative response to the crisis. Whereas Peires's work sets the historical record straight, Mda's work absorbs the historical record into a work of fiction that functions, as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1995:8) suggest as

a process of 'writing back', [that] far from indicating a continuing dependence, is an effective means of escaping from the binary polarities implicit in the Manichean construction of colonisation and its practices.

Though Ashcroft *et al* have come under criticism for perhaps oversimplifying postcolonial writing, Mda's creative non-fiction uses the historical record to authenticate a fictionalised response to a the Cattle Killing. Mda's quest for authenticity accounts for the peculiar structure of this novel – the Cattle Killing and the contemporary events in Qolorha are afforded almost equal space in the novel and the elisions between these twin strands in the diachronic structure are smooth. David Attwell, in his book: Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History , notes that

In his recent novel, The Heart of Redness (2000), Mda shifts the emphasis away from the question of resistance to apartheid, narrowly conceived, and gives his fiction a wholly new orientation: *the relationships that black humanity has forged with modernity at various points in its history*. Mda does this by deprivileging the struggle years as those of "the middle generations", foregrounding instead, two moments of seminal importance, indeed of crisis: namely 1857, the year of the Cattle Killing movement in the Eastern Cape, and 1994, the year in which formal democracy was achieved. The significance of these dates is that they are moments of choice. As such they represent high water marks in the definition of

agency in black historical and cultural identity. (2005:10) [emphasis added]

Attwell has made some excellent points here. It is significant that in The Heart of Redness, Mda barely mentions the apartheid period. This conscious “deprivileging [of] the struggle years” is a deliberate device whereby Mda denies any sense of the reader’s sympathy for these years from watering down the criticism he wishes to deliver of the postliberation government. Similarly, the [Xhosas’] response to modernity, first in the form of confronting colonialist expansionism in the nineteenth century and later their response to the postcolonial society in the wake of the 1994 transition to democracy raises the question of agency. Reichl and Stein (2005: 2) state that

Quite predictably, what little work on humour exists can be subsumed under an *interventionist stance* – for postcolonial critique is concerned with theorising engagement, with analysing agency for the marginalised and in some quarters, even with *creating* agency.

The Cattle Killing is a dark period in South African history and it may seem callous or disrespectful to go looking for instances of humour in these events. Yet, we are looking, as Attwell, and Reichl and Stein suggest, for evidence of agency in the various approaches and reactions to the Cattle Killing that we track in the narrative. Elizabeth Wesseling (1991:166) notes:

In postmodernist fiction, the project to write into history groups whose historical role has been hitherto obscure does not smoothly switch from one perspective to another. Rather it forcefully dislocates established views in order to make way for Western history’s supernumeraries.

The extent to which established views about the Cattle Killing need to be revisited is demonstrated in this observation by Wendy Woodward (2005:209):

The way this history was taught in the apartheid era to schoolchildren and its naming as “The National Suicide of the amaXhosa” in textbooks was obviously derisory.

Part of the “derisory” attitude of the former regime and its supporters can be discerned in the scanty information made available in these textbooks. The simplistic, sweeping generalisations evident in the treatment of a complex period of history supported stereotypes of Xhosas as being inferior to white people. Thus in grafting Peires’s material into his work of fiction, Mda encourages agency by fleshing out the detail and showing the social impact and human cost of the Cattle Killing.

In the Wark online interview, Mda pointed to the importance of agency in these remarks on The Heart of Redness:

It is clear that in The Heart of Redness I am saying that the past is always a strong presence in our present. Indeed our very identity is shaped by memory! (http://www.zakesmda.com/pages/Interview_Wark.html - accessed 10 September 2005)

This supports Attwell’s thesis that the diachronic structure of the novel facilitates agency by linking the events of 1857 with post-1994 South African society. But we realise that Mda is doing a lot more than softening the impact of a terrible episode of recent history. If humour is a postcolonial strategy available to writers, then it becomes distinctly possible that even in such bleak and apparently humourless literary territory as literature dealing with the Cattle Killing, humour could well be deployed to achieve certain critical outcomes.

There appears to be a definite didactic function to Mda’s treatment of the Cattle Killing. For those either ignorant of the Cattle Killing or whose knowledge of it derives from the kind of flimsy historical school text books mentioned above, Mda’s creative non-fiction has, as its most immediate task, the outright dismissal of any idea that the Cattle Killing was a bizarre mass suicide of the type we have come to associate with extremist millenarian religious cults such as David Koresh’s Branch Davidians³.

³ David Koresh was the self-styled leader of an extremist millenarian Christian cult known as the Branch Davidians. Koresh and 84 of his followers perished in a fire that broke out in the cult’s fortified compound near Waco, Texas, during an armed stand off with US authorities in March 1993.

Mda's task becomes an intricate one. The Cattle Killing did not begin as a response to Nongqawuse's apocalyptic visions. Early in the novel, we are confronted with the mystic, Mlanjeni who, in response to colonial aggression instituted by Sir Harry Smith

ordered that all dun and yellow cattle be slaughtered, for they were an abomination. He doctored the military men for war so that the guns of the British would shoot hot water instead of bullets. The Great War of Mlanjeni had begun. (2000:19)

The Great War of Mlanjeni that followed must be read as more than an act of defiance against the colonialists. This episode articulates something of the agency suggested by Attwell because it involved a controlled series of actions. The Xhosas destroyed some of their animals to appease the ancestors and, through armed resistance, they attempted to assert Xhosa identity in the face of an alien power that, Peries notes, threatened to strip them of their independence and turn them into servants of the British Empire and consumers of imperial goods and services. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss the events that determined the outcome of this war, but in The Heart of Redness, Mda makes this telling observation:

The great fear of starvation finally defeated General Maqoma's forces, and the amaXhosa surrendered to the British. They turned against Mlanjeni, the man of the River, because his charms had failed. But other nations continued to believe in him. Messengers from the distant nations of the Basotho, the abaThembu, the amaMpondo and the amaMpondise visited him, asking for war charms and for the great secret of catching witches. Six months after the war ended, the great prophet died of tuberculosis. (2000:25-26)

The significance of this extract is that it ironically foreshadows the crisis of belief and unbelief and famine that accompanied the playing out of Nongqawuse's prophecies. It also serves a small didactic function for it suggests to a significant portion of Mda's readership that the Cattle Killing cannot be seen in narrowly dualistic terms, most particularly that it was not the result of feeble thinking and that it was in fact a vastly more complex issue and shot through with its own

ironies because the Cattle Killing has its roots, as Peires points out, in an outbreak of the contagious lung sickness - ironically introduced to South Africa by the importation of European animals (1989:93). Peires notes that the Xhosa reaction to the outbreak of lung sickness initially included perfectly sound preventative practices:

The Xhosa could see the disease coming and took all the precautions they could to escape from it. They drove their precious cattle to the mountainous and secluded places. They quarantined strange and colonial cattle within their borders and prohibited the introduction of others. They fenced kilometer after kilometer of pasturage, and burnt the grass all around the perimeter until the night sky was illuminated by the reflection of the flames. Infected carcasses were buried deep in the ground and most Xhosa refused to eat the meat...Nothing like this had ever happened before. The Xhosa subsided into a mood which one observer described as a depression and a sense of great loss. (1989:95)

Given that the Xhosa nation faced the almost certain threat of being overwhelmed by the colonial settlers and that their subsistence economy's wealth base was under severe attack from disease, it is hardly surprising that the mystics found ready ears. It appears from both Peires's work and The Heart of Redness, that not everyone accepted the utterances of Nongqawuse without question. Early in the course of the novel, Nongqawuse's visions are brought to the attention of visitors by her uncle, Mhlakaza. We, of course, first met him as Wilhelm Goliath, the disillusioned former disciple of Merriman who abandoned the Christian faith of his missionary master. Mhlakaza convenes a series of informal imbizos to publicise Nongqawuse's teachings. In the description of one of these meetings there is a small amount of good natured heckling apparent, but it is the narrator's observation that is the most interesting:

Nongqawuse shyly stepped forward. She was unkempt and looked like a waif. In the manner of all great prophets she seemed confused and disorientated most of the time. (2000:59)

The narrator's tone here is faintly Bosmanesque, recalling the understated irony and humour contained in many of the Oom Schalk Lourens stories. Mda's

carefully limited use of humour echoes the description of Nongqawuse contained in an account of the same meeting covered in Peires's book:

A girl of about 16 years of age, has a silly look, and appeared to me as if she was not right in her mind. She was not besmirched with clay, nor did she seem to take any pains with her appearance. (1989:110)

Mda's strategy is to use humour to show that Nongqawuse's apocalyptic visions were not universally and automatically accepted despite the apparent agency her visions and prescriptions offered to an indigenous people facing an unfathomable crisis. The intertextuality noted above also functions to debunk the view prevalent in black society that Nongqawuse was a puppet of Sir George Grey⁴ and that he used her to manipulate the Xhosas into killing their cattle, thereby engineering their own downfall and saving this colonial official from having to wage a conventional campaign against them.

It is easy for a postmodern twenty-first century audience to scoff at millenarian thinking, but the curious hybrid of Christian resurrection imagery, traditional ancestor worship and the promise of restoration that were implicit in the prophecies delivered by Nongqawuse offered a potent opportunity for many Xhosas to exhibit agency now that military resistance against the colonisers was out of the question. The epiphanic degree to which some were wholly caught up in these moments is described in this extract from the narrative:

The greatest joy of the Believers was that the Prophet Nxele – who had drowned trying to escape from Robben Island some thirty years before – would come back and lead the people to victory over the colonists; in the same way that he had led the Russian army that had vanquished Cathcart in the Crimean war. It did not matter that Mjuza, Nxele's son and heir, had rejected the prophecies of Nongqawuse, Mjuza was a lost cause who had been deceived by his colonial masters.

These were the happiest times for Twin and Qukezwa. They had few cares in the world. They wandered on their uncultivated fields or on the sands of the sea, daydreaming of the wonderful life that awaited them. They sang the praises of Mhlakaza, Nongqawuse and Nombanda. Their

⁴ Peires (1989:336)

hearts overflowed with love and goodwill. So did the hearts of all Believers. (2000:148)

There is wry humour in this extract. The Believers' agency is shown to be questionable. The narrator's tone emphasizes the ironic sense of anticipation expressed by the Believers. The readers, armed with historical knowledge, know this heady sense of expectation will be dashed by the looming disappointment. The sense of dramatic irony contrasts well with the dazed euphoria with which Twin and Qukezwa move about the uncultivated fields. To add to this sad scene, Mda offers this biting satirical portrait of Mhlakaza:

When the prophet of Gxarha was finally hurled before them, he explained that the ancestors had failed to arise because on that day they had gone on a visit to an inaccessible corner of the Otherworld. He had been unable to get hold of them. Why they had even been beyond the reach of greater prophets like Nongqawuse and Nombanda. (2000:149)

Mda's purpose here is two-fold. The  humour is subversive because Mhlakaza's feeble excuse shows the prophet to be a charlatan but it also points to the ultimately tragic situation of the Xhosas themselves. Caught between the aggressive expansionism of the colonialist and the lungsickness outbreak, their agency (the ability to resist and maintain any sense of national identity) seemed confined to a choice between hope in the apocalyptic visions given to a mystic by the invisible ancestors or the nihilism of the Unbelievers. Mda is asking for our understanding of the very deep divisions that became apparent in Xhosa society as the Cattle Killing gained momentum. From this early encounter with Nongqawuse, we witness the escalating growth of the conflict between the Believers and Unbelievers, a conflict that is mirrored in the contemporary struggle for agency, post-1994.

I have already noted that although there is very little that lends itself to humorous treatment in the Cattle Killing, Mda is careful to combat any dualistic thinking that the difference between Believers and Unbelievers was a neat division centered on acceptance or dismissal of the visions of Nongqawuse.

There is a gently satiric episode in The Heart of Redness that proves that even amongst the Believers, there were those who, whilst placing their hope in the restoration promised by Nongqawuse, saw opportunities to profit even though they had been instructed to slaughter their cattle and get rid of their supplies of corn:

Some Believers sold their corn and cattle to the unbelieving amaFengu and to the markets of Kingwilliamstown and East London at a fraction of the market price. (2000:99)

Unbelievers are also the target of Mda's humour. A few lines further, and we are faced with a single piece of grotesque sexual humour. Twin-Twin, irritated at the indecisive debate about the veracity of Nongqawuse's prophecies, utters this outburst:

I say to you Believers, bring that foolish girl Nongqawuse to me so that I may sleep with her. I will give it to her so hard that she will stop spreading lies! She is telling all these lies, dreaming all these dreams, seeing all these imaginary visions, because she is starved of men. (2000:99)

Twin-Twin's eruption tests the very limits of grotesque humour and some would prefer to call it threatened rape. Yet what Mda is doing in this instance is articulating something of a feminist postcolonial discourse⁵. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1989:262) notes that

Male violence must be theorised and interpreted within specific societies, both in order to understand it better, as well as *in order to effectively change it*. [emphasis added]

She has an excellent point. Mda uses Twin-Twin's grotesque threat of rape here to remind us that he (Twin-Twin) is a member of a strongly patriarchal society. Nongqawuse is young girl, elevated by interest in her prophecies to a level far

⁵ Helen Bradford has written a feminist analysis of the Cattle Killing in which she argues that Nongqawuse was the victim of sexual abuse at the hands of her uncle, Mhlakaza. "Women, Gender and Colonialism" Rethinking The History of The British Cape Colony and Its Frontier Zones, c. 1806-170", in Journal of African History (1996) 37: 351-70.

beyond any that she might normally aspire to. On a most basic level, this would be extremely threatening to those used to operating in a patriarchal society, but Mda contextualises this episode so that his readers are required to look with a degree of empathy on a highly structured, traditional society that is facing a monumental set of crises and threats to its continued existence and identity. The feminist discourse, significantly, is revisited in the contemporary section of the novel and in the characters of women like Xoliswa Ximiya and Qukezwa, Mda sets out to suggest that traditionally patriarchal societies must adapt if they are to survive fresh encounters with modernity.

As the Cattle Killing gains momentum, Mda balances the tension between Believers and Unbelievers and the looming series of disappointments. This works hand in hand with the historical record provided by Peires so that we gain a full understanding of the depth of the crisis and the inability or unwillingness of the colonial authorities to engage with the Xhosas in any meaningful way to prevent a looming humanitarian disaster. Yet the focus remains Xhosa society itself. Twin (a Believer) awakes from a troubling dream and ponders to himself:



He was distressed about the rift between himself and Twin-Twin. He blamed it all on his twin brother's stubbornness. And on his father's headlessness. Because the British had cut his head off, Xikixa was not being an effective ancestor. A good ancestor is one who can be an emissary between the people of the world and the great Qamata. A good ancestor comes between his feuding descendants whenever they sacrifice a beast to him, and brings peace among them. Without a head Xikixa was unable to bring cohesion to his progeny. That was why they were fighting amongst themselves, and were destined to do so until his headless state was remedied. (2000:147)

Mda is deliberately using the grotesque image of the ancestor rendered incapable due to his headlessness not to shock, but rather to draw attention to the impact that the rift between Believers and Unbelievers was having in Xhosa society. The ancestors are revered in Xhosa society but the humour here is used to ironic effect. In Mda's hands here, the headless ancestor becomes a metaphor for Xhosa society that tragically had no real answers to the multiple

challenges facing it in 1857. The same sense of frustrated agency transported itself across the middle generations to the contemporary inhabitants of Qolorah. Mda's dealing with this, forms the focus of the next chapter.



Chapter Three: Laughing at the New South Africa: responses to modernity

In the previous chapter I demonstrated the extent to which Mda used the Cattle Killing to explore agency within Xhosa society in the conflict people encountered when faced with the aggressive expansionism of colonialism. Part of Mda's strategy in confronting the Cattle Killing and particularly his use of humour, was designed to challenge existing perceptions about the Cattle Killing. As Attwell has noted, The Heart of Redness has a diachronic structure and the narrative that is located in the present is largely concerned with examining contemporary issues that have arisen in Qolorha - and by extension - South Africa as a whole. In exploring these large themes, Mda is concerned, again, with probing the agency exhibited by sectors of contemporary Xhosa society in the face of a new contest with modernity – the modernity occasioned by South African society's metamorphosis to non-racial democracy. Just as in the Cattle Killing narrative, occasions of social contest are marked by severe differences of opinion. In the past this became associated with the fracturing of Xhosa society into "Believers" and "Unbelievers" and similar tensions, occasioned by contested responses to changing social realities, threaten contemporary Xhosa society. The same Believer / Unbeliever pattern is reflected in Qolorha society, but this time the locus of Belief / Unbelief revolves around socio-political and developmental issues rather than spiritual matters. Humour becomes a vitally important strategy as Mda examines the roles of the new elite and the sharply contrasted approaches to socio-political and developmental issues in the New South Africa.

The narrative for the second part of the novel is largely the story of the returned exile Camagu. The first encounter with this character reveals a man who is disillusioned and adrift:

Camagu himself is at the wake not because he has any connection with anyone here. He just found himself here.

He was at Giggles, a toneless night club on the ground floor, when he decided to take a walk. He is a regular at Giggles because he lives on

the fourth floor of this building. He does not need to walk the deadly streets of Hillbrow for a tipple. Most of Giggie's patrons are disaffected exiles and sundry learned rejects of this new society. He is one of them too, and constantly marvels at the irony of being called an exile in his own country. (2000:28)

This is the opening for what becomes a powerful critique of the lot of some returned exiles in the post-1994 South Africa. Suggesting, as he does, that some returnees are justifiably disaffected in the new South Africa, Mda is determined to demonstrate that criticism is a vital part of nation building. In a 2002 newspaper interview with Maureen Isaacson, Mda said as much: "I believe that the willingness to be critical shows a deep love for country." (In Sunday Independent, 22 September 2002: 18.)

There is much more to Mda's satire here than a simple quest to be as honest and open as possible. J.U. Jacobs, in his essay "Zakes Mda and the South African Renaissance", draws attention to an earlier argument posited by Margaret Mervis that Mda, in directing criticism at new regimes in postcolonial societies, is articulating something larger:



She [Margaret Mervis] develops the thesis that in a narrative "combination of Brechtian didacticism and indigenous African participatory story telling" (55), Mda has succeeded in translating his theories of Theater for Development (Mda 1993) into what she calls "Fiction for Development." *A new kind of text informed by a humanistic ethos* [emphasis added]. (2000:61)

The plight of poor Camagu well illustrates this. When we meet this character he is living above a nightclub, in obviously cheap, impersonal digs, and his life is without much meaning, revolving, as it does around the empty socialising with other disaffected returned exiles in the nightclub. The criticism is restrained at first, but Mda, as part of his "humanistic ethos", wishes us first to see that exiles have not automatically readjusted to life in South Africa. Quite why this may be so becomes apparent in an extract that is a deeply satirical piece of writing:

[Camagu] remembers how in 1994 he took leave from his job and came back to South Africa to vote, after an absence of almost thirty years. He was in his mid-forties, and was a stranger in his own country. He was swept up by the euphoria of the time, and decided that he would not return to New York. He would stay and contribute to the development of his country.

At his first job interview he heard the comment, "Who is he ? We didn't see him when we were dancing the freedom dance."

That was when Camagu realised the importance of the dance. He had tried to explain about his skills in the area of development communication, how he had worked for international agencies, how as an international expert he had done consulting work for UNESCO in Paris and for the Food and Agricultural Organization in Rome, and how the International Telecommunications Union had often sought his advice on matters of international broadcasting. The interviewers were impressed. They commended his achievements. He had done his oppressed people proud in foreign lands. And now, the freedom dance ? Alas! His steps faltered. (2000:31-32)

Mda's satire is sharp to the point of being bitter. There is a suggestion of an autobiographical element in the character of Camagu. Mda's father was a founding figure in the African National Congress and Mda himself endured a lengthy period of exile. As readers, we share a sense of the post-1994 euphoria and we understand and silently applaud Camagu's decision to return to South Africa. The sting, however, is that Camagu discovers his considerable academic and career achievements in the international business community count for absolutely nothing when measured against that sinister metaphor – "the freedom dance". The sense of deflation is total as Mda unpacks the "freedom dance". Mda's purpose here fulfils what Hutcheon (1994:53) describes as the "satiric, corrective functioning of irony". The semantic juxtapositions contained in the metaphor of the "freedom dance" give it a suitable edge. There is nothing to celebrate, the "dance" is deadly serious and signals exclusivity and a new sense of otherness. Mda is deeply critical but not to the point of being counter-revolutionary. In relating the sad circumstances of Camagu's initial return to South Africa, Mda is stripping away any sense of sentimentality attached to the rainbow nation. He shows quite forcefully that the transformation to democracy has not automatically ushered in an egalitarian society. Non-racial democracy,

as Camagu finds out, is not a meritocracy. It is deeply ironic that where race was once the indicator of a person's status in society, a pernicious elitism connected to one's perceived commitment to the struggle is now the deciding factor of status and progression in society. Camagu, representing the plight of returned exiles, is fundamentally engaged in a struggle for identity in the new South Africa. The freedom dance functions as a metaphor, ascribing the agency of active commitment to the struggle by which black people are defined in the new society. The sense of bitterness and frustration we witness in Camagu is a subtle warning from Mda. The middle generations – representing those who were victims of apartheid and the initial freedom fighters – form no part of this narrative. This suggests that after the struggle, the changing demands of modernity require a forward thinking rather than a retrospective outlook. Camagu (and by implication, all disaffected returned exiles) has a choice: leave South Africa and be forever bitter, or find a new way to integrate into this newly evolving society.

Early in The Heart of Redness the reader is introduced to Xoliswa Ximiya – principal of the Qolorha School.



She looks like the mistress she is – which is what pupils call unmarried female teachers – in a navy-blue two-piece costume with a white frilly blouse. She has her father's bone structure, and is quite tall and well-proportioned – which is good if you want to be a model in Johannesburg, but works against you in a village where men prefer their women plump and juicy. (2000:10)

Xoliswa Ximiya is an intriguing character. The witty juxtapositions in her character sketch do more than simply raise a laugh. Kirsten Holst Petersen notes in her essay “First Things First: Problems of a Feminist Approach to African Literature” (1984) that

whereas Western feminists discuss the relative importance of feminist versus class emancipation, the African discussion is between feminist emancipation versus the fight against neo-colonialism, particularly in its cultural aspect. In other words, which is the more important, which comes

first, the fight for female equality or the fight against Western cultural imperialism? (1985:251-252)

Mda is using feminist discourse here to point to a problem that black women face in South Africa – identity restructuring as they move between egalitarian contemporary society associated with the city and the traditionally patriarchal society of the rural areas. In chapter four we will look at, *inter alia*, how Mda renegotiates roles for women in the rehabilitation of traditional Xhosa society, but in the example of Xoliswa Ximiya, Mda seems determined to explore the motivations of those self-serving ones who see aggressive self-promotion as the only way to secure their identities in this new society.

Whereas apartheid restricted where people could live and attempted to prescribe destinies for them based on racial criteria, the advent of non-racial democracy opened up potential for all. Xoliswa Ximiya represents a sector of those previously disadvantaged who see their prospects inextricably tied to climbing the promotional ladder in the public sector. Xoliswa Ximiya herself articulates this desire early in the novel: “I want to be a civil servant. I want to work for the ministry of Education in Pretoria, or at the very least in Bisho.” (2000:11). Her motivations may at first appear noble but Mda soon shows that there is a different side to Xoliswa Ximiya who says:

“People I have been to school with are earning a lot of money as directors of departments in the civil service. I am sitting here in this village, with all my education, earning peanuts as a schoolteacher. I am going. I must go from this stifling village. I have made applications. As soon as I get a job I am going.” (2000:11-12)

The picture that emerges here is a ridiculous one because she is motivated by selfish, snobbish reasons. Olson (1968:14) offers an excellent suggestion as to the purpose of this kind of ridiculous scenario:

When we see something as ridiculous after having taken it seriously, we learn not merely that we were mistaken in taking it seriously, that there was inadequate ground for doing so; we are also impelled to take the

contrary view of it, because of a manifest absurdity. It must be observed that by “serious” we mean not merely the “very serious” or the tragic but even ordinary matter of daily life, anything that we see value in doing it – in given circumstances. The ridiculous is then the contrary of this, in some characteristic on which its whole value depends, so that the idea of its value is completely destroyed.

Xoliswa Ximiya eagerly embraces modernity, but at the cost of excluding *everything* that challenges her own interpretation of this sense of modernity. We see this in a sharp exchange she has with the history teacher during a discussion on the merits of eco-tourism:

“These are difficult issues, Miss Ximiya,” says the teacher apologetically. “Sometimes I find myself tilting more to the position of the Believers. I think it is important to conserve nature ... our forests ... our rivers...”

“What about jobs? What about the tourists?”

“We can still get tourists. Different types of tourists. Those who want to commune with nature. Those who want to admire our plants, which they regard as exotic. Those who want to photograph our birds.”

“Those who want to see the natives in their primitive state you mean”, says Xoliswa Ximiya disdainfully. (2000:109)

Xoliswa Ximiya is more than narrow-minded and sharp of tongue. She is ambitious and driven and, through her character, Mda wishes to mock those few previously disadvantaged in our new society who see no merit in public service for the sake of the greater good of the nation, but who sense that opportunity, identity and status for them is tied to their occupation of top civil service jobs. Though Mda never uses the word *ubuntu*⁶ himself, he is suggesting that people like Xoliswa Ximiya subvert the *ubuntu* inspired visions of the new public service and do nothing to contribute to nation building. When she finally achieves her goal of finding an important government job in Pretoria, the narrator’s tone is dismissive enough for us to realise that such self-serving people do not serve the greater good of postcolonial society:

⁶ a strong sense of community awareness with philanthropic overtones

Xoliswa Ximiya packs up and leaves Qolorha-by-Sea. She has lost the battle for the soul of the village and for the love of Camagu. She has got a new job with the Department of Education in Pretoria. She is going off to more civilised places. Places with street lights. She will be in a better position to consult specialists – dermatologists and plastic surgeons – to remove the accursed scars. (2000:302)

Interestingly, the mysterious scars that suddenly manifest on Xoliswa Ximiya are one of the prime instances of magic in the novel. These marks are identity-ascribing tokens that appear supernaturally. Xoliswa Ximiya, however, rejects the cultural symbolism inherent in these scars and seeks instead to have them permanently removed by the power of modern, western medicine.

An aspect of the new South Africa's socio-political landscape that Mda explores to great humorous effect is the concept of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE). The acronym hints at lofty ideals but Mda's narrative suggests that something altogether different is involved in BEE:



Black economic empowerment is a buzzword at places like Giggles in Johannesburg, where the habitués are always on the lookout for crumbs that fall from the tables of the Aristocrats of the Revolution. But the black economic empowerment boom is merely enriching the chosen few – the elite clique of black businessmen who have become overnight multimillionaires. Or trade union leaders who use the workers as stepping stones to untold riches for themselves. And politicians who effectively use their struggle credentials for self-enrichment. They all have their snouts buried deep in the trough, lapping noisily in the name of the poor, trying to outdo one another in piggishness. (2000:197-198)

Mda's authorial strategy here is quite clear. The matter-of-fact statements, the use of loaded terms such as "enriching the chosen few" and "snouts buried deep in the trough" have the effect of ridiculing BEE. The narrative is so constructed that there is no room for admitting that BEE is anything else than a corrupt exercise in self-enrichment. Throughout this extract one senses Mda's deep disappointment that the noble humanitarian ideals of the freedom struggle have so easily, at times, been superseded by self-aggrandizing people and their pet projects.

In an extended part of the narrative, Mda brings together BEE, development projects and the issue of corruption in the new government. The narrative opens with this wry comment:

The developers, two bald white men and a young black man, come early on a Saturday morning and insist that the meeting be held at the lagoon so that they can demonstrate their grand plans for the village. The young man is introduced as Lefa Leballo, the new chief executive officer of the black empowerment company that is going to develop the village into a tourist haven. He looks very handsome in his navy-blue suit, blue shirt and colourful tie. The two elderly white men – both in black suits – are Mr Smith and Mr Jones. They were chief executive and chairman of the company before they sold the majority shares to black empowerment consortia. Now they act as consultants for the company. (2000:229)

Though the humour here is marvellously understated, Mda revels in poking fun at the absurdity of business organisation in post-1994 South Africa. The visual clue he offers us – Lefa Leballo's different coloured suit that is in sharp contrast to the dark suits of his white colleagues – points to the absurdity of contemporary South African business organization.  Smiling, token black faces occupy public positions, but behind the scenes, things are controlled by white businessmen who pursue their own agendas whilst being paid handsomely as “consultants”. The term “consultant” here borders on being contextually pejorative, because the implication is that black businessmen are incompetent and cannot manage business deals on their own. This is a strong point Mda is making and though he never claims to be any kind of moral watchdog of the revolution, the satire here has a clear purpose – it is derisory because it suggests that BEE deals are intrinsically farcical. The public faces of business may have changed, but very little has been done to transform the substantial structure of South African business. The BEE projects themselves offer questionable “development” and economic opportunities. A little further along in the narrative we read:

Mr. Smith talks of the wonders that will happen at Qolorha-by-Sea. There will be boats and water skiing and jet skiing. People from across the sea will ride the waves in a sport called surfing. This place will be particularly

good for that because the sea is rough most of the time. Surfing will be a challenge. There will be merry-go-rounds for the children, and rides that go up to the sky. Rides that twist and turn while the riders scream in ecstatic fright. (2000:230)

On a very basic level, Mda is using the useless frivolity of water skiing and roller coasters to underscore the point that the projected development at Qolorha has no practical foundation whatsoever. It does not take much for the reader to realise that development of this type is aimed at the rich few. The fact that the proposed location for this pleasure park is an economically depressed rural area is insulting, tasteless and politically unacceptable because it does nothing at all to redress inequalities. Rather it serves to highlight unequal access to resources and opportunities. It is left to Camagu to speak the truth: “These things will be enjoyed only by rich people who will come here and pollute our rivers and our ocean” (2000:231). The development will alienate the local population who cannot afford these fairground attractions and it will benefit very few of them. Mda’s satire here is designed to show up many of the development projects that have sprung up in South Africa since the advent of democracy. These projects, masquerading as BEE deals or community enrichment developments, benefit a small handful of privileged people. This is the closest Mda comes to expressing a socialist polemic in his writing and his criticism of the postcolonial regime for condoning and participating in these sham deals builds to a climax towards the end of chapter eight. Mda stokes the narrative to the point where Camagu and Lefa Leballo (significantly both black men but on opposing sides in the empowerment debate) have this confrontation:

“You will get jobs,” says Lefa Leballo desperately. Then he looks at Camagu pleadingly. “Please don’t talk these people against a project of such national importance.”

“It is of national importance only to your company and shareholders, not to these people!” yells Camagu. “Jobs? Bah! They will lose more than they will gain from jobs. I tell you, people of Qolorha, these visitors are interested only in profits for their company. This sea will no longer belong to you. You will have to pay to use it.” (2000:231-232)

The final card that Lefa Leballo plays in an attempt to sway the villagers against Camagu reveals the manipulation that occurs behind the scenes in many BEE deals:

“We are going ahead with our plans,” says Lefa Leballo adamantly. “How will you stop us ? The government has already approved this project. I belong to the ruling party. Many important people in the ruling party are directors of this company. The chairman himself was a cabinet minister until he was deployed to the corporate world. We’ll see to it that you don’t foil our efforts.” (2000:232)

The satire here is cutting and direct. As Gisela Feurle (2005:281) notes, “laughter is created when taboos are broken”. Mda is determined that the same moral values and sense of humanity that damned apartheid and gave moral impetus to the freedom struggle should apply to the postcolonial regime. Although Feurle was writing specifically about the edgy cartoon strip *Madam and Eve*, her comments seem to apply equally well to the larger purpose of the satire in The Heart of Redness. Mda is well aware of the contesting opinions and differences in society and his stated agenda of promoting reconciliation prompts him at times to adopting a contrary position when the behaviour of the new regime and its agents become suspect. Mda’s writing is forging a new path that is distinctly different to the kind of anti-apartheid polemic that characterised much of the South African literary canon until the mid 1990s.

Although Mda is quite keen to turn the full focus of his art on the larger issues in society, there are moments in The Heart of Redness which demonstrate that he is well attuned to the lot of the individual, the apparently insignificant. Theorist Gayatri Spivak, proposes in her 1988 essay, “Can The Subaltern Speak?”, an engaging argument that in a colonial situation the subaltern(s) – the people of the lower layers of colonial society - are silenced, and unable to represent themselves. Spivak claims: “in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.” (1988:28). Mda seems to be aware of Spivak’s theories and he appears to suggest that the sense of marginalisation,

withdrawal and inability to express agency may continue even into the postcolonial situation. A small episode in The Heart of Redness illustrates this notion very well. Camagu has become involved in a co-operative society largely composed of women and this group makes a small profit from exploiting the seafood resources along the coast. These people are archetypal subalterns, ordinary folks in society, the bedrock of any community and Mda shows in this biting critique that institutional impediments dog their attempts to progress:

The co-operative society is not doing badly. Business would be booming if the banks were interested in assisting small business people. The women sell their sea harvest to hotels and restaurants in East London. They now want to expand their market to inland cities like Queenstown, Kingwilliamstown and Grahamstown. They have signed a contract with a hotel chain for large supplies of mussels, oysters and cockles. But now they need money to harvest on a larger scale. More importantly, they need to buy a cold storage vehicle that will deliver the food. At the moment they use cooler bags filled with ice. For transport they depend on lifts from Dalton, the four wheel drive van from the Blue Flamingo, or buses and taxis.

They have tried to get loans from banks, but to no avail. The banks want security. They do not look at the potential of the business and the profits that will come from the contract with the hotel chain. Camagu fears that they will end up losing this big order, since the hotel chain will opt for a supplier who is able to deliver. (2000:206)

There is a great deal of wry bitterness wrapped in this clever piece of “writing back” – Mda’s critique demonstrates the disproportionate power of these financial institutions. He shows that far from assisting and empowering people, the banks serve their own narrow economic agendas and neglect the potential of individuals. The local women are Xhosa and continue an aeons-long tradition of harvesting seafood resources, yet their markets are in the towns that still bear colonial names. The fact that the towns’ names have not changed and that the banks do not recognise new entrepreneurial efforts is an authorial device by which Mda suggests that political liberation has not automatically included economic liberation for the previously disadvantaged and others who are marginalised in society. The faceless and impersonal indifference of corporate

capitalism is responsible for Camagu and the co-operative not receiving financial help and therein lies a caveat. South Africa may have shaken off legislated apartheid, yet it continues to flirt openly with economic apartheid, denying opportunities for advancement to anyone somehow not connected with BEE or big business.

Mda does not specifically say so, but one senses in the unease that percolates through the narrative that he is well aware that successful social transformation in postcolonial South Africa must include the extension of economic opportunities to all of South Africa's people. In the final chapter, I will examine how Mda uses humour to suggest that, finally, traditional culture needs rehabilitation if the challenge of modernity is to be successfully met.



Chapter Four: Reinventing Redness: Rehabilitating traditional culture

Thus far I have demonstrated the extent to which Mda has constructed the narrative to confront discourses that run counter to the humanist philosophies that spurred the struggle against apartheid. In these strategic schemas, we have seen how Mda has tackled racism, prejudice, xenophobia and the post-liberation gravy trains. Julie Wark, in an online interview with Mda, made this comment:

The Heart of Redness deals with the struggle to conserve traditional values in post-apartheid South Africa with its new pragmatic politics and western style materialism.

(http://www.zakesmda.com/pages/Interview_Wark.html - accessed 10 September 2005).

This is not strictly correct. The novel is titled The Heart of Redness because Mda is concerned, ultimately, with restoring a balanced outlook on traditional values. Mda suggested in this same interview with Wark that



it is clear that in The Heart of Redness I am saying that the past is always a strong presence in our present. Indeed our very identity is shaped by memory! However I do not advocate going back to that past. That is why I ridicule the whole notion of cultural villages that are big tourist attractions in South Africa. *They purport to portray the culture of African peoples of South Africa but in fact misrepresent that culture as a museum piece as if it has been static since the pre-colonial times.* [emphasis added].

Camagu makes precisely the same forceful observation when he condemns John Dalton's plan to establish a cultural village in Qolorha:

"That's dishonest. It is just a museum that pretends that it is how people live. Real people in today's South Africa don't lead the life that is seen in cultural villages. Some aspects of that life perhaps are true. But the bulk of what tourists see is the past ... a lot of it an imaginary past. They must be honest and say that they are attempting to show how people used to live. They must not pretend that's how people live now." (2000:285)

Michel Foucault suggested something similar in Archaeology of Knowledge (1969:130):

It is obvious that the archive of a society [the accumulated evidence of its cultural totality], a culture, or a civilisation cannot be described exhaustively; or even, no doubt, the archive of a whole period. On the other hand, it is not possible for us to describe our own archive, since it is from within these rules that we speak, since it is what we can say – and to itself, the object of our discourse – its modes of appearance, its forms of existence and coexistence, its system of accumulation, historicity and disappearance. The archive cannot be described in its totality; and in its presence it is unavoidable...

Foucault's thesis is that discourse as an extant body of knowledge is, rather, a set of loosely coherent set of statements and claims and Mda seems aware of this idea. In particular, he is wary of accepting the transmission of culture into modernity without critical reexamination of aspects of that culture. A large part of his purpose in The Heart of Redness appears to be concerned with critically re-examining certain traditional Xhosa beliefs, specifically with regard to the role and status of women in a patriarchal society.

Mda is uncomfortable with tradition for tradition's sake. We have seen this in the Wark interview and it becomes apparent early in the narrative. There is a curious episode where the Qolorha pensioners gather at Dalton's store to cash and spend their government pension cheques. Zim, a modern Believer, arrives "resplendent" in traditional Xhosa clothing:

When Zim arrives, heads turn. He is resplendent in the white ingqawa blanket which is tied around the waist and is so long that it reaches his ankles. Around his neck he wears various beads such as idiliza and isidanga. Around his head he wears isiqweqwe headbands made of very colourful beads. He is puffing away at his long pipe with pomp and ceremony.

The aged and their hangers-on are all puffing away, filling the store with clouds of pungent smoke. Women, especially, look graceful with their pipes, which are much longer than men's.

"Tell them to stop smoking, John. We can't even breathe in this smoke," complains Missis in English.

“Those who want to smoke must go outside!” shouts Dalton in his perfect isiXhosa.

“And they must not spit on the floor,” moans Missis. “They spit everywhere, these people.”

“Don’t spit inside the shop. It’s not good manners. If you want to smoke and spit, go outside!” (2000:48)

The scene degenerates into farce. On the one hand, Zim appears to be asserting his cultural identity by wearing Xhosa traditional dress, but far from asserting any sense of “cultural capital” (Bourdieu:1984), the picture of mock nobility is deflated when we realise that for all the fine clothes, Zim has actually dressed up to receive a meagre handout, a government supplied pittance. To cash this cheque, he is utterly reliant on the “Missis” Dalton – an ill-tempered white woman who knows nothing about his culture and who cannot even speak his language.

An aspect of traditional society that Mda is determined to revisit, for its humourous potential, is the whole question of masculine and feminine identities. The diachronic structure of the novel allows for a near parallel comparison of gender identities over time. Historically, male and female roles were well described and understood in a strongly patriarchal society. I have already indicated the extent to which the crisis occasioned by the assaults of lung sickness and rampant colonial expansion thrust a young woman into a role not traditionally afforded in a patriarchal society. The conflict between the Believers and Unbelievers obscured any contest between competing models of masculinity in the historical section of the narrative. It remains for this aspect of masculine identity to be explored in the contemporary strand of the novel.

Camagu is the vehicle through which Mda does most of his examining of masculine identity. Initially when we meet him, he is something of a cad; he is an amoral man with a rampant sexual appetite. The humour is contained in the picture of an apparently educated man given over to lustful pursuits. The description we have of Camagu’s first meeting with NomaRussia highlights the licentious nature of this man and Mda enjoys mocking him:

His unquenchable desire for the flesh is well known. A shame he has to live with. Flesh. Any flesh. He cannot hold himself. He has done things with his maid – a frumpy country woman who has come to the city of gold to pick up a few pennies by cleaning up after disenchanted bachelors – that he would be ashamed to tell anyone. Yet he did the things with the humble servant again and again. (2000:30)

The humour is politically incorrect. Mda shows us that Camagu regards women as faceless objects of desire. Instead of naming the women, Camagu refers obliquely to his conquests as “Flesh. Any flesh”. This functions as a comment on a masculinity that is sexually out of control. The sexual relationship Camagu has with his maid is a strong satiric echo of the kind of racialised sexual violence and oppression that emerges as a theme in another Mda work: The Madonna of Excelsior. The irony in The Heart of Redness is that the man responsible for this abuse is a black man. Mda is deliberately inverting the South African racialised stereotype of sexual exploitation here to foreground the issue of manipulation and sexual abuse. He is suggesting to the readers that traditional ideas of masculinity need redefining. Significantly, Camagu changes in the novel. David Attwell, in Rewriting Modernity, (2005:198) says:

Camagu’s quest reverses that trope of South Africa’s literature of modernisation, the “Jim-goes-to-Jo’burg” theme that we find in Alan Paton and an earlier generation of black writers (notably R.R.R. Dhlomo in An African Tragedy). The reversal is telling: instead of narrating the emergence of the African as modern subject – the end of innocence – the novel attempts a reintegration of the already – modern subject into the dilemmas of southern Africa’s postcoloniality. Like Soyinka’s figure of the interpreter, Camagu is a returnee who needs to discover who he is in the professional sense, but more importantly in cultural terms.

Qukezwa is the agent of his transformation. When he first meets her he assesses her sexuality with his old practiced cad’s eye for another potential conquest:

Camagu takes a close look at her, his eyes betraying his shock. She is short and plump. She wears a skimpy blue and yellow floral dress. Although she is not particularly beautiful, she is quite attractive. (2000:62)

This is possibly one of the funniest moments in the narrative, in retrospect, because a woman he has completely misjudged outmatches the highly educated sophisticated Camagu. Maurice Charney in Sexual Fiction (1981:32) suggests that

Sexual compulsions are part of the tragic, limited, fallible condition of man – the same pessimistic assumptions from which existential philosophers begin – doomed to endless repetitions that can never satisfy the ideal images of the spirit.

Camagu's out of control libido is a marker of a severely disrupted personal ontological state. There is a spiritual quality to his relationship with Qukezwa as it effects a sense of personal redemption. It is through Qukezwa that Camagu comes to discover a sense of his identity as a postcolonial Xhosa man and resolves the inner struggle he experienced as a disillusioned returned exile. Whereas his uncontrollable libido once marked his disrupted ontological state, as he falls in love with Qukezwa, he becomes celibate: "he fights hard against the urge to hold this girl, tightly and kiss her all over" (2000:120). The Camagu who previously had his way with women, is totally overwhelmed by the free spirited independence exhibited by Qukezwa. She models a radically different femininity to that which he was used to, a femininity in opposition to the subservient role afforded women in traditional Xhosa society. Significantly it is Qukezwa who makes the first moves in the relationship and she is the agent whereby Camagu is schooled in aspects of the culture he was estranged from. On a bare-back horse ride with Qukezwa, Camagu is introduced to the phenomenon of split-tone singing. The moment is described in poetical beauty and it becomes a moment of epiphany for Camagu:

She whistles and sings all at the same time. Many voices come from her mouth. Deep sounds that echo like the night. Sounds that have the heaviness of a steamy summer night. Flaming sounds that crackle like a veld fire. Light sounds that float like flakes of snow on top of the Amathole Mountains. Hollow sounds singing before. He once read of the amaXhosa mountain women who were good at split-tone singing. He also

heard that the only other people in the world who could do this were Tibetan monks. He did not expect that this girl could be the guardian of a dying tradition.

For some time he is spell bound. Then he realises that his pants are wet. It is not from sweat. (2000:175)

The effect that Qukezwa has on Camagu is remarkable for more than the poetic beauty of its language. The sexual compulsion referred to in Charney's argument is resolved in a sophisticated joke that Mda constructs. There is the subtle humour occasioned by the former rake - Camagu's - unexpectedly sexual reaction to Qukezwa's singing. The joke extends when we realise a little later that this was potentially the moment of (immaculate) conception that resulted in a pregnancy for Qukezwa. There is also the suggestion that the immaculate conception occurred through dreams (2000:200).

Qukezwa is a character that Mda uses to revisit the subservient roles of women in Xhosa society. Early in the narrative we learn that socially she occupies an unremarkable position – she is, after all, “only nineteen... [and] works as a cleaner” (2000:42). Yet despite her youth and her apparently lowly occupation, she has aspirations and shows that she is not prepared to accept the will of her father and submit to his rule as is the tradition in Xhosa society:

“I am talking about Johannesburg, tata. I have Standard Eight but I sweep the floors. You heard what old man Bhonco said. Maybe if I go to the city I'll be a clerk and earn better money than the small change that Dalton gives me. I'll be somebody in the city.” (2000:51)

Zim, her father, attempts to sway her by invoking the name of Mlanjeni. In response Qukezwa shows an independent spirit such that she scorns the influence of [false] prophets, rebuking her father with this sarcastic retort: “Of Mlanjeni, tata. Even though his prophecies were false?” (2000:51)

Qukezwa's offbeat sense of humour, her spunk and apparent cheekiness in her dealings with traditional authority figures become an effective device whereby Mda suggests other avenues for feminine roles in Xhosa society. In a satirical episode later in the narrative when she is hauled before the elders and

charged with violating customary law by chopping down certain trees, Mda's narrative shows the pomposity of the tribal court early in its proceedings against Qukezwa:

An elder sums up the charges against Qukezwa, daughter of Zim. Yesterday she was seen cutting down a number of fully grown trees in Nongqawuse's Valley. She continued with impunity even when women from Xikixa's Great Place shouted at her to stop. She displayed her bad upbringing by daring anyone to physically stop her. (2000:245)

The charges are serious. The elders flex their authority and treat Qukezwa like a naughty child. Chief Xikixa pompously reminds Qukezwa of her minority status in traditional law:

"You are a minor still. Even if you were thirty or fifty you would still be a minor as long as you are not married," explains Chief Xikixa. (2000:245)

The trial extends over several pages of the narrative and Qukezwa impishly insists that she is unrepentant and will cut down these same trees again. The infighting and mud slinging that occur as a side show in the proceedings is evidence that Mda is enjoying this extended joke hugely. It takes this supposed child to unravel a profound ecological truth and suggest a new attitude to conservation that has evaded the entire assembly:

Then the law must be changed," says Qukezwa, explaining once more. "Just like the umga, the seed of the wattle tree is helped by fire. The seed can lie there for ten years, but when fire comes it grows. And it uses all the water. Nothing can grow under the wattle tree. It is an enemy since we do not have enough water in this country. If the umga can be cut without permission because it spreads like wild fire, so should the wattle ... and the lantana for that matter. So should the inkberry, which I have always cut without being hurled before the elders."

Most of the elders nod their agreement. Some express it in grunts and mumbles. One mutters his wonder at the source of Qukezwa's wisdom when she is but a slip of a girl. Shouldn't she be focusing her interest on red ochre and other matters of good grooming and beauty? (2000: 248 – 249)

Mda achieves several aims with this extended joke. On the most basic level, this episode suggests that too much customary law or tradition is without foundation in the modern world where knowledge has a much broader base. The ridiculous statement by an unnamed elder that Qukezwa should concern herself with grooming and clothing functions to ridicule male chauvinism (a by-product of patriarchal social organisation) and exclude it from a place in modern society. More significantly, through the vehicle of a young and apparently socially insignificant girl, Mda has effectively rehabilitated the role of women in modern Xhosa society. In the collective memory of Xhosa people must be the deep sense of confusion that is the unfortunate heritage of Nongqawuse's prophecies; the profound truth of Qukezwa's ecological vision effectively brings Xhosa society back to a position where it can take note of the prophetic statements of a woman. Qukezwa offers something more substantial than the apocalyptic visions of the prophetess over one hundred and fifty years ago and her role functions as a large realignment of social attitudes to women, and restores a substantial function to women in traditional society.

Through the character of Xoliswa Ximiya, Mda explores another approach to femininity. In a previous chapter I suggested that ultimately Mda uses Xoliswa Ximiya to devalue the self-serving in society. Yet that apart, in aspects of her character, Mda offers an alternative reading of femininity in contemporary Xhosa society. Like Qukezwa, Xoliswa Ximiya defies male authority. She too balks at the idea of submitting to parental authority:

She has just come to see how her parents are doing. She takes it as an obligation to see them occasionally. Her parents – especially her mother – were not happy when she moved out a year ago to stay in a two-roomed house in the school yard. At first they insisted that no unmarried daughter of theirs would live alone in her own house. It was unheard of. They had to relent when she concocted something to the effect that as a senior teacher she had to live at school or lose her job. It really frustrates her that her parents insist on treating her like a child. (2000:10)

But whereas Qukezwa's independent spirit is fuelled by an ecological awareness and a sense of security in her sexuality and her position in society, Xoliswa

Ximiya represents a different type – a woman disenchanted with traditional ideas of femininity, but caught in modernity and unable to work out what her identities are in an intricately coded world. Xoliswa Ximiya defies tradition through her body shape (she is slim in a society where plump women are objects of desire) and the fact that she wears fashionable clothing and affects a haughty demeanour. The latter is used to merciless comic effect at times. In a notable humorous episode the community is gathered at the school concert and a good-humoured auction takes place whereby, generally, spectacles are created for the enjoyment of the audience as a whole. Xoliswa Ximiya becomes the object of an auction bid:

The conductor looks sad. He is therefore buying with his three rand that that man who is sitting in the audience, Camagu, son of Cesane, should come to the stage and tickle the conductor, Miss Xoliswa Ximiya, as she conducts this song. We have never seen Miss Xoliswa Ximiya laugh, the buyer says.“ (2000:221)



The auction resides in a Rabelaisian carnival framework. According to M.M. Bakhtin in Rabelais and His World:

Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time, life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants... Carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. (1965:18)

The fact that Xoliswa Ximiya deliberately distances herself from the auction – she withdraws from the spirit of carnival the auction briefly captures – is used by Mda to poke fun at her pomposity, but also to draw attention to the symptoms of a person struggling somewhat ineffectually, to discover her sense of postcolonial identity. Iain Chambers (1990:72) notes:

[B]ody imagery not only involves a symbolic game with fashion and mortality. If the male sex continues to represent the abstract measure of the world, the universal “he” of mankind, then physical attributes are themselves a complexly coded text, script and language directly inscribed on our limbs and skin. We are not all men and neither are we all white. It is from such distinctions, such differences, that specific moments of power, culture and politics emerge. It is the body, as individual history, memory and trace, which sets in play the possibility of dialoguing with our being in difference. Here a surplus of specificity, an excess of details and sense, points towards the impossibility of erasing difference, where difference functions not simply as a rhetorical or stylistic trope, but above all as a historical experience.

What Chambers is suggesting here explains, in large part, why Xoliswa Ximiya struggles as she does. Xoliswa Ximiya does not understand the complex coding knowledge that is required of a person in the process of self-actualization and identity recognition. She projects her very limited attempts at understanding her identity construction into peripheral events - her fashionable clothes, her status as schoolteacher and her half-hearted love interest in Camagu for example. But because all these things are peripheral, she is doomed to failure. In chasing after the government job in Pretoria, Xoliswa Ximiya succeeds only in putting distance between herself and the site of her initial struggle. She does not achieve any real sense of happiness because she is never able to reconcile herself to her aspirations. She disappears from the narrative and although we have laughed at her on occasions, we recognize that Mda is urging his readers to understand that identities in postcolonial society hinge on much more than money, status or a person’s job category.

Other female figures whom Mda uses to explore feminine agency are NoPetticoat and the members of the co-operative who collect and market seafood. NoPetticoat straddles the invisible divide between traditional Xhosa society that heavily prescribed the roles of women and modernity where feminine roles are less than clearly defined. When we first meet her, she is radiant in traditional dress:

NoPetticoat is one of the amahomba – those who look beautiful and pride themselves in fashion. She is wearing her red-ochred isikhakha dress. Her neck is weighted with beadwork of many kinds. There are the square amatikiti beads and the multi-coloured uphalaza and icangci. Her face is white with calamine lotion, and on her head she wears a big iqhiya turban which is broader than her shoulders. It is decorated with beads which match her amacici beaded earrings.

To the amahomba, clothes are an art form. They talk. They say something about the wearer. (2000:47)

Despite this semi-regal first appearance she is a subservient figure, wholly reliant on an old age pension cheque and her casual employment at the Blue Flamingo Hotel as a “nanny” to the children of white holidaymakers. She is also cast as acquiescent to her husband – Bhonco – and through him she is dragged into the futile modern incarnation of the feud between the Believers and the Unbelievers. Yet Mda uses this apparently minor character to articulate a solution to the feud and to suggest a strategy for the economic emancipation of rural women in communities such as Qolorha.

The feud between the Believers and the Unbelievers has its origin, we know, in the reactions to the prophecies of Nongqawuse. The same Believer / Unbeliever divisions continue into the modern day, but the locus of the feud shifts to the contested ground of the development programme proposed by Lefa Leballo’s company at Qolorha. This is the same development that promised a holiday resort with roller coasters for the visitors and some spin off, in the form of jobs for the locals. NoPetticoat’s husband Bhonco is an Unbeliever (in the eco-tourism plans articulated by Camagu) and a Xhosa traditionalist. He despises modern hut-building practices for example: “Bhonco does not believe in this newfangled fashion of building hexagons instead of the tried and tested rondavel” (2000:6) , and in his attitude to his wife and child, he suggests that he as head of the household should be followed unswervingly. His ongoing petty feud with the Believer Zim is foregrounded in some of the funniest moments of pure comedy in the narrative. To underscore the utter ridiculousness of this feud and to emphasise Bhonco’s plain silliness, Zim’s death elicits this reaction:

Bhonco, son of Ximiya, is enraged when he hears that Zim is dead. Zim was always one up on him. Now he will reach the world of the ancestors before him. He is going to be an ancestor before him. When Bhonco finally dies and goes to the world of the ancestors, Zim will have been there a long time. (2000:309)

Mda has huge fun with this character. Bhonco's reaction to the news of Zim's death shows him to be a grumpy old man. Even though his rival has died, Bhonco cannot relinquish the petty feud the two had indulged in; the bad blood that has its origins in the original schism between Believers and Unbelievers in the Cattle Killing era. Mda appears to be suggesting that as we confront modernity, we need to be culturally flexible and be open to adaptation and change. NoPetticoat, by contrast, gets on with the business of adapting to the changing world. Whereas people like Bhonco were content to be passive, allowing others, outsiders even, to plan developments, it is people like NoPetticoat who become proactive participants in change. The co-operative she is part of represents a real opportunity to bring economic upliftment on a sustainable basis to Qolorha.  The narrative relates the success of this development as follows:

There is no gambling complex at Qolorha. None of all the wonderful things of civilisation that his daughter used to tell him about. Instead, there is a tourist place, which started as a backpackers' hostel but has now developed into a holiday camp. Those villagers who decided to join the co-operative society own it. It is managed by Vathiswa, who learnt the ropes at the Blue Flamingo Hotel. To make things worse – from Bhonco's perspective, that is – this holiday camp is at Zim's old homestead. When Qukezwa moved to Camagu's cottage, she gave the homestead to the co-op. More chalets in the form of isiXhosa rondavels and hexagons were built. The place now gives the Blue Flamingo Hotel tough competition. (2000:314)

The project is sharply contrasted with the cultural village established by Dalton. The latter project is shown as something sterile, an artificial sideshow that peddles cultural shadows:

Although it is called a cultural village, it is not really a village. There are four mud rondavels thatched with grass and fenced in by reeds. The outside walls of the rondavels are decorated with colourful geometric patterns. Inside there are clay pots of different sizes which are for sale. Grass mats are strewn all over the cowdung floor. There is nothing else. (2000:315)

The contrast with the booming co-operative backpackers' lodge-cum-tourist resort is stark. The readers feel a certain degree of satisfaction that Dalton's manipulations have not prospered, but the larger picture is the one Mda would have us see – that traditional rural societies have the innate capacity to respond to modernity and create their own economic independence. They need not be reliant on handouts or dubious projects set up by outsiders. It is a hopeful message that brings Qolorha society back full circle. It is as if in the twenty-first century they finally achieve the potential to engage with modernity successfully – a challenge that eluded the same community a century and a half ago. In my conclusion, I will demonstrate that the ending of the novel does, indeed, achieve exactly this and point towards a prophetic model for our society.



Conclusion: Into the future, laughing ?

J.U. Jacobs in his essay “Zakes Mda and the (South) African Renaissance” suggests that

Mda’s novels demonstrate in many respects a similar break with the earlier – dare one say medieval? tradition of black writing, and may be seen as part of a process of liberation from apartheid conformity. (2000:61)

Mda would be the last person to suggest that the writing that emerged in South Africa during the apartheid years is somehow irrelevant. It most certainly was not. The cultural equivalent of armed struggle is writing that is angrily polemic. Yet with institutional apartheid finally conquered, the changing socio-political landscape demands a different response from writers. It has been most refreshing to witness an outpouring of writing in South Africa post-1994, much of it the work of younger writers with fresh vision and new ideas. Zakes Mda, although his reputation began pre-1994, has similarly taken his writing to a new threshold, determined, as it were, to look for new artistic challenges. Mda said as much in a paper he delivered at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation in 1995. He made this semi-prophetic statement, the manifestation of which we have seen in his novels, particularly The Heart of Redness:

When the predominant political culture was that of resistance, the art that was created reflected that situation. Not only did it reflect it, but it rallied both its producers and its consumers around issues of resistance. Now that the culture being cultivated by the dominant political structures is that of reconciliation, the arts will play a role in reflecting that situation, and in mobilising people for reconciliation. Artists in all fields are already creating an art of reconciliation without anyone prescribing to them to do so. Singers like Vusi Mahlasela are singing songs of reconciliation, and poets like Mzwakhe Mbuli are talking the language of reconciliation in their performances. Available: <http://www.csvr.org.za/papers/papmda.htm>. [Accessed 25 July 2002].

I would suggest that The Heart of Redness, to a very large extent, is a novel of reconciliation. This is not the reconciliation that some would perhaps like. At no time does Mda suggest that we as a nation simply forget the past and move on. Far from it. True reconciliation flows out of an informed and honest revisiting of the past. This is what Mda has done in The Heart of Redness. The novel's diachronic structure has worked superbly as an instrument whereby the narrative can slip into the past and deal with issues such as prejudice, colonialism and the awful events of the Cattle Killing and simultaneously project the unresolved impacts of these past episodes into the present. We have seen variously how issues in the past have had a concomitant "knock on effect" into the present. Contemporary values are shaped by past events and Mda would have his readers understand these fundamental premises before unwrapping the larger prophetic vision of his novel contained in the figurative "heart of redness."

There is an established tradition in literature about characters engaging in quests to discover their identities. Mda's novel echoes Conrad's similarly titled work The Heart of Darkness, but whereas Conrad offers a bleak picture of the state of humankind, Mda is prepared to offer a significantly brighter picture. Camagu's quest, though roughly similar to that undertaken by Conrad's character Kurtz, is the antithesis of Kurtz's damned journey. Camagu's quest leads to self-discovery and fulfillment in life.

The ending of The Heart of Redness offers the reader a complex opportunity to affirm the ideas that have emerged in the narrative. As we begin to withdraw from the narrative, we are left with Camagu's solitary thoughts:

He feels fortunate that he lives in Qolorha. Those who want to preserve indigenous plants and birds have won the day there. At least for now. But for how long? The whole country is ruled by greed. Everyone wants to have his or her snout in the trough. Sooner or later the powers that be may decide, in the name of the people, that it is good for the people to have a gambling complex at Qolorha-by-Sea. And the gambling complex shall come into being. And of course the powers that be or their proxies – in the form of wives, sons, daughters and cousins – shall be given equity. And so the people shall be empowered. (2000:319)

The irony is bitter and barely controlled here and Mda is weaving a complex set of ideas around the idea of redness as signifying the moral essence of a people or community. David Attwell (2005:174) makes the observation that

The powers that be – the State, no doubt, and those who drive the economy – are mistaken, even treasonous in siding with unbelief, which is what capitulating to globalisation and material acquisitiveness amounts to. The bitterness of that final phrase “and so the people shall be empowered” is made more deeply ironic by its echo of the Freedom Charter, which has been debased in its association with “equity” in the financial sense.

Attwell’s analysis here is convincing. The final bitter irony serves as a sober reminder that the victory scored by the villagers is not a final one and it comes with no guarantees.

The challenges facing society in modernity revolve around socio-political issues. Colonialism and its later incarnation, apartheid, combined economic and political exploitation of the majority of the people. Mda is suggesting that it is quite likely that the aggressive promotion of materialism and globalisation will once again lead to a position where minority interests overwhelm the lives of ordinary people. We leave the novel with the focaliser articulating Qukezwa’s thoughts:

Oh, this Heitsi! He is afraid of the sea. How will he survive without the sea? How will he carry out the business of saving his people? Qukezwa grabs him by his hand and drags him into the water. He is screaming and kicking wildly. Wild waves come and cover them for a while, then rush back again. Qukezwa laughs excitedly. Heitsi screams even louder, pulling away from her grip, “No, mama! No! This boy does not belong in the sea! This boy belongs in the man village!” (2000:319 – 320)

Attwell (2005:174) has noted the apparent difficulty of interpreting this closing paragraph. He suggests that

The conclusion is not quite that straightforward. In the passage, Qukezwa wants Heitsi to learn to be comfortable in the sea, water being the element from which the shades will return; it is the element of prophecy, of millenarianism, of salvation. But the story is too multifaceted, the tensions

of Xhosa symbolic life are too contradictory, for Qukezwa to have the final word. It is given to Heitsi, who chooses not the sea but the village, therefore people over prophecy, and the future over the past.

Attwell's reading of this conclusion is illuminating. In a sense, the novel has come full circle. In the nineteenth century, the Xhosa people looked in vain to the sea for their salvation. Heitsi, the product of an immaculate conception, rejects the sea, thus in a fashion bringing closure to the hope contained in the prophecies of Nongqawuse but pointing, rather, to the truth that people themselves are the architects of their own fates and do not need to place their hopes in the hands of unseen others. In creating a narrative designed to articulate this large truth, Mda has consistently chosen humour as an authorial strategy and he has harnessed the full potential of parody, satire and irony.



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