

The modernization of redness

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Mda's novels develop his critique of black society and governance, from the campaigning of political parties in 1994 to the established black rule in the late 1990s and 2000. However, the suffering of the poor and the venality of their leaders are balanced with the redemptive possibilities provided by a selective appropriation of African values and spirituality

With the demise of the apartheid state, it would appear that many black writers have diminished their output, possibly lacking a suitable subject. Not so with Zakes Mda. In 1995, his first two novels, *Ways of dying* and *She dances with darkness*, appeared. Last year, his third adult novel, *The heart of redness*, was published. It is perhaps not surprising that the appointment of the first democratically elected black government did not rob Mda of novelistic material, because even in his plays, such as *We shall sing for the fatherland* (1979, 1993), he focused on black oppression and exploitation of

other black people, as well as the ills of colonialism and apartheid. His novels develop his critique of black society and governance, from the campaigning of political parties in 1994 to the established black rule in the late 1990s and 2000. However, the suffering of the poor and the venality of their leaders are balanced with the redemptive possibilities provided by a selective appropriation of African values and spirituality. Thus, in *Ways of dying*, the protagonist finds that a recovery of the presence of his ancestors, as expressed in artworks, forms part of a process of resuscitating in him a sensibility that enables him to cope with the miseries of life in a squatter camp. In *The heart of redness*, certain traditional values and beliefs also help to ameliorate the present.

One of the means Mda has adopted to blend the elements of the traditional past with the materialistic global culture of the present (as modified by specific South African conditions) is that of magical realism. Brenda Cooper (1998:16) has defined magical realism as “the fictional device of the supernatural, taken from any source the writer chooses, syncretized with a developed realistic, historical perspective”. Cooper (16)

argues that magical realist writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabel Allende and Salman Rushdie are, nevertheless, “not inserted within these indigenous, pre-technological cultures that provide their inspiration”. However, while these writers may not actually believe in the “magic” they incorporate into their fiction, it would appear that Mda (1997:281) does. He comments:

Some critics have called my work magic realism ... I wrote in this manner because I am a product of this culture. In my culture the magical is not disconcerting. It is taken for granted ... A lot of my work is set in the rural areas because they retain that magic, whereas the urban areas have lost it to Westernization”.

It is this acceptance of the magical that allows him to imbue traditional black values and spirituality with a vitality that offers a redemptive hope for the present.

In *The heart of redness*, Mda explores the contrasts between the present Westernized urban black person, the rural areas where traditional beliefs are being contested and the past where traditional beliefs were still dominant but challenged by the two central events of Xhosa history –

British imperialism and the Great Cattle Killing of 1857. To examine conflicting values in the present, modern South Africa, he has as his protagonist, Camagu, a Westernized returnee from exile, who travels from Johannesburg to a remote rural village, Qolorha-by-sea. In his encounters with the villagers he gradually discovers his Xhosa roots – the heart of redness – and is spiritually transformed, so that he attains a sense of community with the rural people. The narrative of past imperialism and the Cattle Killing is woven into the contemporary *bildungsroman* by means of flashbacks. The various villagers, both past and present, the prophets of the past and British imperialists, the modern urbanites and, above all, Camagu's consciousness, provide a polyphony of voices that allows Mda to present a richly complex and ironized debate about the issues facing contemporary South African society and its historical, colonial antecedents.

The book opens in Qolorha with the present-day controversy between the Believers and the Unbelievers, headed by Zim and Bhonco, respectively. After the defeat of the Xhosa by the British in the Seventh Frontier War (called “The War of Malajeni” in the book, thus indicating a specifically black perspective), and despite Xhosa prophets predicting otherwise, a rift arises between those who believe in the prophecies of their seers and those who do not. This rift splits the nation when, after a devastating drought and a fearsome incidence of livestock disease, a young prophetess, Nongqawuse, predicts that if the people plant no grain and slaughter all their cattle, at a specific date, their food will be replaced and healthy cattle will arise from the sea, along with their ancestors. A new Edenic age will dawn. The Unbelievers, who are sceptical of the forecast, refuse to comply with the demands and, indeed, some have so forsaken the religious traditions of their forefathers that they align themselves with the British. Such animosity arises between the two factions that the whole fabric of the nation is torn apart: for, when the grain, cattle and ancestors do not arrive, the Believers maintain that it is because of the disobedience of the Unbelievers that the prophecy was not fulfilled. Brother fights against brother. This is literally the

case when Twin, the ancestor of Zim, raids the kraals of his twin brother Twin-Twin, the ancestor of Bhonco, who retaliates by denying the existence of his brother's family when starvation haunts the land. After many months of increasing starvation and internecine strife a final date (16 February 1857) is set for the apocalyptic day. The disappointment of the Believers' final hopes breaks the nation. In the months that follow tens of thousands die while others exchange their liberty for food rations in the Cape Colony. After the destruction of the power of the Xhosa, they become the Middle Generations who languish under the dominance of whites. However, after black majority rule, when an imperative exists to explore complexities between black and black and not simply between black and white, Bhonco and Zim resurrect the feud between the Unbelievers and the Believers.

Mda's outline of the epic tragedy of the Xhosa does not only allow him to outline two basic modes of thinking in the nation, it also gives him scope for a sardonic critique of British imperialism. The arrogance on which imperialism is premised is revealed in a particularly fatuous form when Sir Harry Smith (who calls himself the Great White Chief) forces elders and chiefs to kiss his staff and boots. More subtly, Mda exposes another premise of imperialism when he has Dalton, a soldier, boil the head of Bhonco and Zim's ultimate ancestor so that the cranium can be stored for phrenological analysis. People of “lesser” cultures are thus reified. The consequence is that they have little right to their land which then can be appropriated so that colonists can make better use of it. One of the processes of appropriation, discussed by David Spurr (1993:5), is that of naming: “The very process by which one culture subordinates another culture begins in the act of naming or leaving unnamed, of marking on an unknown territory the lines of division and uniformity, of boundary and continuity.” Thus, Sir George Grey, after “pacifying” the Maoris in New Zealand, consolidates his appropriation of their land by naming twelve rivers. The Xhosa mock Grey's pretensions of owning their land by calling him “The Man Who Named Ten Rivers”. Grey informs

the Xhosa that he has only come to impart the wonders of British civilization to “barbarous natives” (96). However, men such as Twin-Twin (one of the Unbelievers who has not become pro-British) realize that the gift of “civilization” entails the loss of their land. But, after the Cattle Killing, the Xhosa are not in a position to resist the British. Men like Dalton become rich by selling goods to Xhosa survivors. Missionaries find rich ideological pickings in disillusioned people. Ultimately – in a passage reminiscent of the title of the District Commissioner’s book, *Pacification of the primitive tribes of the Lower Niger*, at the end of Chinua Achebe’s *Things fall apart* – in Southern Africa, “Pacified homesteads are in ruins. Pacified men register themselves as pacified labourers in the emerging towns ... Their pacified fields have become rich settler farmlands” (312).

Nevertheless, not all is lost in the holocaust. Some people, like Twin’s Believing wife, Qukezwa, retain a sense of African spirituality. Her numinous experiences are conveyed by the way that in her dreams “[s]he flies ... in the land of the prophets”. After the destruction of her people, she is still associated with magical qualities for “[s]he sings in soft pastel colours. She sings in many voices” (312). Furthermore, she has passed such characteristics on to her descendant, the modern-day daughter of Zim the Believer, also named Qukezwa.

However, the book does not begin with an examination of the contemporary Zim’s camp of Believers, but with a positive description of Bhonco, the Unbeliever. He is a sensitive man

who weeps at beholding beautiful things. Like his ancestor, Twin-Twin, he has not quite given himself over to Westernization for, although he does avail himself of Western benefits, he retains a staunch belief in the powers of the ancestors. He is the bearer of magical scars that are handed down from father to son. He and fellow Unbelievers are in possession of a dance, given to them by the abaThwa (Bushmen), which allows them mysteriously to communicate with their ancestors “when they were still people of flesh and blood” and the land “still belonged to them” (81). Nevertheless, Bhonco does believe in modernization. Thus, in the huge debate between his party and the Believers – whether or not a casino and, later, timeshare units – should be erected, he favours the developers because they will ostensibly bring employment, proper roads and electricity to the area. His daughter, Xoliswa, takes his modernizing views to the extreme for she despises redness: she has even abandoned belief in the ancestors. With her superior education (which is exposed as being pathetically meagre), she aims to leave the rural areas to go to Pretoria to the Ministry of Education where so many lucrative jobs are opening up to upwardly-mobile blacks, eager to board the gravy train.

Zim, head of the modern Believers, does not utterly oppose modernization, but he is more traditional than Bhonco. Zim’s primary idea in life is that the Believers of colonial times were right and that it was owing to the betrayal of the Unbelievers in not killing their cattle that the tragedy of the Xhosa nation came about. Furthermore, unlike Bhonco but like

the traditional Xhosa, he perceives the sacredness in nature. He is so much part of the natural world that he can talk with birds. Unlike Bhonco, too, he does not mourn the past but communicates with the world of the present ancestors. His ancestors are more vitally perceived. Most importantly, however, he opposes the casino and timeshare schemes because they would destroy the natural world that he so loves. Like Bhonco, he too has a daughter, Qukezwa, who embodies his worldviews in an extreme form. She is actually a throw-back to her Khoi ancestor of the same name and partakes of her sense of the numinous qualities of her world. Her Khoi ancestry is important because, as depicted in Mda’s previous novel, *She dances with the darkness* (and indirectly in *The heart of redness*), for Mda, the Bushmen and the Khoi, as the truly aboriginal people of Southern Africa, are most vividly imbued with the spirit of the place. Thus, Qukezwa, with her miraculous multi-toned voice, her strong, fighting spirit and her harmonious existence with the natural and spiritual worlds represents a quintessential Africanness – the heart of redness.

In the many figures of the Believers and the Unbelievers – both in the colonial period and in contemporary South Africa – Mda seems to be exploring two central forces in black culture. In the colonial period there was the tension between believing in the Xhosa prophetic traditions and a rationalistic scepticism concerning these traditions that, in some, went as far as Westernization and loss of their traditional faith in favour of Christianity. In the case of the modern

Believers and Unbelievers there is a tension between embracing traditional life, with its supernatural elements, and a desire for “progress” which, in an extreme form, means yielding to the exploitative materialism of global capitalism.

When the protagonist of the novel, Camagu, arrives in Johannesburg, he is initially exposed to materialistic Unbelief. Mda wickedly satirizes modern South Africa in the exile’s inability to find employment. Well-educated, with a doctorate in communications, he is not wanted by the corporate world which “did not want qualified blacks. They preferred the inexperienced ones who were only too happy to be placed in some glass affirmative-action office where they were displayed as paragons of empowerment” (33). But neither can he find work in black government offices. The problem is that he cannot and, later will not, “dance the freedom dance”: he will not yield to government sycophancy, nepotism and mendacity. He is advised to

[j]oin the Aristocrats of the Revolution ... Only then did Camagu understand the full implications of life in this new democratic society. He did not qualify for any important position because he was not a member of the Aristocrats of the Revolution, an exclusive club that is composed of the ruling elites, their families and close friends ... The jobs he had been applying for had all gone to people whose only qualification was that they were sons and daughters of the Aristocrats of the Revolution. (36)

Disgusted, Camagu decides to go back into exile but, after meeting a beautiful woman from Qolorha, travels to that village.

Because of his education and sophistication, it is assumed that Camagu will identify with the Unbelievers. He does initially associate with the “educated,” extreme Unbeliever, Xoliswa, but finds the traditional way of life that she rejects more and more fulfilling. His sojourn at the village actually initiates a process of rediscovering his Xhosa identity, lost to him during the long years of exile. A turning point is reached when he is visited by Majola, the brown mole snake that is the totem of his clan, the amaMpondomise. A link is forged with the spiritual heritage of his own people for “Camagu is beside himself with excitement.

He has never been visited by Majola He has heard stories how the snake visits every newborn child; it sometimes pays a visit to chosen members of the clan to give them good fortune” (112). The cosmopolitan urbanite has begun to enter the magical realm of his ancestors’ faith. This is reinforced when, immediately after the incident, he meets Qukezwa, the most ardent Believer, and they walk to the place where Non-gqawuse had her visions. Here he follows a Khoi ceremony of placing a stone on an ancient cairn in a symbolic gesture of commemorating the Khoi God, Heitsi, and the ancestors. While Camagu never actually becomes a Believer, in so far as he never accepts the old prophecies, he increasingly believes in the spirituality of his people.

His sense of solidarity is consolidated in his opposition to the casino and time-share developments fervently desired by the Unbelievers and rejected by the Believers. A black economic empowerment firm arrives to plan the developments. This gives Mda further chance for sly satire because an obviously ignorant black executive is advised by highly-paid white consultants who actually control the endeavour. The casino and the time-share units, they argue, will provide the electricity, running water and employment for the villagers that the Unbelievers so want. However, as Camagu argues, the development will only supply limited employment to the people because they lack the sophistication to operate a casino and the electricity and water will not extend to the village. Instead, the indigenous vegetation will be destroyed when decorative exotics replace them and, as the beaches are privatized, they will lose free access to an important food source. In fact, they will effectively lose their land and be reduced to tourist curiosities. The only people who will be empowered by the schemes are the fat-cat Aristocrats of the Revolution and their white backers. Camagu proposes, instead, the development of cottage industries, limited selling of seafood delicacies and a simple hostel for backpackers who have come to appreciate the beauty and sacredness of the area: all these enterprises are to be communally owned by the villagers themselves so that, with the profits generated, they can install the electricity and running water as they require. Above

all, they will all be employed. The success of such schemes is finally ensured when, against all odds, the area is declared a world heritage site owing to the persistent efforts of a supportive white shopkeeper, Dalton, who is none other than a descendant of the colonial soldier who decapitated Bhonco and Zim's ancestor. (Dalton's empathy for the Xhosa, although not unironically treated, offers one of the many polyphonic voices of the novel, for he is implicitly contrasted with the Aristocrats of the Revolution who disregard people of their own race.)

Throughout the debate about modernization which rages intermittently in the book, the position of the Unbelievers, who have increasingly entrenched themselves in their support of materialistic progress, is gradually undermined. They become alienated from their traditions, as indicated by the fact that the abaThwa take away their trance-like dance. This helps to fracture that solidarity the dreams gave them. Bhonco's tears no longer flow because he no longer finds beauty in life owing to an increasing bitterness that is consuming him. His wife leaves him to join the Believers and work in their cottage industries. His daughter leaves him to join in the freedom dance and become one of the Aristocrats of the Revolution. He is rejected by his ancestors as they, in the form of a swarm of bees, attack him. Finally, there is his defeat concerning the casino and time-share units. His ultimate degeneration occurs, however, when his mind becomes unhinged and he attacks his life-long friend, Dalton, with a panga.

As the Unbelievers deteriorate, the Believers gain the ascendancy. Zim gains in a quarrel involving a school choral performance. He gains a son in Camagu who was supposed by everyone to marry Bhonco's daughter, Xoliswa, but actually marries his own daughter, Qukezwa. He gains a grandson, Heitsi (Camagu's son), while his rival's daughter, Xoliswa, remains barren and unwed. His greatest victory, however, occurs when the plans to develop the area are thwarted. Yet Zim has one more victory. He is granted leave to join his ancestors after a long period of mourning for his wife. Bhonco is deeply embittered because this means that Zim will be able to blacken his name in the spirit world. Furthermore, as Zim is now an ancestor himself, he will be deeply revered by the whole village.

Mda's apparent endorsement of the present-day Believers is problematic because they still venerate those prophecies of Nongqawuse that caused the destruction of the Xhosa nation. Can a view of life that generated such a holocaust be a viable one – in any context? It seems that Mda resolves this tension in the enigmatic final scene of the novel, in which he fuses the historical figures of Qukezwa and Heitsi with their modern counterparts. Qukezwa calls to her son to join her swimming in the sea, but the boy is terrified of the water. The novel concludes with his flat refusal to swim. This may not be such an abrupt ending if we consider that water – especially the sea – is, throughout *The heart of redness*, associated with the cattle-killing and its concomitant events. Nongqawuse

first told of her visions at a lagoon near the sea. In one of the earlier versions of the prophecies, the ancestors would have come with cattle out of the sea. In a later version, the ancestors would have led Russian forces from over the water which would then defeat the British. (The Crimean War, in which Russian and British forces fought each other, had just occurred and the Xhosa assumed that, if the Russians were enemies of their enemies, they must be their friends.) Furthermore, much of the action during the period of famine occurs on the seashore when the starving Xhosa look yearningly to the sea horizon from which their ancestors must surely come. Many even claim to have seen the spirits of the dead and their cattle beneath the waters. Seen in this context, Heitsi is actually rejecting the disastrously prophetic aspect of his traditions. Implicitly, however, he does not reject the spiritual aspect of his kinship to the dead. Moreover, he is not only his mother's son but is also named after the God of the Khoi. As previously mentioned, for Mda the Khoi and the Bushmen were the people most closely attuned to the spiritual forces operating in the African reality. So, from his mother Heitsi he inherits a living awareness of his ancestors while his name alludes to the spiritual – the “magical” elements within that world. When one takes into account that his father, Camagu, is a man steeped in a knowledge of the West, who has practical plans for uplifting the community (but who has also found his African identity), this little trinity offers much, by example, to the modernization of redness.

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