MOTHERS, MADONNAS AND MUSICIANS: A Writing of Africa’s Women as Symbols and Agents of Change in the Novels of Zakes Mda.

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, Department of African Literature, UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.
Abstract

My dissertation interrogates the ways in which Zakes Mda has made women central to his novels. I argue that the women characters in Mda's novels are key to the idea of the re-birth of Africa (and the simultaneous birth of a (South) African identity) - a re-birth made necessary by years of dispossession through colonialism and apartheid. I will explore how on one level Mda, through magical realism, represents women as symbols of both destruction and construction; and how on another level he represents them as complex characters existing as agents of history. Mda's novels: Ways of Dying (1995), She Plays With the Darkness (1995), The Heart of Redness (2000) and The Madonna of Excelsior (2002) critique the top-down approach of the post-apartheid, post-colonial discourse of African Renaissance - a discourse which aims to reverse the damage done to the lives of Africans who have been brutalised by history. Mda writes an African renaissance (with a lower case “r”), which acknowledges and explores the ways in which people on the margins of power, recreate and transform their lives, without necessarily waiting for politicians to come up with policies and solutions. The renaissance of ordinary people privileges the spirit of ubuntu, whereby the individual strives to
work with the collective to achieve a more humane world. Mda’s female characters are central to the debate on renaissance and reconstruction in that he questions existing gender roles by

highlighting strongly the rights still denied African women - his challenge to the discourse is whether a renaissance is possible if the humanity of women (and others marginalised by class, age, location, ethnicity, and other categories) continues to be denied. I ask the question whether Mda, goes further, and envisions women participating as leaders in traditionally male spaces.
Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university or institution.
Dedication

_Egameni lika Mdali, ngibonga ukuphetha lomsebenzi._

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