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Mothers, madonnas and musicians: A writing of Africa's women as symbols and agents of change in the novels of Zakes Mda

Mazibuko, Nokuthula

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INTRODUCTION

> The African identity is a very novel phenomenon. It is in fact, an identity in the making. Inhabitants of the continent did not generally refer to themselves as Africans - either as a racial or as a continental identity. They recognised and celebrated various identities that were based on ethnicity, clan, family, gender and class - and later on nation and religion. They, however, recognised their human identity as the core identity. (Mda 2001)

Zakes Mda's entry into prolific novel writing a decade ago, introduced a key and brilliantly original narrative voice within the South African story-telling landscape. Mda's novelistic artistry has brought him international critical acclaim, primarily for his consistent privileging of experiences from outside official nationalistic discourses[1]. Mda's critique from the margins celebrates "various [discordant] identities" (2001) through an aesthetic that draws from history, art, folklore, literature, theatre, film, music and dreams. His work as a painter, dramatist, composer, poet, film-maker, bee-keeper, cultural activist, academic and novelist permeates the narrative components of his oeuvre.

The focus of my dissertation is on Mda's writing of African women as symbols and agents of the "African identity...in the making" (2001). Mda's novels represent a complex array of colourful characters by drawing from various African literature tropes of women as mothers, madonnas and artists in ways that put "new spins on old archetypes" (Moffett 1996: 15).

[1] Among the many prizes Mda has won are the M-Net Book prize, the Olive Schreiner Prize, the Commonwealth Prize for Fiction and the Sunday Times Fiction Award.

Mda puts centre stage rural and working class women, thus privileging experiences that are not yet fully empowered by political bureaucracy, and yet are instrumental to the changing South African social and political landscape. *Ways of Dying* (1995), *She Plays With the Darkness* (1995), *The Heart of Redness* (2000), and *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002) talk to a post-apartheid, post-colonial nationalistic discourse of an African Renaissance in ways that question existing gender roles by highlighting strongly the rights yet to be realised by African women and others marginalised on the basis of class, ethnicity (Twalo 2001) and region. Mda challenges official political discourse and asks whether a renaissance is possible if the humanity of others is still denied because of structural inequities.

The Personal as Political – An Overview of Mda's life and literature

An understanding of Mda's biography will begin to shed light on the thematic concerns of both his stage and novel writing. In contextualising Mda, I will give an overview of his biography and his theatre work, as both have influenced greatly the style and content of his novels. However, close and extensive readings of the actual plays are not within the scope of this study.

Born in South Africa on 6 October 1948, the year apartheid was officially adopted, Mda's life was to follow a dramatic trajectory mapped by turbulent political and personal histories. He was raised in a middle class home of intellectuals, where he had access to books and creative freedoms early in his life. His mother, Rose Mda, was a nurse, and his father, A.P. Mda, a well-known lawyer and politician. A.P. Mda was a founder member

of the African National Congress (ANC) Youth League, and became the organisation's president in 1947 - later, he led a breakaway group to form the Pan African Congress (PAC)[2]. The family lived in Soweto, before leaving for exile in Lesotho (then called the Basotholand Protectorate prior to independence in 1966), in the mid-1960s. After completing high school, Mda studied to be a lawyer. He later completed two Masters degrees in theatre and mass communication at Ohio University in the United States of America.

In 1980, Mda published his first collection of plays, *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland* – a work critical of the conditions of poverty and oppression that most black people have had to live through in colonial and post-colonial Africa, a theme that weaves through all Mda's work. The collection consists of three plays which include *Dark Voices Ring* and *Dead End*. In *We Shall Sing For the Fatherland*, the main characters - Sergeant and Janabari - are two former freedom fighters who question the arrival of independence because they are not enjoying the fruits of independence and are still very poor, and homeless. They are harassed by the new black government agents whose main concern is removing them from the public park where they live, claiming that the pair is an eyesore. Mda's experimentation with the magical realist[3] mode is evident here as the play blurs lines between realms of existence when Sergeant and Janabari witness their deaths through hypothermia, and attend their own funeral.

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[2] Mda's biographies appear in his novels as well as in Bhekizizwe Peterson's introduction to *And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses* (1993).

[3] Magical Realism treats magic and fantasy as everyday normal occurrences. Elements of magical realism in literature include the use of folklore, cyclical time frames, symbolism and metaphor.

In *Dark Voices Ring* the debilitating, soul destroying conditions of South Africa's notorious potato farms, where workers were forced to dig the soil with their bare hands, is the subject. *Dead End* is about a man and a woman who are forced to work as prostitute and pimp to survive (again, the play explores multiple realms of existence when Charley has conversations with God about the wretched life they live under apartheid, and Tseli witnesses her own death).

In an interview (Naidoo 1997), Mda states that he started experimenting with magical realism at a time when the dominant literary form of expression in South Africa was realism. At the time he was not aware that his mode of narration was referred to as “magical realism”; his experiments with the form were influenced by African folklore, where reality, dreams, death and concepts of the divine are part of daily existence. Mda attributes his narrative and imaginative techniques to the fact that he was so far away from the South Africa he was writing about, and hence was not constrained by the pressure to tell his stories in a realist mode:

> ...My distance from South Africa actually helped me to write. This was the situation even during the days of apartheid when I was writing my plays. I am grateful to the fact that I was far away from the situation here...
> ...Those writers who were living within the situation here could have perhaps created much greater theatre than they ever did. Because they were living within the situation they could get their characters and their stories from what they saw around them. Apartheid itself was so absurd that it created the stories for these writers. Many of the theatre people who became famous during those days were actually reporters who would take a slice of life and put it on a page and thereafter on stage, and hey presto they had great theatre! With me there was no such advantage. I was far away from the situation itself. I was forced to use my imagination in order to recreate the situation as I remembered it, or as I thought it would be. (1997: 251)

Mda cites writers such as Gibson Kente, Barney Simon, Matsemela Manaka, and Athol Fugard who during the 1970s and 80s popularised workshopped plays - which aimed to evolve a script out of real life absurdities caused by apartheid. He explains that although some of the work was very good, the workshopped plays ran the risk of limiting artists' imaginations. Mda fully appreciates the extent to which his imagination had to fill in the gaps in his narratives because he could not access immediately the day-to-day horrors of apartheid. He could not entirely rely on so called historical facts, so he focussed instead on individual journeys - and had the freedom to speculate on the possible motives, and realities of his characters.

In a sense, Mda rediscovered "the ordinary"[4] within the absurdity of colonial and post-colonial Africa much earlier than most of his South African counterparts, and this has freed him to explore quirky narratives and characters which on many levels differ from the canon of African literature. However, Mda's plays from exile were influenced by the thematic concerns of the Black Consciousness inspired resistance art prevalent in South Africa during the 70s – such as the novels, short stories and poetry of Wally Serote, Miriam Tlali, Mtutuzeli Matshoba, Mothobi Mutloatse, Sipho Sepamla and Gcina Mhlophe. Resistance literature produced post the 1976 youth uprisings influenced the militant espousal of armed insurrection put forward in a play like *Dark Voices Ring*. In the play Mda pits two generations against each other, a dynamic that would have resonated at the time of the play's performance in the late 70s, when young people were impatient

[4] See Ndebele's seminal work, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (1991), on the need to go beyond stereotypes and symbols and begin to explore the interior and intimate lives of characters.

with their parents' seeming acceptance of apartheid. In *Dark Voices Ring*, a character called "Woman" mourns the killing of her baby by prisoners who had been abused by her "induna" husband ("Old Man") at the farm of their baas ("Janfek"). Old Man is tasked with enforcing Janfek's feudal means of controlling and exploiting the free labour of prisoners whom he literally beats daily with a whip in order to get them to dig up potatoes with their bare hands. Woman, Man, and Old Man are symbolic of generations of black people who were exploited and killed whilst working on white-owned farms. Mda complicates the world of the farm, through exploring the inter-generational conflict when Man refuses to follow in Old Man's footsteps by becoming an induna; and through depicting the voracious and uncontrollable nature of violence when the prisoners turn on Old Man and Janfek and burn down their houses, killing Old Man and Woman's baby. At the end of the play, Man expresses the mood of the times by speaking against black people who collaborate with apartheid: he puts forward armed struggle as a solution (Mervis 1998: 41). Woman tries to justify Old Man's selling out, by working as an induna at the farm:

> Woman: He is only doing his work, my child.
> Man: They always say that. Every one of them. Black officials of this regime...civil servants who carry out the repressive laws...chiefs...policemen....in Soweto...Langa...New Brighton...throughout the land...They are doing their duty, whilst they mow down peaceful children marching down the streets, voicing their hatred of the evils done to us by those who have given themselves the divine right to decide our destiny. That is why I am going, ma. Because now I know that our salvation lies only in ourselves...in our guns. (43)

Man embodies the spirit of youth resistance and protest that was prevalent after 1976 and right through the 1980s. He eventually convinces Woman that armed struggle is the only way to gain freedom. His outlook mirrors that of Tsietsi in Serote's *To Every Birth Its*

Blood, and Maba in Mothobi Mutloatse's *Mama Ndiyalila*, both texts dealing with the '76 uprisings and the choices of the main characters to take up armed resistance in exile.

Mda cautiously acknowledges operating within the post '76 Black Conscious-inspired milieu, however he makes a point of distinguishing between his own espousal of a Pan-Africanism which does not foreground race politics as much as Black Consciousness did:

> For me being black is something I take for granted, because I know that I am black. At the same time I must say very strongly that Black Consciousness was very essential at the time in which it came. It served a very important political function at that time, and I have no problem with Black Consciousness. But I am a Pan-Africanist. I must stress though that when I speak of Pan-Africanism I am talking of my outlook. I believe that in South Africa the ANC is actually more Pan-Africanist tha[n] the PAC is. So when I am talking about Pan-Africanism I am talking about the outlook that recognises the common history of the African people in Africa and the diaspora, and this should not be seen as a racial term. Pan-Africanism to me acknowledges and celebrates the common history of the African people. Also the common interests and common destiny of the African people on the continent and in the diaspora. That common history is manifested very much in the culture of these people. One sees it in their literature, in their customs, in their traditions. (Naidoo: 258)

Mda's politics of a Pan-African renaissance is more influenced by the psychoanalytic politics of Biko's Black Consciousness and Frantz Fanon's theories of racial oppression than Mda's quotation (above) acknowledges. Black Consciousness in South Africa, which was influenced by Black Power in America, Fanon, and the Pan-Africanism which Mda describes, have all influenced the current discourse of the African Renaissance[5]. A

[5] In South Africa, the discourse of African Renaissance has been championed by President Thabo Mbeki whose well known 8 May 1996 parliamentary "I am an African" speech aimed to bring black and white South Africans on board the government's transformation agenda. The speech is published in a collection of Mbeki's speeches titled, *Africa – the Time Has Come* (1998). In 1998, a part government, part private sector sponsored conference took place in Johannesburg where 470 intellectuals, politicians, business people and cultural activists debated the practicalities of the African Renaissance. 30 papers from the conference were published in a book titled: *African Renaissance - The New Struggle* (1999). Topics ranged from the mindset required to spearhead a political and economic renaissance on the continent, to specifics of what various sectors of the society need to do to transform society, and enable Africa to be prosperous and peaceful. The main approach of the conference was to galvanize those in leadership, i.e. the black (male) middle-class. It is the discourses' black male, middle-class bias that Mda interrogates. Also see *Problematising The African Renaissance* (2000) edited Eddy Maloka and Elizabeth le Roux, for discussions which link the current debates in South Africa with previous Africa-wide debates.

discourse which, as already mentioned, Mda interrogates and engages with when he explores the African renaissance of ordinary people. In 2002, Es'kia Mphahlele spoke at a Writers Conference in Tshwane where he critiqued the African Renaissance for not engaging ordinary South Africans. He lamented the fact that the discourse was "by and for the intelligentsia". Similarly, Mda's critique of the African Renaissance is that it does not see the renaissance already happening at grassroots level.

In 1985, Mda completed his Masters degree and returned to Lesotho where he began working for the national television broadcaster. Later he spent seven years as a lecturer in the English Department of Lesotho's national university (Roma). Whilst teaching Mda started producing theatre for development and founded the Marotholi Travelling Theatre at Roma. In the group his students researched and dramatised challenges facing their communities. The Marotholi plays and theatre for development models were part of Mda's doctoral thesis, and were published in *When People Play People* (1993). *When People Play People* is significant in that the theories developed in the book are a consolidation of Mda's theatrical experience and approach, as well as forming the basis of the thematic and narrative experiments in his novels (Mervis 1998).

In 1993, Mda published another collection titled *And the Girls in Their Sunday Dresses: Four Works*. The collection comprises two theatre plays (*And the Girls in Their Sunday Dresses*, and *The Joys of War*), a radio play (*Banned*) and a cinepoem (*The Final Dance*). Peterson's introduction to the collection states that its themes revolve around "... the plight of homeless people, the social and other violence that emanates from the

state, the futility of peaceful protests and the need to accept the necessity of sacrifice if more militant forms such as armed struggle are to be embarked upon" (xii). Peterson's analysis on Mda's position within South Africa's literary terrain, emphasizes Mda's innovative and questioning approach to making art as follows:

> Mda's unusual distinction, particularly for a black playwright, can be partially accounted for by his unique status and location in the history of South African theatre. It is the consequence of his peculiar biography, dramatic skills and the thematic concerns of his plays. Inasmuch as Mda's creative and theoretical works are part of the black theatre movement which crystallised in the seventies, there is no mistaking the many ways in which his work goes against the grain of the performance traditions and politics of the same movement. (vii)

The title story of *And the Girls in Their Sunday Dresses* is set in post-independence Lesotho, and is told from the vantage point of two women, a domestic worker and a female sex-worker who through the course of the play discover that they have been betrayed by the same man. The play critiques the new ruling elite who together with other elites elsewhere in the world, steal from the poor. The two women discuss the state of the nation, as they wait in a queue to buy development-aid rice, which is being sold illegally by corrupt government officials. They wait for several days in line outside the government offices in the scorching sun, as the nouveau-riche go about the business of power and dressing up "in their Sunday Dresses". Within the South African context, Mda has referred to the post-apartheid nouveau riche as the "Revolutionary Aristocracy" (*The Heart of Redness* 2000), a class of people for whom he has reserved the sharpest criticism in his transitional novels. Mda views the "Revolutionary Aristocracy" as practising a brand of crass and backward materialism that will not realise the necessary renaissance for the continent. In *And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses,* the humanity and

dignity of ordinary people, who are marginalised by the new dispensation, is celebrated and acknowledged, and the rulers are ridiculed and exposed for their disingenuous enchantment with materialism. The play celebrates an alliance between the two women, Lady and Woman, who decide they will no longer compromise their dignity by waiting for days in the rice queue:

> Lady: I am not going through with it.
> Woman: You are not
> Lady: No. I am not. I am going home now, and I am not taking the chair.
> Woman: What about the rice?
> Lady: To hell with the rice! I am going home, and I know that never again will I need the food-aid rice, and my chair of patience. Are you coming or not?
> Woman: [excitedly]: You know what? I love you. I think you are a great human being. Of course I am coming. I am coming.
> Lady: Let's go then. (37)

Their decision to stop aiding corruption through buying from the officials is a call that encompasses Mda's Pan-African politics which are concerned with unethical governance practices in post-independence Africa.

And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses was first performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival on 14 August 1988 by Meso Theatre Group. The play's director Teresa Devant attests to Mda's leading role in theatre by stating that it is the first play about Lesotho to be performed outside the mountain kingdom. Devant further states that Mda's use of Brechtian alienation devices which make extensive use of symbols and allegory sets him apart from theatre peers in Africa and Europe whose styles focused more on entertainment value and were more naturalistic. She writes that, "Mda's works...form a theatre of resistance which aims to conscientise and mobilise the oppressed" (xxviii).

Mda tackles the tricky entanglements of everyday interactions which are framed by the larger issues of poverty, alienation and gender oppression. Peterson, however, questions Mda's exploration of gender in the collection. He is not satisfied that Mda's critique of discriminatory gender practices within nationalist politics in the principal play goes far enough. Peterson writes:

> As far as the imperatives of gender conflict are concerned, Mda falters after his initial substantial identification of the problem. His shortcoming is a common one in African performance where women, increasingly, are cast as protagonists who are broadly representative of a diverse range of marginalised and exploited social groups. Such typifications allow for insight into the experiences of the lower classes, of which women form a significant proportion, but they rarely highlight the specific predicaments that face women as a 'gendered' constituency. What tends to happen instead is that the contradictions that bedevil women's lives are approached as being just more manifestations of what is already identified as the primary contradiction, be it colonialism or neo-colonialism. (xxii)

Peterson's argument that in *And the Girls in Their Sunday Dresses*, Mda only makes a superficial passing comment on sexism is partly justified, Woman and Lady are mainly symbolic of marginalised people generally in post-independence Africa. They are types within Mda's morality play. The white Italian man who betrays the women, can be read as symbolising the presence of Western forces whose role in Africa is not always productive or beneficial to the well-being of the majority of people. Mda does, however, go beyond this level of symbolism. Like the characters in *Dark Voices Ring* (Man, Woman, Old Man), the characters in *And the Girls in Their Sunday Dresses* are both real and symbolic. At a metaphoric level, we don't know their names or where they come from, what their personal internal narratives are - they represent, in broad expressive strokes the political, social milieu. However, Mda also explores the ways in which Woman and

Lady's oppression is gendered. As women, they are primarily responsible for domestic duties which include ensuring that their families are fed. This is clear when Lady at first appeals to Woman not to abandon the wait:

> Lady: Sister woman, wait! What will your children eat?
> Woman: I'll just have to buy for them in the shop. It's more expensive there of course, but what choice do I have? (17)

The betrayal of Woman and Lady by the same Italian man, also functions to expose the ways in which women suffer at the hands of men. The love-triangle dimension of the play, paints men as unreliable and out to exploit and demean women. The following diatribe by Lady expresses her understanding that patriarchy is not only practised by Western men like their Italian exploiter, but is pervasive:

> Lady: Local men? They are bastards as well. Maybe even worse. They take you for granted. They don't treat you like a lady. They treat you like scum and you got to be at their beck and call. Do everything for them. Even have to wipe their arses. No, sister woman. Men are all the same. (20)

Lady and Woman do later agree to unite and escape their condition of entrapment. So, although they start out as polar opposites - the one a sex-worker, and the other a self-righteous domestic worker - they ultimately unite against the neo-colonial system that abuses them as well as against the man who preyed on them. It is ironic that although Lady and Woman agree that men oppress and degrade them, they become unwitting aides to their own suffering. It is suggested that Woman is the one who runs off with the Italian man, after he had impregnated and deserted Lady. Mda's morality tale does not easily classify who is good and who is bad it complicates systems of domination in ways

that unsettle our beliefs about who is responsible for discrimination. He makes the point that patriarchy can be supported knowingly and unknowingly by diverse groups of men and women.

After running away to Cape Town with the Italian man, Woman (like Lady) is deserted by the man, who returns to Italy. Woman is forced to take up domestic work where she becomes exploited by white madams who overwork and underpay her. She then joins a workers' union, committed to the upliftment of workers. What is key is that Woman understands the many facets of her oppression as a worker. She is not protected by the law because she is black and she has little financial and social power. Her involvement in the struggle for liberation is with the understanding that oppressor and oppressed need to be freed. Furthermore, Woman sees the links between a South Africa yet to gain freedom and independent Lesotho yet to be truly economically empowered and free. Towards the end of the play Woman explains her insights to Lady as follows:

> Woman: It is now time for us to change things. To liberate not only ourselves, but the men themselves[6] for we are all in bondage! Yes, the men in this free and independent country are in bondage, mostly to their attitudes. That is why you see them sitting back and swimming in the glories of the past. Oh, our ancestors were great! They defended this country against all sorts of invaders! Oh we are descendants of the great warriors who through their wisdom created this nation. That is all they ever do. (27)

Mda's exasperation with ongoing discrimination and double standards continues in his novelistic oeuvre. As will be discussed later, his engagement with particularly the gendered aspect of domination can be clearly traced back to his troubled and

[6] Angela Davis' *Women Culture Politics* (1990), makes the same point that freedom for some (i.e. women only) is not enough, the feminist struggle must endeavor to liberate oppressed peoples.

complicated background within colonial and neo-colonial Africa, and his early and continuing search for artistic forms that can articulate a politics of non-discrimination. His search has resulted in courageous and often uneasy explorations of what it means to be human, and specifically what it means to be African. Mda's insistence on confronting uncomfortable terrain, results in his work seeming pessimistic and too focussed on war, disease and misfortune. The genius of Mda, however, is evident in how he manages to acknowledge and pursue difficult subjects with integrity and urgency, whilst still articulating a tentative, delicate optimism.

The other three stories in *And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses* explore the price paid and sacrifices made during and after struggles for freedom. *The Final Dance* is a cinepoem about the clash of two worlds. One world is lavish, materialist and cold; this world is described as having "...a beautiful paved road, with wild shrubs and flowers growing on the sides" (42). The other world is materially impoverished - yet spiritually enriched. The Old Man resides in the world with little material value, he lives in a shack which is described as: "sparsely furnished, mostly with makeshift furniture: a table, a bed, a conglomeration of boxes and a wheelbarrow. Although one can see that an attempt has been made to keep the room clean, it is too crammed to look neat" (41). Dance is the metaphor through which the encounter happens. The Old Man in his world of shacks and poverty loves to dance; similarly the Little Girl in her world of Victorian riches enjoys the waltz. Encouraged by the Little Girl, The Old Man joins her in dancing a beautiful waltz. The poem is a brief dramatic representation of opposing worlds and the characters who inhabit them. Mda's point comes across, when the Little Girl becomes ill

and dies. Her world comes to an abrupt end, whilst The Old Man's world continues - it is The Old Man who enjoys The Last Dance. The other works in the collection, *Banned* and *The Joys of War*, depict the many crevices of apartheid terror. In *Banned*, Cynthia is a social worker who tries to help township communities deal with the trauma caused by the 1976 uprisings. The state places a banning order on her because she refuses to betray the confidence of victims of the uprisings. The indiscriminate force of the violence of the times is explored through Cynthia's relationship with a former gangster who although apolitical gets caught up in politics. She meets the gangster when she has to counsel him for depression after he gets shot and paralysed during the uprisings. Soldier Two, in *The Joys of War*, is another character whose personal life becomes entangled in the struggle for freedom in unexpected ways. It becomes apparent that his zeal for the struggle is actually an act of atonement for the killing of a love rival whom he delivered to the security police. *The Joys of War* which was first performed on 26 August 1989 by Meso Theatre Group in Harare Zimbabwe, falls within Mda's persistent interrogation of easy dramatisations of the fight for freedom from colonialism and apartheid. The schisms within liberation discourse become the core in his stage works and in his novels. He brings out divisions along gender, ethnicity, region and class. For him, solidarity and progress will be achieved if these differences are addressed.

In *Fools, Bells and the Habit of Eating* (another collection of plays published in 2002) Mda is particularly scathing of South Africa's ruling “Aristocrats of the Revolution”. He attacks officials who gorge on public coffers whilst poverty rises, leaders with little knowledge and wisdom, and hypocritical former apartheid agents. In the introduction

Rob Amato states that Mda is persistent about giving voice to those that the revolution leaves behind:

> Mda believes that government by those who have made a successful revolution is almost inevitably, in the first decade or two, hi-jacked by the smart operators, who ensure that they, and not the people, and especially not the women, are the beneficiaries. This theme is present in virtually all his work. Mda is interested in many of the ideas of Steve Biko, the martyred Black Consciousness leader who wrote what he liked and stressed self-reliance above all things. Along with Mda's theatrical questioning of post-revolutionary governments and grotesque/heroic individual political types (which is his own, not Biko's territory) goes a Biko-like demand, made also by Mda the man himself in interviews, that people should not expect governments to feed and support them. (xi)

Amato's assessment that Mda writes about revolutions spearheaded by ordinary people in line with the Black Consciousness philosophy of revolution from below is apt. His characters rely on community-based support to survive. Mda's critique of grotesque materialism is valid and well considered, though sometimes verging on being overly didactic. He dismisses those in "...the Habit of Eating", and he advocates that those who are serious about development should get on with grass-roots movements.

Mda's entry into novel writing in 1995 continues the themes, content and development models explored in his plays and in his theoretical writing. His novels world realities wherein material wealth is not paramount. He questions the nationalism embedded within anti-colonial and anti-apartheid liberation discourse, a discourse which places strength in unity, and often papers over conflict within the struggle movements. Mda questions the over-determined need for unity focusing on the discourses' capacity to enable citizens to achieve freedom from poverty and oppression whilst divisions and

power struggles exist within. Mda's exile in Lesotho shaped his post-independence, post-apartheid cynicism about achieving real Pan-African freedom within a framework of certain kinds of nationalism.

Mda is uncomfortable with a nationalism that does not pay enough attention to divisions and differences within the body politic. His seemingly prophetic sense of the pitfalls of nationalism are the result of having lived through the euphoria of Africa's independence, as well as the poverty and disappointment caused by high debts to former colonial powers as well as corrupt local leaders who are willing to empower only themselves and those they favour. His reluctance to bask in the mid-nineties glow of rainbow-nationism in South Africa needs to be understood against his life and work before coming back to South Africa.

Mda's novels centre on fighting oppression in all its forms and put forward models of development which enable those outside spaces of power to help themselves rather than accept handouts. His world-view is premised on the notion that Africa can walk away from accepting development aid hand-outs, and rise from its colonial legacy.

Mda's method looks beyond the façade of unity and well-being and extends to how he uses form to articulate his thought provoking ideas and world-view. His plays and novels interrogate various symbols circulating within the South African and African literature canon in order to find new ways to write about change in colonial and post-independence Africa. In pre-1994 resistance and protest literature South African characters tended to

be divided into two groups - blacks and whites. The black characters were mainly: the struggle hero, the sell-out, the shebeen queen, the struggling mother, the loose woman, the country bumpkin, the tsotsi, priests, teachers and students (especially post the '76 student uprising). The white characters, were: baases and madams, policemen, ruthless farmers and kind or hypocritical liberals. Mda borrows freely from the symbols in circulation, but goes further to find new ways to portray his characters in symbolic as well as real terms.

As Helen Moffet states, Mda's women characters are a novel and interesting combination of symbols; the mother and virgin become one (Noria); or the virgin and the prostitute combine. Mda does the same with his male characters whereby he gives new twists to the struggle hero; for instance Viliki in *The Madonna of Excelsior* is both hero and anti-hero, and ends up abandoning completely his political aspirations to become a musician! Mda also writes at length about the psychological and spiritual journeys of his characters, moving them beyond the symbolic into the real in ways that emphasize the processes through which change occurs in their lives.

Mda's novels portray in interesting, creative and poignant ways the historical, political and cultural landscape of change, reflected in displaced gender, ethnic and class identities within Southern Africa. He captures the very long history of suffering in South Africa specifically, which was the last African country to decolonise. He portrays the determined spirit among South Africans to realise the African renaissance and to resolve the conflicts of the past. The South African colonial and apartheid legacy has arguably been the worst

and longest of all the colonial catastrophes; and because of that, the country has learnt many painful and shameful lessons. Mda's novels stand out for being at pains not to sugarcoat or gloss over the scars and conflicts of the past in a rush to embrace rainbow-nationism. His novels pick at old wounds and portray the struggle towards an uncertain future. Mda's narratives go to those inconvenient and difficult spaces where the poor and marginalised attempt to survive and thrive within a South Africa that is "alive with possibility"[7].

I argue that in focusing on especially the position of women within this changing landscape, Mda writes women as strong mothers and creative spirits who lead at a local, largely informal level within their communities. These communities are in the rural areas, the shanty towns and the remote mountain villages of Lesotho. Mda puts black, mainly working class and rural women at the center of his narratives, as symbols and as characters in specific time and space. The women are complex, contradictory and very interesting. They struggle to realise freedom (and in some cases prosperity) for themselves and their communities. They are written as extremely gifted people, who use the strength and power of creativity to ensure that their dreams of escaping unhealthy environments are fulfilled. Success for them is not measured purely in material terms, success comes in finding love, in serving their communities, and in appreciating nature and art. The women's creativity is articulated strongly through the trope of motherhood which is explored in different ways through Mda's oeuvre. The idea of motherhood as real and metaphoric functions to affirm and to question the creative role that women play

[7] I am referring to a popular advertisement on the South African Broadcasting Corporation which positively depicts South Africa as "alive with possibility".

in society; motherhood also has the function of acknowledging the tremendous strain that our history has put on our abilities to mother and father children[8]. Mda does not, however, represent women as solely constructive - they have weaknesses and flaws.

One area where Mda's texts are silent is with regard to women's place in traditionally male spheres of power such as government and big business. This is a particularly prominent silence given his novels' concern with women's empowerment and with the general advancement of society as articulated through the nationalist discourse of African Renaissance. Although Mda questions the continued marginalisation of certain groups within spaces and discourses of power - such as politics and big business - he does not go far enough in engaging with how women are positioned through processes of building state and business infrastructure.

Mda paints woman characters who in one way or another challenge the picture of a society that privileges a few; however, their challenges do not extend to the hubs of power. He alternately represents women as symbols of renaissance (Noria in *Ways of Dying*, and Qukezwa in *The Heart of Redness*) as well as symbols of destruction (Tampololo *in She Plays with the Darkness)*. Through his portrayal of women as real as well as symbolic within a rapidly transforming political and cultural milieu, Mda paints

[8] There is a range of feminist scholarship on the impact and role of motherhood in women's lives. See *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Trebilcot 1983) and *Ties That Bind* (O'Barr, Pope and Wyer 1979) for critiques of the often patriarchal institution of motherhood vs motherhood as a lived experience by women from diverse backgrounds, including lesbian mothers whose experiences disrupt notions of motherhood within a hetorosexist nuclear family paradigm. See also scholarship on the circulation of the mother figure in literature by African women: *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia* (Nasta 1991); *Writing African Women: Gender Popular Culture and Literature in West Africa* (Newell 1997); *This is No Place for a Woman* (Uraizee 2000); and *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity and Resistance in African Literature* (Nnaemeka 1997). Debates center around women writers' engagement with a Western imposed binarism which separate women's roles as mothers from their other roles. In a South African context Desire Lewis and Dorothy Driver(1990) have explored motherhood in the context of the struggle against apartheid, and how women as activists and mothers are represented in literature.

characters who are agents of history. In *Ways of Dying,* he portrays women who inhabit the margins of a democratising South Africa, which, as it hurtles towards independence, is trying to free itself from being "hijacked by the smart operators" (Amato in Mda 2002). The women characters are memorable, and colourfully layered, they have both good and bad qualities. Noria is both virgin and whore; her mother, "That Mountain Woman" is a healer, but she also wields destructive power, especially against Noria's father, Xesibe. Toloki's mother treats Toloki with some kindness, but is more often indifferent. These women characters are unconventional and do not fit the roles of what society would term "good" or submissive women. In showing the women's strengths and weaknesses, Mda pushes the limits of masculinist stereotypes of women in African literature, where women usually fall into the categories of either good or bad[9]. In *Ways of Dying*, the women struggle against racial, class and patriarchal oppression in ways that are real and recognisable. My chapter on *Ways of Dying* will explore the tension between Mda's representation of the women as real and his representation of them as symbols of a nation struggling to find an identity that is empowering for its diverse citizens. Noria is a symbol (primarily) of what is good in the village and in the squatter settlement, she is symbolic of creative energy that renders her community able to transcend debilitating poverty and despair. Through her songs and laughter she journeys towards a way of life that is free. Her journey is not however smooth; at some points she is destructive and spreads misery. Noria's life is full of daily struggles against the patriarchal nationalistic liberation discourse which at various points is worsened by racism, classism and ethnic tensions.

[9] Stratton (1994), Nnaemeka (1997), and Nasta (1992) interrogate how women re-write stereotypical, two-dimensional representations of women in African literature.

Mda's second novel, *She Plays with the Darkness,* explores the theme of violence against women and violence perpetrated by women. The setting (as in *Ways of Dying*) is rural as well as urban, and the narrative unfolds over three decades in post-independence Lesotho. In this text, Mda does not write about South Africa in transition, but still talks to a discourse of African Renaissance, within Lesotho. He interrogates unequal gender roles through the story of two siblings Dikosha and Radisene. *She Plays with the Darkness* continues the theme of women who are not what society would term "good". There is Dikosha whose magical dances and songs uplift and delight. And Tampololo who beats her husband. Mother of the Daughters gives birth to no less than TEN daughters! The book explores Dikosha's periodic silences - her weapon against being denied access to education and advancement simply because she is a girl.

Mda's third novel, *The Heart of Redness,* explores more obviously the legacy of colonialism, and the path to renaissance. In this novel, Mda's portrayal of women seems constrained by the politics of African nationalism and African Renaissance. Mda's portrayal of women as symbolic is most overt. Ideas of womanhood are used to advance ideas about nationhood. Xoliswa Ximiya represents the sterility and backwardness that will result if the nation does not heed the lessons of history, and Qukezwa is a symbol of advancement. One of the solutions that Mda engages in the novel is that of entrepreneurship, which he suggests as a way to escape poverty. He looks specifically at how historically African women (who were excluded from participating in the mainstream economy) developed strong entrepreneurial strategies as a way to survive. Qukezwa

embodies the ideals of the African Renaissance, of progress though making use of African knowledge systems (in global trade, and education). Mda also raises questions about female leadership by framing the fictional story with a historical narrative. The legacy of Nongqawuse's tragic leadership is explored.

The Madonna of Excelsior revisits the toxic cauldron that was apartheid South Africa in the seventies. The novel recreates, through Niki's story, a high profile miscegenation legal case whereby the state deemed sexual relations between black and white people illegal under the Immorality Act. The case, in the small town of Excelsior in the Free State, unravelled a sex ring involving prominent members of the National Party (the now defunct whites-only party then in power) and their black domestic workers. The sex ring was discovered after the women gave birth to mixed race children. The characters in Mda's novel are fictional depictions of the real characters charged in the case. Mda's novel addresses difficult issues around reconciliation and acceptance with sensitivity and courage. Beneath the tragedy of a failed attempt to keep people apart, is the conviction that creativity, hope and forgiveness will heal communities shattered by racial hatred. The novel reveals that the journey is far from simple or easy.

In the final stages of completing this thesis, Mda's next novel, *The Whale Caller* appeared. I have not devoted any significant attention to this novel both because of constraints of time and space and because the themes in this novel diverge from the issues that dominate this project.

CHAPTER 1 - Shifting Identities

Mda's novels will be treated as novels of transition – speaking and creating the unstable language of "the new South Africa". The events that led to the elections of 1994 are pivotal in explaining what is at stake in South Africa's (gendered) identity politics as shared/negotiated and rooted in economic necessity. It is these same ideas that Mda is grappling with. Within the unstable milieu of change Mda envisions the possibility of new ethnic, gender and class identities – ideally where discrimination is eradicated and a true African renaissance can happen. This study's primary method of analysis will be a textual and historical analysis rooted in African feminism. I am interested in Mda's literary expressions of the places where gender (especially motherhood), ethnicity, class and space constitute female identity/ies. I will come back to a discussion of African feminism and how it is specifically used here.

On a textual level, I explore Mda's use of narrative, various themes and characterisation to represent women as symbolic and at the same time 'real' within an African renaissance spearheaded mainly by marginal people outside conventional power structures such as government and big business; and I will look at Mda's use of historical narratives to explore female identity and the position and role of women in a changing South Africa. My approach to theory and methodology is necessarily eclectic and betrays the flux (maybe crisis?) of identy/ies - post-apartheid, post-independence, at the beginning of a new and rapidly globalising "African century" (Mbeki 1998: 204). These shifts dialogue around what it means to be a woman or a man, living in the world, and having available whatever resources at your disposal. We are indeed having to find new ways of living. My multiple interpretive lenses (feminist, literary, sociological, post-structuralist, psychoanalytic, historical, Africanist, Black Consciousness, biographical and humanist) are influenced not only by my commitment to African feminism, as a tool that exposes centuries of patriarchy and heterosexism, but I have also drawn insights from working over a period of eight years as a writer and journalist travelling the towns and rural areas of Africa and witnessing women's myriad experiences at the bleeding edge of poverty and the HIV pandemic. I have also experienced the many strategies that women access through collaboration, creativity and spirituality.

Mda's gendered renaissance needs to be understood within a context of anti-colonial, anti-apartheid nationalist movements. An understanding of Mda's deviation from nationalist discourse (political and literary) is important in reading how he writes an

African renaissance and the resultant shifting, emerging African identities. This study argues that Mda's privileging of otherness is evidenced in his exploration of knowledges not usually appreciated as possessing power - he privileges wisdoms drawn from a spiritual rather than a material reality. In so doing, he challenges strategies aimed at nation building and alleviating poverty that overemphasise materiality without sufficiently tapping into creative, artistic and spiritual resources. Mda's critique is aimed particularly at the current political discourse of African Renaissance and (South) African nationalism(s) whose vision is narrowed by an inability to see the wealth which exists in poor people's lives.

It is necessary to briefly explain what I understand by the terms "African nationalism"; and "African Renaissance", as Mda's imagining of a new African dawn talks directly to these two ideas. I will glean my understanding of the tenuous concept of nationalism in part from Ndabaningi Sithole's (1968) explanation of the term, whereby nationalism is described as a movement through which people express their common subscription to a culture, language and history, these people may also share geographic boundaries. Hence nationalism emphasizes the political, cultural, historical and psychological bonds which a group (or groups) of people have to respect and grow in order to foster feelings of belonging and commonality necessary for a nationalistic movement. Such groups may form a nationalistic movement whose common destiny they attempt to agree upon. Sithole's description of African nationalisms further explains that they are built on sharing historical burdens. He argues that this engenders familiarity based on a "consciousness of kind". This "consciousness of kind" is a shared vision which is formed when a group of

people go through a profound experience together - such as the struggle against colonialism. So in South Africa, although there are many cultures and languages, South Africans would have a "consciousness of kind" because of having the common experience of surviving colonialism and apartheid. Sithole explains that the reach of nationalism can go beyond nations (based on language and/or culture) and country[10]. Sithole's description traces African nationalism to be an integral part of Pan-Africanism:

> Whatever theory we may advance as to the origin of African nationalism it must eventually go back to a set of historical circumstances that gave rise to a phenomenon of 'consciousness of kind' without which African nationalism or Pan-Africanism would have been next to impossible. It is inconceivable how Pan-Africanism, which sired African nationalism, could have so successfully appealed to the West Indians and the Negroes of America as well as to the peoples of Africa living under widely divergent political, economic, cultural, historical, and geographical circumstances unless their common denominator – their only one reconciling, fundamental basis – was this 'consciousness of kind'. This 'consciousness of kind' is not something that was born with these people involved in Pan-Africanism and African nationalism, but it grew in the course of their divergent histories. There were particular historical circumstances which fused to produce this fact of 'consciousness of kind' (67)

Sithole makes the point that Africans within the diaspora have a "consciousness of kind" because of their shared history of slavery and imperialism. Although over time, they developed differing cultures, histories and political realities, this "consciousness of kind" remains. For the purposes of this thesis, I will understand "African nationalism" to be a movement through which people living on the continent and those that identify with an African heritage subscribe to by virtue of having survived racial and imperial oppression. I understand African nationalism to be expressed through the African Renaissance as a

[10] Benedict Anderson's (1984) description of a nation as an imagined community based primarily on shared myths that can transcend geographical and ethnic boundaries talks to the fluid boundaries of the concept of nation. In the wake of more rigidly exclusive, and often dangerous ideas of what constitutes nation, cultural scholar Paul Gilroy (2000) advocates a shedding of all notions of race, culture and nation towards a focus on humanity as one, rather than as belonging to separate ' camps'.

movement which fosters the ideals and values of African unity, and African prosperity free from the legacy of imperial domination. The idea of the African Renaissance has gained currency in post-apartheid South Africa mainly through president Thabo Mbeki's efforts to continue the Pan-African[11] legacy started by the presidents of the first decolonising African states. Mda scholar Johan Jacobs' paper on *She Plays with the Darkness* (2000) critically engages with Mda's narrative experiments, and how they interrogate the African Renaissance as articulated through nationalism. Jacobs puts forward the following useful explanation of the development of the discourse of an African Renaissance in South Africa:

> Although Nelson Mandela has on various occasions since his release from prison invoked the idea of an African Renaissance, the actual discourse of African Renaissance has been the particular province of Thabo Mbeki, now President of South Africa. Especially in his speeches since the country's first democratic elections in 1994, Mbeki has systematically promoted the idea of an African Renaissance and developed it into both a philosophy and a programme for leading the rainbow nation into a future defined in visionary, Africanist terms. In his own words, in a speech in Chantilly, Virginia, in the United States, in April 1997: "It is not given to every generation that it should be present during and participate in the act of creation. I believe that ours is privileged to occupy such historic space...Those who have eyes to see. The African renaissance is upon us" (Mbeki 1998: 200-1)(55)

Jacobs' paper mentions Mbeki's indebtedness to former post-independence presidents in speaking and writing about Renaissance. For example, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Abdul Gamal Nasser of Egypt, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Patrice Lumumba of Congo, Agostinho Neto of Angola, Eduardo Mondlane of Mozambique and Sir Seretse Khama of

[11] See Sithole's useful differentiation between Pan-Africanism and African nationalism (previous page). Sithole states that politically and geographically the two movements have a shared commitment to African unity and progress. He makes the useful distinction that African nationalism comes out of Pan-Africanism, and that African nationalism is concerned with the development of African development and unity post-independence. In this study Mda dialogues with African nationalism as a movement specifically concerned with political and economic affairs of the African state post-independence.

Botswana were among many presidents who articulated a vision of a decolonised, prosperous and interdependent Africa. Their vision led to the formation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963, which became the African Union (AU) in 2002. As mentioned, Mbeki declared his vision in his well known “I am an African speech” (1996) in parliament. In the speech he emphasized the need for all South Africans to see themselves as Africans, and to work together towards a prosperous future, a future which will be part of an African Renaissance. In an interview (Naidoo *Alternation* 1997) Mda pointed out that although African nationalism has done a lot of good for African unity and the struggle against colonialism, the other side of that very positivity is that as a concept nationalism is also responsible for the politics of exclusion. In its ugliest form, nationalism is responsible for genocide. Hence nationalism can be both fruitful and extremely destructive. Mda's work acknowledges the positive struggles that African nationalism has fought and won, yet he is vigilant and scathing about the pitfalls of nationalism in a post-colonial setting, whereby the call for unity leads to a myopic vision of what constitutes the nation. This vision often excludes marginal groups. Mda's exploration of the limits of nationalism within the post-colonial state is expressed through his portrayal of worlds where the African renaissance is realised within peripheral spaces.

Mda shows how peripheral places like the rural areas and squatter communities often do not form part of the vision of a successful nation. The successful post-independence nation is mainly articulated by leaders in government, business and civil society; these leaders reside mainly in cities where big government structures and other structural

resources such as shops and hospitals are to be found. Mda's characters reside in worlds not celebrated by official leaders. They reside in those spaces where the African renaissance does not happen with a capital “R” (i.e. the officially sanctioned Renaissance policies articulated by the state), but is driven by ordinary people (renaissance with a lower case “r”), people outside of central places like government and the cities, people whose narratives are “marked by exceptional radicalism, freedom, and ruthlessness” (Bakhtin: 71).

Since independence in 1994, South Africa has attempted to articulate national unity firstly through galvanising the populace behind the idea of the "rainbow nation", a metaphor aimed at celebrating multi-culturalism. A more recent manifestation of the same idea is that of "unity in diversity". As a rallying call "unity in diversity" appears in such national symbols as the coat of arms, the flag and our eclectic national anthem. In addition to South African unity, the newly democratic 1994 state endeavoured to promote good neighbourliness with other African states[12], and to prove that it really had shirked its former role as a troublesome divisive state. The successive democratic governments celebrated and endorsed African nationalism by being on the forefront of the formation of the African Union.

Writers of fact and fiction have deliberated around how writing South Africa's history of transition contributes towards not only what of that history is remembered, but can also reinforce nationalist sentiments of unity. Authors who can be said to be on the fore-front

[12] See Adam and Moodley

of South African writing like Andre Brink and Njabulo Ndebele have theorised how the act of remembering, whether be it in books or the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), plays an important role in identity formation. Although they recognise the need to fill in the gaps of history, gaps created by British and Afrikaner nationalisms which did not recognise the histories of South Africa's many peoples; they caution that democratic South Africa's need for "unity in diversity" should not flatten out and erase the multiplicity it espouses. Their writings appear in Coetzee and Nuttall's comprehensive text on memory making, *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (1998). Coetzee and Nuttall's introduction summarizes how remembering, writing, and nation building can intersect:

> In her preface to Sol Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa* (1982) South African writer Bessie Head writes of the book as a 'missing link in black South Africans' sense of history'. Some will indeed want to argue that memory is a key way in which a sense of continuity and unity can be restored in South Africa. But in many cases the mnemonic devices to be found in landscapes and built structures have been destroyed, and it is hard to imagine how these links can be made again. It also remains as a challenge to all who are, in some way, involved in memorializing the past, to keep multiple versions of the past alive and not to privilege, as has so often been done, a few master narratives that offer a sense of unity at the cost of ignoring the fracture and dissonance. (Nuttall & Coetzee: 14)

The introduction continues to state that at the time that the book was published (the late-nineties) it was yet unclear which narratives would prevail. The move to adopt "unity in diversity" shows at least a desire by government to move away from the politics of exclusion, which were the hallmarks of apartheid. The focus on excavating indigenous knowledge systems and recognising hidden histories like those of the Khoisan is proof of a more inclusive nationalism. Ndebele states that the TRC[13] was a major site of

[13] For scholarship on the TRC see: Asmal, K. et al. 1997. *Reconciliation through Truth: A Reckoning of Apartheid's Criminal*

excavating hidden, previously unacknowledged histories. For Ndebele, remembering the stories of the TRC is an act whereby South Africans can experience "a shared social consciousness" (20). He describes the opening up of the past as:

> ... an additional confirmation of the movement of our society from repression to expression. Where in the past the state attempted to compel the oppressed to deny the testimony of their own experience, today that experience is one of the essential conditions for the emergence of a new national consciousness. These stories may very well be some of the first steps in the rewriting of South African history on the basis of validated mass experience. (20)

Ndebele goes on to argue that histories which were previously repressed can be used to go beyond national consciousness to imagining a better present and future; because if we can imagine, we can create. Ndebele, Brink, Mda, Nuttall et. al and other writers of South Africa's transition have taken up the challenge to contest exclusionary visions of what constitutes the nation. I will interrogate Mda's engagement with history through Michael Green's notion of *resistant* historic forms (1997). Mda uses what Green terms the *resistant form* to draw attention to the lessons we can learn from history and to draw attention to the constructions of history. In thinking critically about the position of women through history we can then reflect on the various gender constructs.

Reading Mda's gendered renaissance

In employing African feminist theory to read Mda's novels, I will refer mainly to the work of African, black and Third World feminists and womanists whose theories and praxis highlights the multiple burdens carried by women; burdens arising out of the matrices of

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Governance. Cape Town: David Phillip. Also, Motsemme, N. & Ratele, K. 2002. “Losing Life and Remaking a Life at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission”. In Duncan, N. Gqola, P.D. Hofmeyr, M. Shefer, T. Mashige, M and Malunga, F. (Eds) *Discourses on Difference, Discourses on Oppression*. Cape Town: Centre for Advanced Studies in African Society.

racial, class, gender and regional oppression. African feminism has been aptly articulated by Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, who has incisively theorised gender oppression and the intricate web of oppressive systems:

> One might say that the African woman has six mountains on her back: one is oppression from outside (colonialism and neocolonialism), the second is from traditional structures, feudal, slave-based, communal etc., the third is her backwardness; the fourth is man; the fifth is her color, her race; and the sixth is herself" (Molara Ogundipe-Leslie 1994: 28)

Carol Boyce Davies (1986), like Leslie has provided a useful outline of the multiplicity of burdens which African women carry collectively and individually. She outlines the issues with which a progressive African feminism needs to engage. Davies' *Ngambika Studies of Women in African Literature* provides not only a useful definition of African feminism, it is also a critique of aspects of the predominantly male African literature canon. Davies moves from the accepted premise that "Theoretical African feminism understands the interconnectedness of race, class and sex oppression" (Davies 1986: 11), and crucially acknowledges and calls for unity with "white men and women, and definitely Black men who seek to overturn the oppressive structures of their societies" (Davies 1986: 11). The need for unity across struggles is an important rallying point for many feminists concerned with the eradication of inequality across all spheres of life. Davies maps the following useful framework within which to understand the tenets of African feminism:

> A genuine African feminism can therefore be summarized as follows. Firstly, it recognizes a common struggle with African men for the removal of the yokes of foreign domination and European/American exploitation. It is not antagonistic to African men but it challenges them to be aware of certain salient aspects of women's subjugation which differ from the generalized oppression of all African peoples.

> Secondly, an African feminist consciousness recognizes that certain inequities and limitations existed/exist in traditional societies and that colonialism reinforced them and introduced others. As such, it acknowledges its affinities with international feminism, but delineates a specific African feminism with certain specific needs and goals arising out of the concrete realities of women's lives in African societies.
>
> Thirdly, it recognizes that African societies are ancient societies, so logically, African women must have addressed the problems of women's position in society historically...
>
> Fourthly, African feminism examines African societies for institutions which are of value to women and rejects those which work to their detriment and does not simply import Western women's agendas. Thus, it respects African woman's status as mother but questions obligatory motherhood and the traditional favouring of sons. It sees utility in the positive aspects of the extended family and polygamy with respect to child care and sharing of household responsibility...
>
> Fifthly, it respects African woman's self-reliance and the penchant to cooperative work and social organization (networking) and the fact that African women are seldom financially dependent but instead accept income-generating work as a fact of life.
>
> Sixthly, an African feminist approach has to look objectively at women's situation in societies which have undergone a war of national liberation and socialist reconstruction...
>
> Finally, African feminism looks at traditional and contemporary avenues of choice for women...
>
> The obvious connection between African and Western feminism is that both identify gender-specific issues and recognise woman's position internationally as one of second class status and "otherness" and seek to correct that. (Davies 1986: 8-10)

Davies' summary highlights the complexity of the variables at play when women are engaged in struggles through and after long periods of imperial domination. Although understood to be generally belonging within the first wave of African feminism, which was mainly talking back to Western feminism's reluctance to confront the race, class, region nexus - the work of scholars like Leslie and Davies is still relevant in its visionary insistence on choice, agency, historicity and unity in difference - issues which, I believe, are still pertinent to the current third wave of feminist scholarship which focuses on how public politics affect intimate personal spaces and vice versa. Interconnections between

first, second (concern with women's entry into public spaces like politics etc.) and the third wave African feminism are evident in how some of the very reactionary systems in our society are still making women suffer. This study recognises that the global backlash against human rights and women's rights specifically necessitates a vigilant approach to guarding and fighting for women's rights in all spheres. We cannot assume that basic human rights like the right to vote, education and other resources have irrevocably been won. Our eyes must remain peeled for any reversal of gains made.

The recent Beijing Plus review expresses consensus that "A combination of global trends - the predominance of the neo-liberal economic framework growing militarization, and rising fundamentalism - have created an environment that is increasingly hostile to the advancement of women's human rights" (Moolman 2005: 4). In a post-independence setting, a commitment to "women's human rights" needs to address the legacy of racism, classism, and regionalism which weighs on African and other Third World women.

Marxist feminist Gayatri Spivak is well known for guardedly insisting on confronting and embracing difference and specificity within the feminist movement. Her agenda is useful in its deployment of post-structural self-consciousness when asserting the need to constantly resist and re-negotiate multiple burdens:

> Today I would see my work as the developing of a reading method that is sensitive to gender, race and class. The earlier remarks would apply indirectly to the development of class-sensitive and directly to the development of gender sensitive readings. (*Feminism and Critical Theory* 1996: 59)
> ....

> It is also the deconstructive view that keeps me resisting an essentialist freezing of the concepts of gender, race and class. Look rather at the repeated agenda of the situational production of those concepts and our complicity in such a production. This aspect of deconstruction will not allow the establishment of a hegemonic “global theory” of feminism. (62)

Chandra Mohanty has also written about the need to focus on the processes through which Third World women's identities are constituted, and has resisted an easy adoption of the label "feminist":

> …western feminist discourse, by assuming women as a coherent, already constituted group which is placed in kinship, legal and other structures, defines third world women as subjects outside of social relations, instead of looking at the way women are constituted as women through these legal, economic, religious and familial structures, women are treated as a phenomenon to be judged by western standards. It is here that ethnocentric universality comes into play. When these structures are defined as ‘underdeveloped’, or ‘developing’ and women are placed within these structures, an implicit image of the ‘average third-world woman’ category is produced. (1984: 80)

Mohanty's concern is that feminist researchers and scholars should take care not to reproduce the same oppressive binarisms that support patriarchy. If as researchers we simply go in search of "oppressed third world women", we run the risk of simply naming the oppression, without looking at specific instances of when and how certain structures operate, leading to blind spots in recognising possibilities and even strategies of resistance and transcendence by individuals and groups.

In South Africa, Pumla Dineo Gqola, has theorised about the need for feminists to name themselves, and embrace diversity. She states that: "There is no shortage of academic writing by Blackwomen which addresses itself to the manner in which race and difference complicate inter-racial sisterhood. This corpus is as varied in its approaches and tones

as it is in the labels these Blackwomen adorn" (Gqola 2001: 13). However, Gqola warns that we should not get so caught up in labels that we miss each other along the way. She concludes that the difference between labels “lies more in the name than in what each propagates”. Her approach to African feminism is to analyse the creative work of African women and women of African descent living elsewhere to see how their texts theorise African women's experiences. She articulates her theoretical approach as follows:

> Reciprocity marks the connection between experience and theory, so that representations in creative texts are seen as enriching the variety of possibilities for Blackwomen's theories in Africa. This is an active deviation from the binary opposition which sees theory and praxis posited against each other, engaged in an exercise of polarity. Instead of filling a position between these two poles... Blackwomen redefine the terrain altogether so that theory is constructed in sites which are traditionally, under white supremacist capitalist patriarchal logic, assumed to be outside the terrain of knowledge-making. Similarly, activism is able to find expression in academe. (Gqola 2001: 14)

Gqola's refusal to separate theory and creative work is useful in excavating from creative texts African feminisms which theorise a range of experiences - from the impact of slavery on how African women view themselves; to how spirituality and "keeping faith"[14] has played a big role in the survival and work of African women; and how specific cultural practices have aided or impeded women's growth especially when women's lives weave together the multiple roles of "mother", "professional", "domestic worker", "artist" and so on. This move away from compartmentalising the creative and the theoretical/academic work of African feminists echoes a position explored by Isabel Hofmeyr earlier (1992) when she wrote about the need for scholars to read African women's cultural production

[14] Cornel West (1994) and bell hooks (1991) have theorized on the importance of spirituality and religion in political struggle; that working class people who have not much else “ keep faith” to survive and even thrive.

for clues as to the kind of theoretical frameworks best suited to its study. Hofmeyr's paper critiqued the ease with which labels are assigned without rigorous engagement with what black women's literatures express and the context within which it is produced:

> Much time is then spent debating whether this "Western" theory can be imposed on African societies. Concomitantly little time is spent trying to understand the cultural and intellectual traditions of African societies and their internal workings. An instructive parallel in this regard is to be found in revisionist historical scholarship in South Africa, which over the last two decades has proved to be extremely productive. One reason for this has been an Africanist legacy that has directed attention to the internal workings of African societies as a significant factor in appropriating and changing "Western" forms whilst simultaneously influencing the direction of historical change. If feminist literary studies is to follow suit then it is similarly to the internal structures of indigenous societies that we must look, rather than focusing endlessly on the hopelessly blunt contrast of "Western" and "African" traditions. (Hofmeyr 1992: 98-99)

Hofmeyr's call refers specifically to the performance of oral poetry, and her extensive study titled *We Spend Our Lives as a Tale that is Told* (1993) documents how oral narratives provided women with a "potentially powerful cultural resource from which status could be wrung" (Hofmeyr 1993: 35). Her findings highlight the importance of space and time in theorising African feminism. The *dinonwane* art form (explored in her study) reveals that at certain moments, certain spaces were empowering for rural black women to inhabit; thus destabilising the stereotype of the perpetual victim-hood of rural women, walking long distances with the inevitable bundle of wood on their heads. Her study shows that searching for theoretical expressions of an African feminist, black feminist, Third World feminist and womanist consciousness within creative work can yield results as informative and diverse as the creative expressions from which they emerge.

Gqola and Hofmeyr's engagement with African women's creativity as a means of excavating African feminist theory informs my use of Sindiwe Magona's *To My Children's Children* (1990) and *Mother to Mother* (1998) as texts which theorise motherhood in ways which are empowering as well as limiting. The theoretical and rich historical and cultural store embedded in these auto/biographies, are a key lens through which to read Mda's writing of African women. This study will look further into how motherhood, culture, history, nationalism, African renaissance, spirituality and creativity constitute the identities of the women that Mda writes about.

As this study's title suggests, African feminist theories around constructions of motherhood will illuminate how women's private and public roles are mediated by culturally understood formulations of what it means to be a mother. Motherhood is one role that has been important in how South African women have resisted and negotiated colonialism, and apartheid; and in how they continue to struggle against current inequities (Gaidzanwa 1992; Lewis 1992; Meintjies 2003). Feminist Gender commissioner, Sheila Meintjes describes the construction of activist women's roles as follows:

> One of the challenges that South Africans and women in particular face is to turn away from our traditional views that women have no place in the public sphere, or that when they are there, they are there as “mothers”. Appealing to and constructing the identity of women through their motherhood does two things. It mobilises women for a broader political struggle, as we saw in our own struggle. But it also puts women in a traditionally acceptable role... Women's citizenship becomes structured around their identity as home-makers, mothers and sexual beings. (Meintjes 2003: 7)

Meintjes' argument that women need to occupy more diverse speaking positions outside of their roles as mothers tallies with Desire Lewis' critique of motherhood as a site of resistance. Lewis identifies the place where nationalist and colonialist discourses coincide in expressing the notion that African womanhood is mainly corporeal. She states that the discourses represent:

> ...skewed perceptions of women's sexuality both through male-centred nationalism (which deifies African motherhood as social and personal duty) and through racist and colonialist views that African women's 'agency' revolves solely around their social and biological mothering. (Lewis 2005: 22)

Lewis has written extensively about the trope of the idealised mother in African literature, detailing how women in the struggle fought for the rights of their children to a free and just society. In her critique of Ellen Kuzwayo's autobiography, *Call Me Woman*, Lewis (1992) addresses the ways in which “Mothering is represented as a pivotal and extensively supportive activity which coordinates acquisitions of self in a patriarchal system influenced by white-centred myths and hierarchical oppositions" (37). Lewis states: “the image of the strong black woman in the autobiography is subsumed by the gender ideology of its subtext, a set of restrictive conventions about motherhood that shapes Kuzwayo's experience and her interpretation of that experience” (40). Kuzwayo appreciates herself as a "good" strong black mother, as she has risen to the challenge of protecting children against a vicious state. She recognises the gender/race nexus as pivotal to her oppression when she writes: "As I shall stress time and time again in this book, the majority of black women for too long have been discriminated against as women and as blacks". However, as Lewis states, Kuzwayo's text does privilege the

category of "mother" over that of "woman" (1992: 32). Her self-hood, outside of motherhood is secondary. First and foremost, she is a mother in the struggle against apartheid. This point is especially clear in chapter three when Kuzwayo narrates women's involvement in the 1976 uprisings. She states that many of the women activists involved were concerned for the safety and well being of their children:

> Hundreds of black mothers can now tell their tales of woe, each with unique emphasis. Yet in the end, in every one's story, there will be an underlying bitterness and fury at the injustice, expressing their emotional torture. In some cases, this feeling leads to a sense of total helplessness. Amazingly, though some mothers have emerged as heroines, championing the course of the national struggle for liberation of their people - even if this means the sacrifice of their own well-being and freedom, and that of their children and families too. (Kuzwayo 1985: 44)

Lewis' paper also explores the trope of motherhood in three other texts - Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Agostinho Neto's poem *Farewell at the Moment of Parting*. Her reading of how these texts naturalise and exult motherhood is pertinent as a frame whereby "motherhood is not a discrete facet of women's experience, but regulates social and psychological processes deriving from the inter-penetration of race and gender" (Lewis 1992: 36). I will return to Lewis' points in chapter two.

Florence Stratton is another key African feminist who has questioned the masculinist African literature tradition. Her study *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender (*1994) critiques the manichean aesthetics within a male-centric African literature canon. Stratton posits that whilst deconstructing the racial stereotyping inherent in many

colonial texts early in the twentieth century, African literature neglected to unpack the binary sexual allegories embedded within post-colonial literature. Her argument is emphatic that literature needs to substantially engage with the politics of gender:

> Gender is a submerged category in colonial discourse, a status it has maintained until recently in African men's literature. While African men writers challenge the racial codes of colonial discourse and attempt to subvert them, they adopt certain aspects of the gender coding of their supposed adversaries in their representation of African women. (Stratton 1994: 171)

Stratton's text details the uses of womanhood and motherhood in African literature. She looks at how firstly motherhood circulates as a symbol of ideal womanhood, and secondly as representative of the nurturing African continent. She maps the tendency by male writers to depict African women as symbolic of the state and future of the post-independence nation. Women are made to embody Africa's heritage (46). She explores how the trope has been used within the "first wave" of African literature which was responding to the weight of colonialism. Represented within the "first wave" literature are the anti-colonial Negritude poems of Leopold Senghor, and the novels of Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiongo and Sembene Ousmane. Stratton explains that "the trope functions both formally and thematically to valorise African culture" (40). It also functions to refute colonial representations of Africa. The use of the mother Africa trope operates within a binary system which separates earth mothers and career women, virgins and whores. The trope of motherhood ultimately does not destabilise colonial formations; however, it does produce a rewriting of Africa as positive, thus an image of Africa as barbaric and untrustworthy is substituted for mother "Africa as warm and sensuous, fruitful and nurturing" (40).

Stratton's approach is similar to Lewis' in that she analyses texts whose critique of race, class and to some extent gender domination is in the main progressive; she scrutinises the ways in which they become entrapped by the discourses they disavow:

> The burden of my reading of the African male literary tradition has been to reveal the strategies of containment to which men writers have resorted in their attempt to legitimate patriarchal ideology. These include the embodiment of Africa in the figure of a woman, one of the most enabling tropes of 'post-colonial' male domination as well as of colonialism; the portrayal of women as passive and voiceless, images that serve to rationalize and therefore to perpetuate inequality between the sexes; and the romanticization and idealization of motherhood, a means of masking women's surbodination in society. (172)

In praising and valorising motherhood, writers (male and female) do in certain instances further entrench patriarchal ideology. These writers posit motherhood as a role natural and most important for women. Women are attributed with instinctive powers of being able to nurture humanity; and because women's energies and time are consumed by the work of mothering, they have little time to occupy themselves with work that may earn them money, or contribute to changing the power roles in society. Or if they become mothers too early in their lives, opportunities to advance through acquiring an education become limited because their time and resources are used to mother their children. Within African literature, women's nurturing fits conveniently into a manichean structure whereby it is the foil for men's fathering roles which include working for financial gain in predominantly public spaces[15]. Continuing along the same reasoning, women are most able to inhabit marginal spaces such as the rural areas, where (as the guardians of

[15] A growing area of study is on how fatherhood and masculinities impact on gender equity. See the HSRC's *Baba: Men and Fatherhood* in South Africa (2006).

culture and lore) they can peacefully and joyfully pass vital indigenous knowledge on to coming generations. Stratton explains the division as follows:

> They [male African writers] also encompass the assignment of different roles in the anti-colonial struggle to men and women - allocating to the former the task of mending the breach in the historical continuum and to the latter of embodying African cultural values; the assumption of the primacy of the male subject; the objectification of women; their identification with tradition and with biological roles; the representation of female sexuality as dangerous and destructive; and the resolution of narrative tension with the theme of redemption through repatriation to the village. (Stratton 1994: 172)

The quote above in part defines the tension between modernity and tradition that drives the plot of *The Heart of Redness*. As mentioned, the modernised Xoliswa Ximiya stands for Western type education and modernity, and wants to live in the capital, Pretoria. Whilst Qukezwa, is at home in the rural Qholorha-by-Sea. Qukezwa knows the hills, valleys and plant life of the region well. She is steeped in the culture and history of her forebears, and most importantly, she bears a son, Heitsi.

Like in *The Heart of Redness*, Mda's novels all engage culture as an important resource in the battle between modernity and tradition. His novels make numerous inter-textual references to African cultural knowledge. Mda archives African songs, dance, paintings, novels and various other African media. Although Mda's revisionist project is necessary and very positive, he does not grapple rigorously enough with the thorny issues around the gendered aspect of artistic cultural expressions. He effectively looks at how culture is a powerful resource for Africans who especially have been brutalised by racial and class oppression; however Mda does not adequately explore how that same potent resource contains very problematic gender stereotyping and oppression.

Patricia McFadden's paper titled "Cultural Practices as Gendered Exclusion" (2001) is extremely useful in reading the silences in Mda's novels around how culture, as it is expressed in art and ritual, can operate to exclude women from the nation. My concern around Mda's silence stems from bell hooks' assertion that "...the function of art is to do more than tell it like it is - it's to imagine what is *possible*" (hooks 1994: 237). McFadden's critique of gendered cultural expressions investigates "notions of culture in relation to the struggles by women of colour for inclusion into the conceptual and territorial space of Africa and Europe respectively" (59.) McFadden states her radical critique as follows:

> I will be arguing that culture is best understood as a heavily contested source of identity (in gendered and ethnic terms) and power (in a political and material sense), which is located in the historical struggles against colonialism and racism on the African continent, and in the more recent struggles by women for rights of inclusion into that space called 'the nation', as it is emerging in the countries of South Africa in particular. (McFadden 2001: 59)

McFadden is rightly not convinced that the majority of African women are fully able to exercise choices about how to live. She states that there are still a lot of cultural practices, entrenched in rituals and sanctioned by customary laws, which restrict women's freedoms. McFadden identifies herself as an African feminist, and states that it is her commitment to feminist ideals that makes her impatient with the insistence by many colleagues on the continent and in the diaspora on being cognisant of cultural specificity as we agitate for equal rights. She feels that a focus on culture clouds issues, and provides an excuse for African women to be denied fundamental human rights:

> From where I am positioned, I cannot afford the intellectual luxury of pretending that I live in an African society without gendered relationships and structures that are directly linked to systems of power, control and violation. Nor can I imagine that the notion of gender could be anything but a product of the difficult, life-taking but often life changing struggles of women across the world. (McFadden 2001: 60)

McFadden's intervention is important because research on culture and how it can dis-empower women is a difficult subject to confront. This is because culture can and has been a useful resource of strength and subversion for many women. Relevant as McFadden's analysis is in reading Mda's silence around dis-empowering cultural processes, it is also necessary to balance her views with the positive aspects of artistic and cultural expression as depicted in the novels under study.

I have had informal conversations with friend and colleague Nthabiseng Motsemme about the role of culture and spirituality in enhancing as well as complicating African women's lives. Motsemme has done extensive fieldwork in South Africa on the cultural and spiritual strategies that black women have used to live through violence. Her incisive article “'The Mute Always Speak': On Women's Silences at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission” - which I have used in understanding silence in *She Plays with the Darkness* and the silence around community violence in *Ways of Dying* - theorises silence, solitude and spirituality as part of the cultural capital that black women have been able to draw from. Motsemme says that "... pain, suffering, humiliation and joy do not necessarily only find their expression through verbal language, but a number of other representations such as song, dance and, as I argue, even via silence" (Motsemme 2004: 916). She theorises that various resources and different types of knowledge need

not be in conflict, they can in fact be part of a means for women to radically reconfigure their worlds. She says that: "In expanding our conceptual tools to understand the workings of silences, I show how this also reveals the invisible but agentic work of the imagination to reconfigure our social worlds" (Motsemme 2004: 910). Motsemme's findings consider ways in which we need to link our mainly Western knowledge with the cultural and spiritual resources that we know African women have used to survive and change hostile environments. Mmatsilo Motsei's autobiography, *Hearing Visions, Seeing Voices* (2004) refers to similar strategies as those which Motsemme identifies as incorporating the power of spirituality. Motsei identifies the agency embedded in rural women's understandings of silence and other rich strategies of resistance and transcendence which include song and dance. She reflects that:

> In my work with rural women I have witnessed subtle but powerful ways of resistance and independent thinking related to matters of family reconstruction and gender relations. The lives of rural women, rather than being miserable and hopeless, are pregnant with immense strength, wit and courage in confronting oppression in both public and private sphere[s]. Some of the feminist views I had adopted from foreign practice and literature have been radically challenged in my work with rural women on issues of gender, sexuality, and HIV. (Motsei 2004: 162)

Motsei's attitude towards changing, unequal and oppressive power relations is rooted in the concept of ubuntu/botho which emphasizes inter-dependence and unity across worlds and cultures. She calls for a courageous reckoning of spirituality as a resource which can help visualise and realise more humane environments:

> The world is crying out for a leadership that is founded on spiritual values of sharing, compassion, interdependence and mutual respect. In this as in other life matters that involve humanity and human relationships, Africa is well

> positioned to lead the way[16]. I am grateful to be part of a nation that is embarking on a search for sacred spiritual spaces and reclaiming ancient transformative and liberatory tools used by our elders over decades and centuries. (Motsei 2004:164)

My understanding of the spiritual and cultural resources that Motsemme, Motsei and Mda write about is enriched by personal experiences of dance, creative writing and music as potentially life changing. I have also been immensely enriched by living with and learning from my grandmother, Elizabeth MaMhlongo Mangwane, who has been a traditional healer for the past fifty years. Her understanding of living and healing is embedded within an African world view which emphasizes honouring and respecting humanity and all that has been created. Respecting humanity necessitates an eradication of oppression.

Feminist theorists bell hooks and Pregs Govender write about the importance of an integrated approach to ending domination, they put forward a politics centred on love and respect for humanity and the planet. For them the urgency of eradicating inequality is an act of compassion which we all, for our mutual survival, cannot afford to ignore - this echoes the philosophy of botho/ubuntu that *motho ke motho ka bathu* [a person is a person because of other people]. hooks' emphasis on resisting and transforming a world premised on domination, is explained astutely in her theories about "love as the practice of freedom" (1994). She describes love not only as a sentimental or romantic feeling, she says that the presence of love and compassion is necessary if we are to move beyond divisions of self and "the other" which make it possible to depersonalise people and oppress them. hooks posits that we all "yearn" for peace and justice, and may try

[16] Motsei's work is influenced by Biko's writings on the need to personally and collectively adopt a politics of humaneness and compassion, even when confronted with violence and brutality.

different ways to achieve what the civil rights leader Martin Luther King referred to as the "beloved community" (hooks 1994: 217). The "beloved community" puts emphasis on love for community. hooks defines the attainment of such a community through a politics rooted not only in material reality, but also in recognising the spiritual reality of love and compassion:

> To have a non-dominating context, one has to have a lived practice of interaction. And this practice has to be conscious, rather than some sentimental notion that "you and I were born into the world with the 'will to do good towards one another'". In reality, this non-exploitative way to be with one another has to be practised; resistance to the possibility of domination has to be learned. This also means that one has to cultivate the capacity to wait. I think about a culture of domination as being very tied to notions of efficiency - everything running smoothly. (hooks 1994: 241)

hooks' and Govender's politics require an honest and courageous reckoning that literary studies (like other facets of life in general) makes a difference to the way the world is configured, and as such, is contested, and highly unstable terrain. hooks explains that whether one chooses to act or not act against inequality can aid or halt the process of attaining a more just society. Engagement in ending domination is a process that is unstable and which constantly demands that we question and adjust our strategies as we confront racial, class and gender oppression. She articulates the multiplicity and self-reflective nature of her world-view and politics as follows:

> In this interview, I do not speak out in rage. The passion in my voice emerges from the playful tension between the multiple, diverse, and sometimes contradictory locations I inhabit. There is no unitary representation to be formed here, no fixed sense of what it is to be black, female, from a working-class southern background. For years, I was afraid to engage in radical political thought or movement. I feared it would close down creativity, confine me in an unchanging standpoint. Moving past this fear and embracing struggles to end

> domination, I find myself constantly at odds with workers for freedom who invest in the notion of a unitary self - a fixed identity. I continually resist surrendering complexity to be accepted in groups where subjectivity is flattened out in the interest of harmony or a unitary political vision. Turned off by culture vultures who want me to talk "race only", "gender only", who want to confine and limit the scope of my voice, I am turned on by subjectivity that is formed in the embrace of all the quirky conflicting dimensions of our reality. I am turned on by identity that resists repression and closure. (hooks 1994: 208)

hooks' open-minded approach allows a reflexive reading of Mda's work through a feminist lens that is cognisant of women's multiple and intricate burdens in a post-independence setting. Such a reading can acknowledge Mda's privileging of women's agency in one instance, and its simultaneous questioning of the limits of that agency. Mda confronts the resilience, despair, hope and beauty of the human spirit through violent and hopeless times. Through his journey into often inconvenient terrain, he questions the extent to which a violated people are able to heal; he refuses the easy answers of reconciliation politics and highlights the damage done to the psyche and spirit through years of bludgeoning under colonialism, apartheid and ruthless capitalist systems. His resistance to a rose-tinted unguarded optimism explains his questions about those in society who are poor and marginalised. He asks what it means to have freedom if one does not have a roof over one's head, and if one suffers from hunger and disease. Mda is by no means ignorant of the strides made from colonial to post-independence times. He has for many years been an active and critical agent of numerous poverty alleviation and development projects[17].

[17] Among his poverty alleviation projects are a bee-keeping co-op in the Eastern Cape, and a developmental writing project at the Southern African Multimedia Aids Trust.

Through his novels, Mda guardedly tracks and celebrates the end of legislated poverty and discrimination. This optimistic strain is corroborated by research attesting to the decrease of the number of poor and marginalised since the fall of apartheid. The 2005 HSRC State of the Nation report details the progress made by government during the past ten years. The report commends the emphasis on lowering the impact of unemployment as follows:

> ...the government is making marked progress towards its various targets. Ninety percent of those deemed eligible are now receiving social grants; over ten million people have gained access to potable water; and over two million housing subsidies have been allocated to the poor since 1994. Likewise, whereas 4.1 million out of 11.2 million households lived on an income of R9 600 or less per year in 2001, by 2004 this figure had decreased to 3.6 million households. (Southall 2005: xviii)

In view of the material disparities that still exist, progress made is modest. However, the situation must be viewed in context if critiques are to be balanced and resist the temptation to either throw in the towel, or be in a state of paralysed alarm. Taking into account that the post-independence condition is one where colonial infrastructure, which was built to make life easy for a small percentage of the citizenry, now has to operate within a democratic framework and cater for all citizens, gives a clearer perspective. This reality means that change for those who were poor in the past is very slow and painful. Mda's vigilant stance recognises this post-colonial backlog, but insists on urgency in finding solutions. Finding positive solutions also rests on a strict lack of tolerance for those who wish to take advantage of conditions of transition and uncertainty to enrich themselves and to continue marginalising those outside of spheres of power.

The vigilance around human rights which informs Mda's work lends its weight to other sociological and civil discourses concerned with a firmer transition towards the consolidation of democracy in South Africa as a lived experience, rather than a desire articulated in the Constitution. This concern extends to Africa and the World. Gender equity is integral to entrenching human rights and eradicating the scourge of large sectors of society falling through the cracks. The prevalence of extreme gender violence, poverty and wars - locally and globally - tells us that something is seriously wrong with the world we live in. Equity and justice cannot thrive in such a brutal environment. The fact that globally most adults have the vote is not satisfying whilst many people live with poverty, violence and disease. In the main, the world's poor and vulnerable are women and children from the Third World; this makes feminist theory and praxis for social change, pertinent.

In Africa the feminist movement has historically been subsumed within struggles against colonial and apartheid rule. When northern and central Africa decolonised, gender struggles were in the main sidelined. Nationalist governments did not put the empowerment of women high on their agenda, focusing rather on eradicating racial and class oppression. South African feminists gained key insights from being the last to decolonise, they realised that gender equity did not necessarily follow nationalist struggles, the removal of sexism had to be actively and aggressively campaigned for before, during and after the transition to democracy. Shireen Hassim’s paper, *Negotiating Spaces: Women in South Africa’s Transition to Democracy*, delivered at the Wits

Interdisciplinary Research Seminar (2002) outlines how feminists in a changing South Africa insisted on being part of the national agenda:

> The 'success story' of the South African women's movement in the transition to democracy is by now a familiar one to feminist scholars and activists. Unlike many other African countries, the transition to democracy after nationalist struggles did not lead to the marginalisation of women but rather to the insertion of gender equality concerns into the heart of democratic debates. Women's political participation was extended into the realm of representative government and a range of institutions were created to represent and defend women's interests in policy-making. In addition, women's activism ensured that gender equality was protected in the constitution. Unlike the era of national liberation movement politics, during the transition women organized as women and entered the democratic era with new agendas for women. (Hassim 2002)

Although South African women made major strides in demanding thirty percent representation in parliament, and putting in place legislation that protects women from a second class existence, the effects of their hard work is yet to filter through to all women. Further, alliances formed by women during the early years of transition are no longer as strong because many were absorbed into civil service and parted ways to consolidate rank with their individual parties (Hassim 2002 & 2003; Mtintso 2003)[18]. South African feminists continue to lobby for bridging the gap between the high representation of women in government, and women in civil society. Hassim has analysed the existing gulf as follows:

> ...there has been little research into the extent to which increased representation has translated into real gains in reducing gender inequalities. To be sure, the task is a major one: the democratic government took the helm of a country in which the gap between rich and poor is one of the highest in the world. Apartheid left a legacy of poverty that is not only racialized but also gendered. It is estimated that in 1997, 49 percent of women-headed households

[18] Currently, female representation in parliament stands at about 30 percent and in the private sector, women hold about 8 percent of directorships (see Gouws, A. in State of the Nation South Africa 2005 – 2006, HSRC)

> were poor, while 26 percent were classified 'ultra-poor' (the lowest 20 percent of the population)...Changing these inequities in social and economic power will require more than political representation; it also requires that those elected into power will pursue redistributional policies. (2003: 506 – 507)

Hassim's analysis of the limits of feminism and gender activism in South Africa raises key questions regarding citizens and their access to necessary state and private sector resources. These questions highlight a silence in Mda's novels, regarding the role and responsibility of the state and big business towards the effective redressing of economic power. On one level, Mda's privileging of ordinary people's survival strategies opens up a space for agency wherein “individuals and groups...widen the range of possible choices they entertain in the process of calculating risks attached to social acts that are directed at transformation of existing power relationships” (Ramphele 1993: 108). However, Mda does not balance this with imagining the responsibilities of the state and big business to citizens, especially those most in need such as women, children and the working and rural classes. Ramphele's incisive study on the politics of space within the impoverished environment of hostels (*A Bed Called Home*) reveals that there needs to be a balance between societal structures (which include government structures, non-governmental organisations and big business) as enablers of change, as well as individual responsibility in taking advantage of opportunities for advancement:

> My involvement in the hostels was part of an empowerment process. The focus of empowerment was on identifying, encouraging and supporting those survival strategies of hostel dwellers which would most probably lead to transformation of social relations at both the micro and macro levels. My involvement was also premised on the fact that hostel dwellers cannot be expected to lift themselves up by their own metaphoric bootstraps, because many of them have none. In my role as a facilitator I have advocated, and continue to advocate on their

> behalf, that society meets its obligation to them and enables them to gain access to resources so long denied them. It remains their responsibility, however, to develop themselves...(133)

Ramphele's emphasis on synthesis between official and individual responsibilities in creating a model for positive societal transformation is useful in reading Mda's community based and individual strategies of transcendence. I argue that careful consideration (and imagining) of the processes of leadership and governance is important for balancing skewed economic and social scales. Hence, seriously considering the roles of women leaders and women's participation in policy formation is key in dismantling patriarchal, capitalist structures. Mda begins to address this concern in *The Madonna of Excelsior*, when he writes Popi entering the local council; however, as I will discuss in chapter five, his attempt does not go far in imagining women effectively inhabiting official spaces of power.

Mda's literary treatise on righting past and current power imbalances makes for fascinating study; his multi-voiced, self-reflexive and deeply engaging narratives in many ways pre-empt the questions raised in this study. Perhaps, the gaps and silences in the narratives demand a reckoning with the gulf between the people in power, and ordinary citizens?

The African feminist lenses detailed above provide useful tools in understanding and critiquing gendered oppression in its complexity. Race, class, region, motherhood, culture, spirituality, and self are categories that are explored in how African, mainly black

women's subjectivities are constituted. These categories include not only the burdens that women carry, they are also categories through which women can find the means to leading resourceful, deeply meaningful and productive lives.

"Gender on the Agenda"

Florence Stratton's interrogation of African nationalist texts masculinist agenda marks an important shift in focus from thematic pre-occupations with class and race, to more nuanced critiques of gender oppression. As stated Mda's novels are on the forefront of the move towards a more rigorous exploration of gender equity. Stratton's analysis questions the masculinist history of African literature which has often only gestured superficially towards an engagement with gender politics. Stratton cites the marginality of women writers as the most obvious indicator of African nationalism and the African literature canon's initial silence on gender. Her study writes back to Abdul JanMohamed's *Manichean Aesthetics* (1983), a work which challenges the way colonising nations sought to fix Africa in perpetual victim-hood. JanMohamed's critique highlights the nuances of literature by Achebe, Soyinka and others who gave life to the cardboard cut-outs of who Africans were supposed to be in the Western imagination.

Stratton criticises JanMohamed and the writers in his study for not paying attention to women writers and "where the rain began to beat"[19] African women. She points to the history of African writing and how it mirrors both colonialism and anti-colonial nationalist struggles' universalising of the male subject. In the colonial and post-independence

[19] A phrase used by Achebe to explain the need for Africans to know the history of their oppression, so they can better change that tragic legacy.

social schema, black women disappear under multiple systems of domination. Stratton asserts that gender as an analytical lens has always been a priority for women because they suffered oppression and constraints in many aspects of their lives:

> As a result of the assimilation of gender into other categories, the African/post-colonial subject (including the writing subject) is constructed as male in these models. For as feminist scholars in various fields have argued, colonialism is not neutral as to gender. Rather it is a patriarchal order, sexist as well as racist in its ideology and practices. What these studies indicate is that women's position relative to men deteriorated under colonialism. They also show that while pre-colonial women had more freedom than their colonised descendants, male domination was nonetheless an integral part of the societies they lived in. Under colonialism, then, African women were subject to interlocking forms of oppression: to the racism of colonialism and to indigenous and foreign structures of male domination. (7)

Hence the added burden of sexism gave African women the impetus to recognise and resist both European and African nationalism's attempts to mask gender based inequities. Stratton argues that African women's writing has expressed resistance against the nationalist impulse to forge unity at the expense of rigorously eradicating all forms of discrimination. Her analysis of texts by Grace Ogot, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and Mariama Ba renders visible work that developed an African feminist tradition and consciousness in how it critiqued restrictions on women's lives. Stratton explains that both male and female writers experienced and wrote against racism and colonialism. However, women writers, whilst continuing anti-racist struggles, had to insist on gender becoming recognised as an oppressive and deeply problematic arena. She articulates the convergences and splits of male and female writing in this way:

> The common struggle against racism unites men and women writers. Thus writers of both sexes attempt to transcend the racial allegory. But even here

> there are differences in representational strategies. For the colonized woman is doubly oppressed, enmeshed in the structures of an indigenous patriarchy and of foreign masculinist colonialism. Thus, women writers interrogate the sexual as well as the racial codes of colonial discourse. Thus, too, whereas the tendency in male literature is to counter colonial misrepresentations with valorisations of indigenous traditions, women writers are as critical of those traditions as they are of colonialism. And while the historical fact of women's resistance both to colonial and indigenous male domination is suppressed in the male literary tradition, it is highlighted in women's writing. (173)

The voices of African women writers have enriched the form and content of African literature by introducing voices that are different, and often go against the grain of the African male canon. Their work differs firstly, by putting "gender on the agenda" (Stratton: 158); and secondly, by in the main not using the allegorical form to critique the state of the nation because "women in many African states are marginal to national politics and, more generally, to the public life of their nations" (10). In writing against how the allegorical form and narratives have entrenched "the status quo of women's exclusion from public life" (10), African women writers have depicted women as real by showing the processes through which they become gendered subjects through resisting oppression and negotiating spaces for transformation and growth for themselves and society. Realism has aided women writers to focus on the real context of women's oppression rather than employing women characters as metaphors for an ailing nation. The Mother Africa metaphor has been especially targeted for deconstruction, as it is most problematic in how it masks patriarchal domination within the cultural and political arenas. The third strategy used by African women to counter the sexual allegory embedded within the male canon is inversion, whereby strong women characters replace the usual strong male protagonist. Here, women take centre stage, and the males are

represented in stereotypical and broad strokes. The fourth strategy employed by women writers is that of representing women characters in pairs, either as representative of a supportive sisterhood, and/or representing the various choices that woman make.

I will look at how Mda borrows from both the male and female representational traditions to de-construct notions of what it means to be men and women in a post-independence, post-apartheid context. For example in *Ways of Dying*, Mda borrows from the female tradition, the strategy of representing strong women characters who explode patriarchal stereotypes about what "acceptable" or "good" womanhood and motherhood entails. Another example of how Mda borrows from the female tradition within the African literature canon is in how he moves away from over-valourising motherhood (as Stratton points out the entrenching and exclusion of women from public life in nationalist texts often takes the form of the over-valorisation of motherhood). Mda's novels echo a text like *The Joys of Motherhood*, by demystifying motherhood and showing the positive as well as negative aspects of motherhood. *Ways of Dying* challenges the notion that mothering is instinctual and necessarily empowering for women. Mda depicts motherhood in symbolic as well as real terms which are not necessarily linked to nation building or the "mother Africa trope".

Within the realm of southern African literature, Mda's work can be read as engaging with different traditions of writing about gender and power. Mda's focus on multiple categories as crucial in writing about oppression links him to post-colonial, mainly women, writers

who have experienced multiple systems of oppression[20]. The work of these women writers tends to see beyond the dramatic dichotomies imposed by colonial categorisations. Their consistent engagement with the politics of gender forces a reckoning that they as women writers have been marginalised within the southern African literature canon because of their gender, and their texts testify to the need for continued scrutiny of how societies and its structures marginalise others. Writers such as Tsitsi Dangarembga (*Nervous Condition*, 1988) and Bessie Head (*Maru*, 1971; *The Collector of Treasures*, 1977) represent a minority of southern African post-colonial writers who directly address patriarchal oppression in their novels. These texts represent post-colonial narratives which question the continued subjugation of women in independent Africa, and how motherhood can put added pressure on women.

Madness caused by patriarchal and racial abuse is the theme of Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. The text refers to Fanon's analysis of the "nervous condition"[21] suffered by black men who have had their senses and sense of being human bludgeoned by the physical, psychic and emotional violence of colonialism. Where Fanon's thesis focused on the racial aspect of this violence, Dangarembga expands and depicts the lives of two young girls in colonial Rhodesia, who are entrapped and suffer from a "Nervous Condition". Dikosha in *She Plays with Darkness* suffers from this "nervous condition", she is constantly negated by racism and sexism. She chooses silence, distance and a level of disengaging from society rather than suffer a complete

[20] In an unpublished interview (Mazibuko 2002) Mda stated that international readers of his work are always surprised that he is in fact a man, commenting that he writes like a woman. Meaning his exploration of the interiority of women's lives is authentic and captivating.

[21] The phrase is used by Satre in his introduction to Fanon.

melt down - however, the threat of madness is ever present. The rape and violation of women are major themes in both *She plays with the Darkness* and *The Madonna of Excelsior*. Mda's treatment of the subject focuses on the ways that society fails women and in turn itself by failing to eradicate violence.

Bessie Head wrote her powerful short stories and novels whilst in exile in Botswana. *The Collector of Treasures* (1977) is the title story of a classic collection about life in a village in Botswana, Serowe. In this story, Head narrates the tragic tale of how the conscientious and generous Dikeledi came to kill her husband. Head critiques a society that leaves women vulnerable to gender violence, and then punishes them when they act in self-defence. In her classic novel, *Maru*, Head looks at how gender, class and ethnic discrimination chart the life journey of a MoTswana chief. Maru is forced to choose between his love of Margaret and his chieftaincy. He cannot marry Margaret and remain a chief, because she is a Morwa, an ethnic minority despised by baTswana. Maru chooses to elope with Margaret rather than live without her. In both *Maru* and *The Collector of Treasures*, Head looks at how individual fears intersect with discriminatory discourses to limit lives. In *Maru*, Head goes beyond these restrictions as Maru and Margaret begin a new life away from traditional oppressive rules. A novel like *Maru* goes beyond white and black dichotomies in looking at how ethnicity can be both a positive marker and celebration of difference, and also extremely harmful and divisive. Mda's novels echo the works highlighted so far in privileging multiple matrices of discrimination.

In addition to the female writers, there are a number of male writers whose models of gendering history are pertinent to Mda's work. Plaatje's *Mhudi* is a brilliant text which was written between 1917 and 1920. The text was published a decade later in 1930. Plaatje chooses to narrate the history of how Barolong survived the mfecane and Great Trek wars of the 1800s through Mhudi and Ra Thaga's beautiful love story. In his critique of *Mhudi*, Mpe (1996: 77) states that a big part of the history of Barolong is narrated (in the first person) by Mhudi; thus telling history from a woman's point of view. Mhudi is witness to the massacre at Kunana, and relates the tragedy to Ra-Thaga, re-telling the massacre of her people, and how she came to be alone. Mhudi is painted as a strong and courageous woman who in the course of the story defends herself twice against lions. She first scares a lion off after she meets Ra-Thaga, and the second time she stabs it whilst Ra-Thaga holds its tail. Plaatje's portrayal of Mhudi as one of the primary narrators and as a strong character reveals his concern with gender as a category. Although not overt, *Mhudi*'s gendered critique is ahead of its time. Plaatje put to the fore a critique of patriarchy during a time when the rise of African nationalism (just after the formation of the ANC in 1912) was concerned with discrimination along racial lines. *Mhudi*'s questioning of gender imbalance is apparent on the first page, where the world of the Barolong is described as a place where "they led their patriarchal life under their several chiefs who owed no allegiance to any king or emperor" (13), and in this patriarchal set-up "woman's work was never out of season" (13). Plaatje scholars Tim Couzens and Njabulo Ndebele describe the book as "the first South African epic in the technical sense that it was the first epic written about the country after it 'unified' in 1910. Much more importantly, though, it was the first book to handle, in such epical fashion, the

idea of what constitutes South Africanness" (Couzens and Ndebele: 188). The idea of what constitutes South Africanness still holds our collective imagination a century later. Contemporary writers still address ideas around selfhood and nationhood. Plaatje's depiction of Ra-Thaga and De Villier's friendship, as well as Mhudi and Annetje's alliance is an exploration of the rainbow nation that far pre-dates Archbishop Desmond Tutu's famous branding of democratic South Africa. Further, Plaatje's questioning of nationalisms' will to power, and their suppression of difference is nuanced. His rewriting of the movement of nations during the early 1800s does not privilege the Afrikaners, the Zulu or Ndebele, but brings alive a scenario where multiple groups contested terrain. Although the narrative clearly privileges Barolong, their place in history does not cancel out the roles played by other groups. Plaatje's version of history shows that not only were there many players during the colonial drama, but also that there were divisions within seemingly homogeneous groups. For example the Barolong group of baTswana favoured an alliance with Afrikaners against Mzilikazi; whilst other baTswana were very uneasy about such an alliance. The narrative also deals allegorically with the pressing topics of the day: the 1913 land dispossession, increasing political repression, and the alliances between British and Afrikaner nationalisms (Couzens 1996).

Mda's novels (almost a century later!) also question the many situations where women do the bulk of the work, whilst men sit under trees drinking beer and discussing important issues (*Ways of Dying; She Plays with the Darkness*). Plaatje's comment on gendered imbalances goes beyond merely describing a patriarchal Eden where Barolong live and describing Mhudi's bravery, he also richly represents the strong alliance between Mhudi,

Annetje and Mnandi. His portrayal shows that women can be resourceful and wise whilst dealing with difficult situations. Through the three women characters, Plaatje also shows the possibility of friendships across ethnic groups and the need for (and possibility of) peace and unity. The women symbolically stand for peace, co-operation and progress. *Mhudi*'s portrayal of strong women characters, pre-figures women like aunty Dorah in Eskia Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue (1959)*, the mother in Can Themba's *Kwashiorkor (*1972), Dumazile in Don Mattera's short story by the same name (1973), Martha in Dikobe's *The Marabi Dance* (1973)*,* right through to the women characters who are the focus of this study: Noria, That Mountain Woman, Mother of Toloki, and other female characters in Mda's novels. Peterson (2005) has noted that before Mda's novels, texts such as *Mhudi* and *Down Second Avenue* stand out in South Africa as writing women characters who challenged patriarchal and racist stereotypes through their survival strategies.

Down Second Avenue, Eskia Mphahlele's autobiographical novel, depicts how his mother and aunt Dorah face material deprivation with courage and resourcefulness. Mphahlele's depiction of the strength (and weakness) of maternal love in the face of debilitating forces, resonates with other narratives of motherhood in a colonial and post-independence reality. Themba's *Kwashiorkor* shows how the burdens placed on black women by apartheid and capitalist harassment, produced a colonised subject whose traumatised and split psychology resulted in them turning against themselves and those nearest to them (Fanon 1969). In *Kwashiorkor*, a mother neglects her small child who then dies of kwashiorkor (Andersson 2005). *Dumazile*, from Mattera's *Memory is the*

Weapon looks at the journey of a Zulu woman to the city. Dumazile flees to Western township to escape strict patriarchal laws and factional as well as gendered violence. She flouts convention by having a love affair with a man younger than herself, the eighteen-year-old Mattera. The following passage reveals a deep understanding of the ways in which tradition masks and perpetuates the oppression of women:

> 'I come from a strict family - strict and traditional - where we women are often treated as slaves; as pots and pans and calabashes from which to drink water or beer. It is only when a woman becomes much older, li-Mama or li-Gogo (old mother or granny), that she is held in some esteem. Why wait until I'm old before my dignity as a woman, as a person (uMuntu), can be respected? She spoke deeply and almost in pain.'...'So you ran away from Natal because women are badly treated there?' I probed, not certain that it was the correct thing to say, and also not wanting to hurt her feelings. 'Partly that, but more because my parents had allowed a man to get off lightly after he raped me on my way home from the mission school. I was about to complete standard ten. Dumazile's face assumed a pensiveness I had never seen in her before. I felt deep compassion for her. (68-69)

Dumazile takes the decision to flee the rural areas to escape her tormentor and the environment that allows him to commit a heinous crime against her. She chooses to take control of her life and act, at a time when women's movements were strictly controlled by their families, as well as apartheid Influx Control and Pass laws. Dumazile's burdens are many, but she is not willing to accept passively her lot in life.

Modikwe Dikobe's *The Marabi Dance* as mentioned is yet another instance whereby the interior reality of women living through apartheid is explored. Dikobe enters the narrative interestingly through Marabi culture, which was created in the all night marabi parties hosted by shebeen queens eking out a living in the city. The parties are named after township marabi music, which was a derivative of fast-paced, jazzy kwela music. The

main character in *The Marabi Dance* is a young woman named Martha, who is part of the slum community of prospect township, one of the slums listed as a 'black spot' by the apartheid government. Prospect township was bulldozed during the 1920s because of its physical proximity to white suburbs and the CBD. Martha's journey takes us through the many hazards of a young black woman growing up in the fifties. Her life is controlled and monitored by the state: where she lives, who she interacts with and the range of choices available to her. A big turning point for Martha is when she becomes a teenage mother. Her boyfriend George is an immature womaniser who abandons Martha as soon as he learns of the pregnancy. Martha's situation is made more severe because she discovers her pregnancy just as her parents are trying to arrange for her to marry the rural, and much more stable Sephai:

> That night she entered into the life of motherhood. Sleepless nights with the child crying. Sick baby to the clinic. Tender love of motherhood. Battle to bring up a respectful child. Problem of giving it a good education. Its future in a country where a person is not judged according to his talent but by his colour, denied the right to take part in the administration of the country and the right to do skilled work. On this particular Saturday night Martha conceived a child who, among millions of others, was to spend his life in and out of jail. (78-79)

The quoted excerpt shows how society and politics intruded on Martha's role as a mother. Where she could raise her child, where she took her child to school, and what happens to the child when he grows up - that is all dictated by the state. Dikobe paints a powerful woman character who is able to be a loving mother in such a debilitating situation. Martha stands up for herself firstly against the formidable force of her parents and extended family, and decides against marrying Sephai for convenience sake; and later she raises her son in a world that is set up to entrap her.

Another important voice is Ndebele whose acclaimed collection, *Fools and Other Stories* deals with a respected teacher Zamani who rapes a school girl Mimi. Zamani is a complex and deeply confusing character. On the one hand, he is a respected, very smart and charismatic teacher, even a hero of sorts (given how he resists being co-opted by the Bantu Education authorities, he is clearly not on the side of apartheid). Yet on the other hand he is deeply flawed: he drinks too much, he cheats on his wife, and ultimately violates a young school girl. The community becomes torn about what to do with Zamani. There is a shortage of teachers - what will become of their children's education, if Zamani gets fired? They choose to keep Zamani, in the school system, sacrificing Mimi. Although Ndebele's story is written in the eighties about a period of extreme repression in the sixties, he interrogates multiple matrices of oppression which include: gender, class, race and region (Charterston township being a politically immature small township that Zani tries unsuccessfully to galvanise into political action. The politics of the small township and intense lack of skilled professionals is what makes the choice that the community must make with regards to teacher Zamani that much more poignant.) Ndebele, in weaving his creative narrative managed to reflect more intensely from exile in a somewhat saner Lesotho. Mphahlele also wrote from exile; his brilliant autobiography, *Down Second Avenue,* was written whilst he was in exile in Nigeria because the increasingly intrusive apartheid state was becoming too restrictive and dangerous to allow his creativity to flourish.

Yet another category of writers/writing, through which Mda's novels can also be read, is what is described as post-apartheid writing. Mda's novels share certain structural and thematic traits with writers such as Sindiwe Magona (*To My Children's Children* 1990 and *Mother to Mother* 1998), Njabulo Ndebele (*The Cry of Winnie Mandela* 2004) Sello Duiker (*Thirteen Cents* 2000 and *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* 2001), Phaswane Mpe (*Welcome To Our Hillbrow* 2000), Lesego Kagiso Molope (*Dancing in the Dust* 2002 *and The Mending Season* 2005), Zoe Wicomb (*David's Story*) and J.M. Coetzee (*The Age of Iron* 1990, and *Disgrace* 1999). These writers have creatively depicted South Africa's complicated, difficult transition to democracy. Magona, Ndebele, Molope and Wicomb's novels are similar to Mda's novels in how they foreground gender oppression as a theme that seems most pertinent in post-apartheid South Africa[22]. Molope's brilliant first novel, *Dancing in the Dust*, explores life under apartheid from a teenage girl's point of view. Molope shows how Tihello, grows up in a working class female-headed household and slowly gets involved in the fight against apartheid. Molope's *The Mending Season*, details how Tihello and her family navigate the fast-changing post-apartheid world of uncertain race relations. Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* also explores the apartheid years and transition years from a woman's perspective. The novel will be discussed in more detail in chapter five. Duiker's *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* explores how poverty can cut across sections of society. Duiker's protagonist Tshepo is forced to become a sex-worker to survive, the novel also explores fluid identities as expressed through sexuality.

[22] There has been an upsurge of poetic and filmic literatures which write post-apartheid identity politics. Work by Bhekizizwe Peterson (*Fools* 1995 and *A Zulu Love Letter* 2005), looks at ways of ending and healing violence; Teddy Mattera's *Max and Mona* (2005) is an inter-textual reference to *Ways of Dying*, employing a central character (Max) who like Toloki is a Professional Mourner, and similarly has to navigate the hazards of city life - the film is a celebration of laughter and critiques the social and economic disparities of a country in transition. Lesego Rampolokeng (*EndBeginnings* 1993*)*, Kgafela Oa Magogodi (*Outspoken* 2004), Khosi Xaba (*these hands* 2005) and Gabeba Baderoon (*The Dream in the Next Body* 2005) are among a growing, dynamic, body of poetry which writes about changing power and identity formations, in intimate, and courageous ways.

Wicomb's *David's Story* also explores fluid transitional identities - looking at coloured identity/ies and multiple versions of histories in a democratic South Africa. The narrative is told to a fictional biography writer by the protagonist David Dirkse, a former freedom fighter. Dirkse finds himself at a loss as to what to make of life in the new South Africa where codes and relations have shifted drastically. Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* writes powerfully about social and political change as affected by HIV, rural and urban spaces, xenophobia and poverty. Mpe's novel explores multiple levels of reality from the point of view of Refentse, the protagonist who reflects from heaven on the events that have led to his suicide. The novels mentioned above share with Mda's novels a fascination with shifting post-apartheid identities, and how certain forms of violence such as poverty, disease and exclusion still persist in democratic South Africa.

Critical Appraisals of Mda's Novels of Transition

To my knowledge, there is yet to be a completed study that offers a feminist reading of all Mda's novels. To date, studies have subsumed analyses of gender within critiques of his novels as literary expressions of South Africa's transition and renaissance (Moffett 1996; Ruden 1998; Mantjiu 1998; Mervis 1998; Malan and Mashigoane 1999; Jacobs 2000; Twalo 2001; Van Wyk 2001; Holloway, Byrne, and Titlestad (eds) 2001; Koyana 2003; Barnard 2003; Bell 2003 and Attwell 2005). These critiques focus on the themes of death and birth as symbolic of the end of apartheid, and the rebirth of a democracy and new national identities.

Feminist studies on Mda have focused on individual texts. Gqola (2002) and Samuelson (2005) have considered the role and uses of women as symbols (Nongqawuse in *The Heart of Redness*) of nation formation as well as agents of history. They question whether Nongqawuse as representative of the subaltern can be heard? Is her writing as symbol able to reach across time and place to tell us her story?

Helen Moffet's analysis of *Ways of Dying* and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1996) also engages with Mda's characterisation of African women as symbols. Moffet goes further to say that Mda's extraordinary women characters set him apart from the canon of African literature as he usually depicts "female heroines who represent new spins on old archetypes" (15). She comments that Mda will often have the "good" and the "bad" within the same character. This form of representation creates characters that are more complex than those represented as either "good" or "bad". Moffet's analysis is useful in talking about the boundaries that Mda pushes in characterising women. He does not stick to stereotypes, choosing complicated women who can be both loved and hated.

My study draws on the above-mentioned feminist critiques of Mda's work and looks at how Mda writes women as agents of history, and as central to the process of transition and renaissance. I also expand critiques of Mda's novels of transition through re-reading the novels' politics of identity formation through a renaissance spearheaded by marginalized people, using an African feminist lens.

Within the body of work that looks at Mda as a post-apartheid writer of the transition,

Margaret Mervis' analysis of *Ways of Dying* is especially illuminating for the connections it makes between Mda's “theatre for development” (*When People Play People*, 1993) and what she terms his venture into “Fiction for Development” (39). This is an important link, which looks at Mda's past and present concerns around voicing the issues of marginalised communities. Mervis articulates her views as follows:

> In this article I suggest that he has extended his theatrical blueprint for social change, described in *When people Play People* (1993), to his first fictional narrative of transition, *Ways of Dying* (1995). I also investigate the claim that Mda creates in his novel a new role for himself in a new South Africa: he becomes a writer of 'Fiction for Development'. In discussing the ways in which he forges a style to suit this role, I suggest that he draws on the narrative traditions of folklore and that the result can be read as a kind of magic realism. (39)

Mervis puts emphasis on the novels' aspirations at raising “critical awareness and group conscientisation” (40) in its quest to create new ways of living which are different from the corrosive and stunting life of the past. She states that “*Ways of Dying* points to new ways of living which are able to free the social imagination of the oppressed from the mind-set induced by conditions in apartheid South Africa” (42). Through Toloki and Noria's love story, Mda fashions a narrative that seeks to challenge old oppressive paradigms; to do so, he needs to cross literary, thematic and stylistic boundaries. Mda shifts from theatre to the novel, and from engaging with resistance to protest art towards revolution and transformation. My study expands Mervis’s points by demonstrating how Mda writes women as central to the process of development. In chapter two I describe how Noria is involved in the life of the community, and is the necessary “opinion leader” (Mervis: 47), to effect positive change within the community. Dikosha in *She Plays with Darkness* does

to a degree plays that role as well. Her rebelliousness, and refusal to be co-opted into patriarchal structures, changes her community's passive acceptance of age-old restrictive laws. Popi in *The Madonna of Excelsior*, also forces the people of Mahlatswetsa location to deal with their racism, and sexism. Popi does not withdraw from the community the way her mother Niki does, Popi is active in church activities, in the struggle against apartheid, and later she becomes a local government leader.

Critiques of Mda's work are mainly about how he writes the transition and critiques and expands the nationalist discourse of African Renaissance. I argue that Mda in fact focuses on women and other marginalized groups as using various strategies to effect a renaissance (with a small "r") of ordinary people, who in the main have not fully accessed the resources of government and big business. These women reside in the rural areas and informal settlements of South Africa, and use creativity and communal support to survive.

Malan and Mashigoane's *Ways of Dying - Study Notes* (1999), for example, is a useful overview of the text as a novel of transition that seeks to explore positive ways of living. Their notes succinctly state that the text is ground breaking because of "its uniquely South African themes and its contemporary concerns give an authentic picture of the experience of political transition, and also stands as an allegory of the contemporary life of Africans" (Malan and Mashigoane 1999: 2). *Ways of Dying* has in the main been lauded for its courageous depiction of South Africa's early years of transition when it appeared that violence may derail the processes of negotiating an extremely fragile

peace. Mda took care to write about the country's vulnerabilities, in a way that cautioned us about the depravity of continuing violence and the underlying prejudices and causes of those conflicts.

In their analysis of how South Africa's literatures of transition make sense of the past David Bell (2003) and Siphokazi Koyana (2003) trace a persistent dialogue between past and present in *The Heart of Redness*. Bell takes his cue from Andre Brink's argument that in comprehending our history, South Africans need to read carefully past silences. Such a reading and writing of the past is necessarily open-ended. Referring to this open-ended strain in transitional texts Bell states:

> Significantly, it is a post-modernist narrative that dominates in 'storifying' the past, a past that is explored with the intention of seeking an understanding of the present. This relationship is, however, not one-dimensional but mutually interactive, according to which the past impinges on the present and the present provides the context from which to examine the past. In this respect, all the works studied scrutinise and reject the nomenclature and epistemology of a racist, colonial society, but retain an open and a critical mind on contemporary events. (71)

Bell's analysis looks at the ways in which the text emphasizes engaging with history in order to figure out past and present crises. In the Qholorha of the mid-1800s poverty and disease were rife; similarly, the Qholorha of the early 2000s still faces shortages of resources, and there are still challenges about how best to access cultural and spiritual resources. Koyana reads the multiplicity of voices in Mda's *The Heart of Redness* as a dialogue agitating “for change from below”. For Koyana, the notion of historical "truth" is integral to how the inhabitants of Qholorha understand their current disadvantages, and

how they use their past to attain material and political freedoms. Koyana recognises historical truth as slippery and varied; she addresses Mda's poly-vocality "as a relation between voices" (52), whereby a dialogue about how to create a better future can be opened up, and "Ultimately, Mda not only critiques the political and economic establishments of the new South Africa, but points to viable ways in which its grand ideal of an 'African Renaissance' can be achieved" (53). Koyana also looks at how Mda hybridizes Western and African knowledge systems in his exploration of an African Renaissance. This he does by writing women like MamCirha and NoGiant as tapping into indigenous African knowledges and teaming up with Camagu who has Western knowledge of how markets work, to thrive as entrepreneurs. Koyana does not however pick up on Mda's critique of the African Renaissance as a discourse which potentially excludes poor people; as explained, I will explore Mda's espousal of a renaissance of the marginalized (who in the main are poor women).

In my analysis of Mda's writing of an African renaissance spearheaded by women, I have drawn from Thembinkosi Twalo's (2001) argument that in *Ways of Dying* Mda's "engagement with the question of women's legal and political rights enables him to reveal the contradictions within the liberation struggle" (40). Twalo's analysis is useful in how it explores the discourse of African Renaissance and its struggle to ensure the empowerment of women. Twalo states that the novel reveals how although the fight against race oppression has been won, the eradication of patriarchy is not automatic, and can in fact be resisted by the male-centric discourse of the liberation struggle as expressed in certain forms of African nationalism. His study reveals the contradictions

and conflicts which Africa's nationalisms seek to mask. He explains Mda's deviation from the literatures which reflect and in some ways endorse these nationalisms as “informed by the fact that in spite of its successes, nationalism is also responsible for the delay of total liberation of the South African masses; inherent in nationalism are seeds of destruction, disorder, chaos and corruption”(1). Class, gender and ethnicity are the main categories of dissonance that Twalo's analysis explores. In addition to these pertinent categories, chapter two will include Mda's refusal to buy into a nationalism which subsumes differences in region, and various systems of domination. *Ways of Dying* looks at how the urban rural divide has complicated differences within oppressed groups. I explore how Mda does not simply portray the marginalised as victimised, he explores the ways and spaces where their lives have meaning, joy and power. One of the strategies that Mda employs to explore how marginalised people can exercise agency is through accessing different forms of knowledge represented by art, dreams, dance, and songs. These alternative knowledges signal not only a different and alternative way of being, but also shifting power dynamics between races, sexes, classes and regions.

In his analysis of *She Plays with the Darkness* as a text about the African renaissance, Jacobs (*English in Africa* 2002) also explores how Mda writes ordinary people as being central to historical events. He comments that Mda breaks from apartheid conformity (dealing with the grand apartheid narrative (61)). He correctly identifies Mda's privileging of the histories of ordinary people when engaging with a transforming Africa. I pick up on this point, emphasizing that Mda writes women as agents of history, but not necessarily the grand History of text books and academia. Women make history through their

transformative arts, and through effecting change at grassroots level. Van Wyk (2002), Mantjiu (2000), and Ruden (1998) also address Mda as documenting South Africa's transition from apartheid towards an African renaissance. Mantjiu focuses on Mda's privileging of the spirit in his exploration of the African renaissance. I have emphasized Mda's privileging of women's roles in this spiritual renaissance, and how this renaissance of the spirit is articulated through art, rather than through organised religion. I have drawn on the work of African feminists (Motsemme and Motsei) and black feminists (bell hooks), to read Mda's woman-centric use of spirituality as expressed through indigenous art-forms and indigenous world-views (ubuntu) as a way towards the renaissance of marginalized people. I look at how Mda writes forms of African spirituality and art as accessible ways for people who have limited access to material resources to empower themselves.

Mda's support of an African world-view which privileges spirituality and art as way to empowerment extends to how he infuses his form and narrative with African languages and storytelling formats. Moffet, Malan and Mashigoane analyse this point in Mda's novels. Moffet is particularly struck by his use of transliteration, whereby Mda draws from indigenous languages such as seSotho, isiZulu, isiXhosa, siSwati and Afrikaans to infuse his writing in English with energy and the rich idioms of his multi-lingualism (14). Moffet describes Mda as a "Renaissance Man" (14), whose voice makes use of the magic within African cosmology, to speak through the magical realist mode. Mashigoane and Malan state that *Ways of Dying* is innovative in its use of form as it "finds a way of suggesting multilingualism through English", "uses magic realism" and "adapts traditional oral

techniques of storytelling to the requirements of the written novel" (2). Mda's formal experiments, especially his use of magic, infuse his writing with a quirkiness and a sense of fun, which make his texts engaging and enjoyable even as their content has to do with the violence of transition. I will expand these readings of the novels under study by looking at how indigenous arts and creativity are written as another kind of language of empowerment for women. For example in chapter two, Noria is a powerful and beautiful singer who has a lot of influence in the community because of her artistic abilities. Similarly Dikosha, though (self) destructive in many ways, also has a lot of influence in the community because she is a brilliant dancer. Through her, the community preserves some of the ancient San healing dances and songs, as well as the songs and dances of baSotho. Qukezwa in *The Heart of Redness* is a brilliant split tone singer, she teaches the community about ancient art-forms which preserve their history and wisdoms. Popi and The Seller of Songs in *The Madonna of Excelsior* are also excellent singers, using song to help the community mourn their dead, and heal its wounds. In Mda's own words, he has immersed his writings in the magic embedded in African folklore and ways of being:

> I have drawn from the previously (and perhaps still) marginalised spiritual and poetic traditions of the first nations such as the Khoikhoi people and the so-called San people. In my novel, *The Heart of Redness*, motifs from the Khoikhoi belief systems run through the work to the extent that in many instances they frame the narratives and assume symbolic significance even in those contemporary sections of the novel that deal with characters who no longer subscribe to those belief systems. (2005: 65)

Mda’s use of African creativity, spirituality, folklore and knowledge systems can be said to be his way of focusing on what Njabulo Ndebele wrote as a “rediscovery of the ordinary”,

whereby ordinary people's strengths and weaknesses are written in a complex and transformative way that goes beyond two-dimensional symbols. His complex and symbolic way of writing women involves an exploration of spirituality, indigenous languages (spoken and creative), and African paradigms which privilege communality and multiple realms of being. Mda's exploration of the ordinary goes beyond the themes outlined and also looks at how those without access to material and state power use laughter, as another tool to empower themselves and disregard those who seek to oppress them. In reading laughter in especially *Ways of Dying* Barnard and Van Wyk's deployment of Bakhtin's theories on the uses of laughter, the body, carnival and multi-vocality to deflate official pomp and greed are useful. Mda's ironic depictions of women as mothers, madonnas[23] and artists draws on "the spirit of laughter and irreverence" (*Rabelais and his World* 1965), and explores "the interface between a stasis imposed from above and a desire for change from below, between old and new, official and unofficial."(*Rabelais and his World*: xvi). Barnard asserts that *Ways of Dying* explores a Bakhtinian "productive ambivalence" whereby the "temporality of the moment when the old is making way for the new" (12). Her analysis offers an insightful reading of the janus-faced tension that marks Mda's novels. She also discusses Mda's unique sense of humour as being necessary in releasing liberatory laughter to time and again lessen the narrative tension. Van Wyk also focuses on narrative tension as signifying a literature of transition. He identifies the tension as "traumatic and productive" resulting in an

[23] The word "Madonna" comes from the Christian belief that Mary the mother of Jesus conceived him immaculately. In the study, it used to refer to women who raise children primarily by themselves, without the constant presence or assistance of men.

atmosphere of carnival as the oppressed mount revolutions from below against an unfair state. Van Wyk describes the conflict during transition as follows:

> The confrontation between the masses and the state often leads to violence, death, arbitrary repression and persecution. The inversion which happens when the people take control of the state's functions, and the visibility of the people in mass gatherings on the street evokes images of carnival. The breakdown of the old order is accompanied by a resurgence of repressed instincts embodied in images of violent death, birth and sexuality. This resurgence of the repressed in turn implies regression: a loss to some extent of the reality principle (so that the form of this literature is surrealism, the dream, mysticism and images of infantile omnipotence). Death and rebirth, the apocalyptic and the carnivalesque combine. (accessed 5/31/02)

I will return in chapter two to Van Wyk's reading in light of Mda's use of African cosmologies and idiom through dreams and an Afro-centric appreciation of art and beauty.

In addition to critical appraisals of Mda's fictional work, this study will also draw from a range of interviews and reviews which shed light on Mda's biography, as well as on how his work has contributed to South African and African literature. Venu Naidoo's interview in *Alternation 4* (1997) focuses on Mda's experience of writing in exile from a post-colonial Lesotho, and then returning to a drastically changing South Africa in the early nineties. In Andre Wiesner's "Mixed Grill" (2001) interview, Mda talks about spending 35 years "living in many countries of Africa, Europe and the USA", from a Pan-African and global vantage point. Mda is able to give insights and analyses on the idea of "African Renaissance", and the place of Africa's women within it. Maureen Isaacson's *Sunday Independent* interview (2005) firmly places Mda as among democratic South Africa's

most exciting and probing novelists. Isaacson's interview also discusses Mda's painful past of childhood sexual abuse, a past which has taken him many years to acknowledge and have the courage to talk about. Isaacson states that Mda writes with the compassion, and insight of a person who can recognise and has lived with emotional trauma.

CHAPTER 2: Love and Wayward Women in *Ways of Dying*

> In this society, there is no powerful discourse on love emerging either from politically progressive radicals or from the left. The absence of a sustained focus on love in progressive circles arises from a collective failure to acknowledge the needs of the spirit and an over-determined emphasis on material concerns.
> (bell hooks 1994)

> It was love and not hate that was the most powerful force in the fight against apartheid. Love for child, lover, friend, parent, comrade, community, country...love for our world, for humanity, for peace, equality and justice. The best in our movement resolved that hatred of apartheid's brutality would not lead them to emulate that brutality, nor to become heroes in one context and bullies in another.
> (Pregs Govender 2004)

Ways of Dying, Zakes Mda's first novel (1995), is a poignant love story that captures and explores the violence, despair and hope of South Africa's democratization. Mda takes us through the lives of Noria and Toloki, from their childhood in a village through to the squatter settlement where they end up, and fall in love. They resolve to teach each other "how to live" (115). In the novel, Mda talks to the idea of a new dawn in South Africa, and Africa, as articulated through the discourse of African Renaissance. As outlined in the introductory chapter, Mda's female characters are central to his exploration of South Africa becoming a "new" nation. Through the plot, themes and characters in *Ways of Dying,* Mda expresses a level of disillusion with the anticipated development and

alleviation of poverty necessary for the African Renaissance as articulated through the African Union (AU) and New Economic Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) to take place. Mda's renaissance is that of ordinary people, the majority of whom still live in poverty. He locates his renaissance within a "discourse on love" which not only acknowledges the "needs of the spirit" but privileges a freedom of the spirit rooted in art and creativity that can be accessed by almost anyone. Central to Mda's "discourse on love" are wayward women whom he paints as the custodians of creativity, art and healing. These women go against the grain of what it is to be "good" women and "good" mothers in society.

The narrative in *Ways of Dying* moves from a rural town to a squatter camp in a port city, both these nameless places can be read as microcosms of the broader changing South African society. The novel spans apartheid South Africa, up to the transition to democracy in the early nineties; it captures the surge of violence and confusion that happened just before the 1994 elections.

Throughout the novel Mda creates tension by exploring opposing ideas and values. There is the rural and the urban; beauty and ugliness; poverty and wealth; spirituality and the material world; love and hate. *Ways of Dying* chooses the beauty of spiritual wealth over the riches and vulgarity of a world obsessed with the accumulation of material, a world built through the avaricious appetites of post-colonial elite.

Ways of Dying looks at how spirituality can be a resource for poor people who have little

access to material resources. In the text, sites of power such as government and big business are irrelevant; and the focus is on the under-classes, who are represented as the real custodians of an African renaissance. This skepticism about what official leaders can do for ordinary people reflects a post-independence disillusionment with those leaders who have let their country's democracies down by prioritising self-enrichment over the needs of the populace. Mda's skepticism mirrors that of writers like Ayi Kwei Armah (*The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*), and Ngugi Wa Thiongo (*A Grain of Wheat*), who realised soon after independence that the dream of African unity, and interdependent nation states was fast being corrupted by an elite in a great hurry to amass wealth at the expense of the people who voted them into power; more disheartening for post-independence writers was the realisation that this elite was being aided by former colonial powers to plunder state resources.

Magical, Marginal Realities

In *Ways of Dying*, Mda prioritises the marginal spaces of the rural areas and squatter settlements, where mainly poor people reside. These spaces are on the periphery of city spaces where government and business (which represent official power) are located. Both during apartheid and in the present democratic South Africa, the poor have been marginalised. In *Ways of Dying*, Mda subverts the othering of the poor by doing a thematic reversal of the Jim comes to Joburg story. Instead of the city being shown as a place of opportunity - in *Ways of Dying* the city is impoverished and not that relevant to the lives of the characters.

The text shows the separate journeys of childhood friends Noria and Toloki from the village to go in search of fortune in the city, only to experience more suffering and strife. In the city, they find poverty and death. Through their story, the text shows how people who are peripheral to official power and have very little material resources are most vulnerable to violence. Toloki and Noria's journeys are difficult, grim and fraught with danger during a time of instability and war in South Africa's transition (Barnard 2004; Mantjiu 2000; Twalo 2001; Van Wyk 2001). The universe that Noria and Toloki live in is one of forgotten people - a universe where politicians, business leaders and others who occupy official positions of influence, are distant and don't seem to care. Mda is concerned to show that amidst all the poverty and violence, poor people constantly struggle against degradation, yet strive to live dignified, creative lives full of joy and humour. Their survival strategies are powerful, and often subvert official power by exposing its cracks and rendering it irrelevant. *Ways of Dying* explores the strength and depth of poor people's lives, demonstrating that although not considered powerful in the official sense, they do have degrees of influence over their own lives, and over their worlds. By representing marginality in nuanced, detailed and beautifully creative ways, Mda explores the humanity and dignity of his characters. His representations are not, however, pious or self-righteous; the characters are human, with good, bad and very quirky qualities.

Mda's nuanced writing of complex characters and worlds is in part a result of his interest in, and an engagement with the “ordinary” (Ndebele 1991) interior lives of his characters, and his focus on the processes through which society and politics constitute identity. His

engagement with the intimate details of his characters' worlds is an attempt to move away from the debilitating and over-determined forces of slavery, colonialism and apartheid. His commitment to freeing his art from the dominant discourses (both those of pre-democracy, and the current post-apartheid democratic nationalist discourse) is what has prompted Mda to tell the stories of people on the margins of society, and to find storytelling forms which are suited to his counter narratives from below.

As Peterson (1993) has stated, Mda's storytelling form has always been concerned with ways to represent the interiority of black lives, rather than reproducing the flattened out stereotypes of apartheid discourse; and the similarly reactive representations of most resistance and protest literature. In so doing, Mda has focused on a more organic, open, and plural way to tell stories - his storytelling is firmly rooted in the principles of ubuntu, whereby sharing, community, fairness and living according to the rhythms and aesthetics of nature are key to survival. Mda's particular way of telling stories comes out of an African cosmology which privileges community, and is a continuation of African literature's inclusion of orature in form. Orature incorporates the philosophy of ubuntu, African myths, arts and folklore, and the experience of reality at multiple levels of consciousness (dreams, ancestral communications, prayer). Orature accepts and respects that life has many layers, and that humanity will advance through embracing and harnessing the multiple systems of knowing and teaching. For example, the world of dreams is another realm of existence where the dead visit the living and advise them on day-to-day matters. The world of spirits can also manifest in the material world. This way

of being does not separate the spiritual, intellectual and material realities and is open to the possibility of many other levels of consciousness and being.

Mda's emphasis on the magical aspects of orature has been referred to in contemporary parlance as *magical realism*. Mda's magical realism is a fusion of reality and the realm of magic such that they are assumed to be a natural part of life, and not something unbelievable or extraordinary. For example, in *Ways of Dying* we are told that when Noria's mother, That Mountain Woman, first arrived in her husband Xesibe's village, she spread a rumour that she could walk on the rainbow. This is narrated in a matter of fact way, it is communicated as something quite possible. Noria's two pregnancies is another instance of matter-of-fact magic in the text - both her pregnancies are fifteen months long; the second, happening via immaculate conception. Mda's use of magical realism allows him to explore the uncanny, magical, and sublime spaces between polarities; his narratives traverse the in-between of infinite possibilities. Brenda Cooper's analysis of African magical realist West African novels, explores the inbetween spaces where reality is multi-dimensional. Cooper provides the following useful description of magical realism, and the form's ability to cross boundaries:

> Magical realism strives, with greater or lesser success, to capture the paradox of the unity of opposites; it contests polarities such as history versus magic, the pre-colonial past versus the post-industrial present and life versus death. Capturing such boundaries between spaces is to exist in a third space, in the fertile interstices between these extremes of time or space... (1998: 1)

Magical realism is suited to exploring the interconnectedness of being espoused by the philosophy of ubuntu - which is part of the African world-view written into Mda's work.

Ubuntu puts forward that humanity and the universe is one, we all inhabit one magical, divine sphere. This magical sphere includes multiple levels of reality, whereby dreams, the afterlife, and our collective consciousness are all legitimate realms. The sphere of dreams is one of the ways in which the ancestral realm and the space of the living are connected in *Ways of Dying*. In the text, when Toloki's father Jwara dies, he communicates with the living through dreams. He visits Nefholovhodwe's dreams and nags him to take his iron figurines to Toloki. And whilst alive, Jwara gets inspiration and creative ideas from his ancestors through his dreams. Through using magical realism, Mda is able to infuse his politics of divine, creative and spiritual interdependence through the different levels of his texts.

Creative use of orature and magical realism in *Ways of Dying* is closely linked to articulating the lives of the marginalised masses of Africa. The aesthetics and values privileged in orature are those readily available to marginalised peoples such as the oral arts (singing, folktales, myths and legends). These arts emphasise inter-dependence and the rights of everyone to speak, and be heard. Moreover the oral arts and live performance arts in general are suited to a democratic way of narrating because they are not resource intensive, all that is needed is for one to have a story, and they can go ahead and tell it - there is no complicated machinery needed to write or perform the story. In live performance, each player on stage and in the audience contributes what they can (song, dance, poetry, mime etc).

Performance and oral arts privilege both the performer and the audience - because the performer needs an audience for his or her story to make sense. Thus a more inclusive, dynamic creative process takes place. In *Ways of Dying*, this politics of interdependence is rooted in spirituality and centers communality - hence the multi-layered and many voiced way of telling in Mda's novel.

There is a sense that *Ways of Dying* is told and performed, and that there is someone listening to and witnessing, rather than reading the novel. The text narrates in a communal "we", which is omnipresent and omniscient, representing the community of the living and those who have passed on. In the following passage, the communal "we" explains itself to the reader/listener/audience:

> We know everything about everybody. We even know things that happen when we are not there; things that happen behind people's closed doors deep in the middle of the night. We are the all seeing eye of the village gossip. When in our orature the storyteller begins the story, 'They say it once happened...', we are the 'they'. No individual owns any story. The community is the owner of the story, and it can tell it the way it deems it fit. We would not be needing to justify the communal voice that tells this story if you had not wondered how we became so omniscient in the affairs of Toloki and Noria. (12)

The communal “we” is ever present in the novel, and takes different forms - sometimes it is the voice of rumour and gossip, at other times it speaks through the nurses, and then through the characters, dreams, art and through the author. It does not respect individual spaces and boundaries, it speaks whenever it feels like, and often makes mistakes. In short, the communal voice represents us in our entirety - our hopes, dreams, individuality and our human catastrophes. For example, it this "we" that tells us, unapologetically, just

how ugly Toloki is saying "...we always remarked, sometimes in his presence, that he was an ugly child..." (32). The voice also relishes gossip about Noria's myriad sexual exploits ("We saw all the things Noria was doing..."(73)), and it boasts with glee about That Mountain Woman's sexual indiscretions: "We told the story over and over again, and we laughed..." (40).

In *Ways of Dying*, the communal "we" privileges the voices of the marginalised - it centralises the voices of the poor, and women (and laments that very often the poor are women). The communal voice follows and tells the stories of the inhabitants of the rural areas and the informal settlements; it speaks for and through them. We get to know about the families and friends of Toloki and Noria in the rural areas; and through the communal "we", follow them to the city. The voice plays an important role in remembering the past and linking it to the present, even when the characters have forgotten their own stories. For example, Toloki cannot remember how Noria got the nick-name of "stuck-up-bitch" and the voice explains that: "We know all these things, but Toloki does not remember them. He only knows that as far as his memory can take him..." (30). The communal voices own and shape the narrative. It weaves a beautiful story about people who are often not prioritised. More importantly it tells the shameful tale of how the country's many violent deaths, affect mainly poor, vulnerable people.

Another set of voices that contributes to the text's many ways of speaking are the various "nurses" who speak at the many funerals in the novel. The function of the nurses is to speak at funerals and explain how the deceased died. The nurses try to make sense of

the many deaths that are happening in the cities during the transition. It is the nurse at the funeral of Noria's second child Vutha The Second, who dramatically declares: "There are many ways of dying!" (7). The nurses in the text tell us about the many ways of dying. These deaths are caused by racial wars, political infighting, and the violence that seems to be pervasive in the city space. They narrate the cyclical nature of violence, and how through the transition to democracy it escalates and affects those who are fighting for freedom. The nurse at Vutha's funeral exposes the shame that Vutha was killed by the very people who were meant to protect him:

> This our brother's way is a way that has left us without words in our mouths. This little brother was our own child, and his death is more painful because it is our own creation. It is not the first time that we bury little children. We bury them every day. But they are killed by the enemy...those we are fighting against. This our little brother was killed by those who are fighting to free us!" (7)

The nurse speaks up for the many voiceless children like Vutha, who are the victims of the wars that are raging. It is especially the children of poor people, who cannot hide behind high suburban walls, who become the victims of war.

Ways of Dying also opens itself to the many voices of the past, present and the future. In the narrative, the story unfolds over a few days between Christmas and New Year. During this period childhood friends Toloki and Noria, meet again, and fall in love. They meet at the funeral of Noria's child Vutha, on Christmas Day. In the present Toloki plies his trade in his brand new, invented vocation of "Professional Mourner". He mourns at funerals of thousands of South Africans who were being killed in racial and ethnic wars of the early and mid-nineties. The majority of those who were dying were poor people who travelled

on trains to get to work. The deaths narrated in the novel are based on actual deaths that were happening at the time. The deaths, such as the 1992 Boipatong massacre, were reported in various newspapers. The novel's opening sentence, "There are many ways of dying!", captures the cheapness with which poor people's lives were regarded. Every other day poor people's lives were lost, through racial and ethnic violence. The sentence plays on the world of infinite choices available to the rich - but for the poor, they can choose many ways to die. In the South Africa of the mid-nineties, if you could not afford to live behind high walls, and had to cross a war zone on foot, or in the trains to get to work - you had at your disposal many ways to die. This shameful reality of death and poverty is what Mda's work exposes, and what the nationalist discourse of unity and African Renaissance seeks to suppress. Through the voice of the present, the poor are given voice. Their deaths are acknowledged as a national disaster that requires us all to attend to it. The voices from the past show the links between how poor people lived then, and how they live today. It shows that in material terms, they are still vulnerable. And their future is being sacrificed, because the children of poor people continue to be victims of violence.

The world of the poor rural classes in *Ways of Dying* is also explored and described through contrasts. Noria's family's riches is in sharp contrast to the poverty around. Apart from Noria's father, Xesibe, who has a lot of cattle the rest of the people are poor. We are told that Noria's classmates, all wore "patched" (72) clothes, their parents could not afford to buy them new uniforms, Toloki's uniform was also "patched all over with pieces of cloth from his mother's old dresses" (72). Unlike other village families, Noria's mother

could afford to buy her ready made town dresses, other girls made do with home made clothes. These descriptions define the rural community as not having access to money - a state of affairs which was carefully engineered by colonialism and entrenched by apartheid, whereby black people were shepherded to about 13 percent of arable land. This thirteen percent consisted of dusty, dry strips of land where people were supposed to stay in groups belonging to specific ethnic groups. Although apartheid is not referred to directly (the word is not written in the entire text, and it is never mentioned in any of Mda's work), the world of the past that Mda describes is clearly one where racial segregation was entrenched and poverty was rife. Apartheid ethnic and racial segregation is clear in the text by the absence of any reference to different races or ethnic groups living together.

The poverty in the rural areas, and his father's meanness, is what prompts the eighteen year old Toloki, to leave his village and go on his three-month odyssey in search of "love and fortune" (60). Mda further complicates the Jim comes to Joburg narrative by adding a personal dimension to Toloki and Noria's departures. Their stories do not start and end with the system that sought to control their lives. Toloki's problems have to do more with the lack of love and validation he suffers from his egocentric father, Jwara. And Noria is a victim of her wild adventures, and of patriarchy. Hence, although it is clear that apartheid and colonialism are responsible for the choices available to Toloki and Noria, the text however aims to sidestep this oppressive past, by showing processes through which lives were affected which are not completely controlled by apartheid. *Ways of Dying* does not go into detail about the many manifestations of apartheid oppression. Mda's text

echoes Ndebele's refrain that apartheid has told its own horrors, hence writers need to narrate stories that are not as debilitating as that grand narrative:

> I came to the realisation, mainly through the actual grappling with the form of fiction, that our literature ought to seek to move away from an easy pre-occupation with demonstrating the obvious existence of oppression. It exists. The task is to explore how and why people can survive under such harsh conditions. The mechanisms of survival and resistance that the people have devised are many and far from simple. The task is to understand them, and then to actively make them the material subject of our imaginative explorations. We have given away too much of our real and imaginative lives to the oppressor and his deeds. The task is to give our lives and our minds to the unlimited inventiveness of the suffering masses, and to give formal ideological legitimacy to their aspirations. (Ndebele 1998: 39)

Ways of Dying focuses on the creative ways through which Toloki and Noria's families survive harsh conditions. Mda writes more on what the characters are doing in their lives: Noria's mother is a brewer and healer, her father a rich cattle farmer, Toloki's father owns a Smithy, his mother is a housewife, and later a domestic worker, Toloki paints, Noria sings and does community work. As mentioned, Mda also explores reasons other than the history of political oppression to account for his characters' pain - such as the tragic love between father and son; or the life-giving love that Noria and Toloki ultimately find. However, Mda does acknowledge the devastating effect of the system of separate development, but he does not grant it total and unlimited power over his characters' lives.

The creative ways of survival that Ndebele refers to and Mda writes about are the subject of feminist scholar, medical practitioner and social anthropologist Mamphela Ramphele's book *A Bed Called Home.* Ramphele's study looks at the way poor families survived the psychic, emotional and material violence they suffered through the migrant labour

system. She spoke to many male migrant labourers in Cape Town who lived in very small hostel dormitories, where their only private space was a bed. The picture on the cover of Ramphele's book shows that the beds were not even free standing, but were stacked one on top of the other. In these small beds, some of the men lived with their wives and children. Ramphele describes the hostel conditions (under which millions of black workers and their families in squatter settlements and in hostels lived) as follows:

> The picture of hostel residents provided by this demographic information shows them to be severely disadvantaged population at many levels. The physical space constraints are considerable; overcrowding, filth and lack of privacy are constant assaults on the dignity of the inhabitants of this space. The pressure on limited facilities is immense, along with the potential for conflict among those competing for access. The noise level to which residents are exposed is overwhelming; there is no quiet moment during which one can gather one's thoughts in peace. Withdrawal from the constant noise and intense human presence is impossible within the confines of this physical space. The fact that some semblance of human community is possible in such an environment is remarkable and a tribute to human ingenuity....
> This book explores the coping strategies employed by the inhabitants of these spaces to enable them to survive under such severe space constraints. It also attempts to examine the social cost of such coping strategies of hostel dwellers for themselves as individuals, and for society as a whole. To what extent are such people, who have to sacrifice so much of their individuality for the sake of survival, able to recapture their creativity and become agents of transformation? (38)

Ramphele argues that, "The constraints of space in the hostels at all levels act as positive incentives to ingenuity, but also limit transformative action in a creative sense" (56). The limited space in which these families live restricted their sense of psychic and creative space, thus limiting the survival strategies they could employ. The living conditions of the hostel dwellers in Ramphele's study are very similar to those which Noria and Toloki live under in the squatter settlements. The living space is very small and precarious, with a lot of exposure to physical disease and emotional trauma. However, as

Ramphele details, the inhabitants create means to make their lives functional and joyful. Some of the strategies involve complex kinship systems whereby people support and nurture each other. Some of the systems have financial benefits such as the burial society and savings clubs. Similarly the people in Noria and Toloki's squatter camp help each other cope. Although Noria does not have a job, she is able to get food from Madimbhaza, she in turn helps Madimbhaza look after the settlement's orphans (victims of the war). However Ramphele points to problems such as the high level of alcoholism amongst hostel dwellers as evidence of the limits of residents coping strategies (56).

In *Ways of Dying* Mda also describes the majority of men as sitting around all day, drinking and talking. So although the text emphasizes the power of creativity and spirituality, there is an acknowledgment of the limits of this resource in the face of debilitating material conditions. Mda's acknowledgment of the devastation that material conditions can effect is evident in how he describes past legislation restricting and destroying people's lives. During Toloki's odyssey for example, he refers to how apartheid affected people when we are told that Toloki passed "through farmlands and through small towns that reeked of discrimination against people of his colour" (59). Toloki witnesses the discrimination when during his journey, he manages to get a job as a malaisha loading bags of mealie on to trucks at a labour camp. Toloki discovers that the job he got used to belong to a man who got fired by his white employers for stealing some maize. The manner in which the man was fired betrays the many instances when black people were at the mercy of white employers and would be over-worked, underpaid and fired at the slightest transgression (real or imagined). Before being fired, the man

was stripped and severely flogged by the employers in an attempt to elicit a confession about the alleged theft. When the man failed to confess, "his interrogators got angry and punched his testicles. Then they tied him to a chair and attached wires to his fingers and neck. They connected these to the electricity outlet on the wall, and the man screamed in agony and lost control of his bowels" (62). Another tragic instance of the conditions in which black people lived is when Toloki's friend and workmate at the labour camp is burnt alive by a white colleague whilst playing a "joke" on him.

The man is said to have played fire tricks on black labourers before. In one of his pranks, he douses Toloki's friend with petrol and sets him alight, killing him. The friend's father does not believe the lie that his son was killed by mistake during a "prank". He tells Toloki that it was a racially motivated hate crime. Under such conditions, no amount of ingenuity or creativity can save someone from physical and emotional trauma; very often harsh material conditions resulted in death from disease or murder.

T.G. Twalo's study (2001) shows that in exploring the material conditions of black people's lives, Mda goes beyond defining race as an oppressive category, and explores ethnicity, gender and class. Twalo highlights how Mda's inclusion of other categories looks more closely at divisions between black people. He states that Mda writes against the grain of nationalist discourse in *Ways of Dying* by highlighting how the text brings out divisions amongst the oppressed - divisions along class, gender and ethnicity. These are differences which nationalist politics of unity within the anti-apartheid movement sought to suppress. Twalo states how *Ways of Dying* differs from a nationalist African literature

text such as *Things Fall Apart* in how it exposes rather than masks differences among the oppressed:

> The nationalist texts seek to restore a sense of African community by criticising colonial domination and asserting common identity, experience and history. They foster a nationalistic feeling among the people, a feeling of oneness, common purpose and common destiny, thus foregrounding African bonding masking the profound discursive ideas and practices that existed among the people. (3)

The nationalistic texts that Twalo refers to are those by the writers of the first and second wave of African literature which placed emphasis on the 'consciousness of kind' among people oppressed on the basis of race by imperial powers. Twalo analyses how Mda foregrounds rather than masks differences among the oppressed saying, "...Mda's concern in the novel shifts away from the fundamental ideology of nationalism - the artificial unitary vision. It is evident that he probes the 'nervous condition' of the victims of ethnic violence, the poor and women" (8). Mda writes about the divisions and conflicts that occur within marginalised groups. He writes against the kind of nationalism that displaces discordant and multiple voices. For Mda, a nationalism (whether South African or African) needs to respect and empower all voices. He argues that an attempt to silence discordant voices will only result in dissent. My argument is that Mda goes further in suggesting that suppressing the voices of women, the poor, and children within the nationalistic discourse of African Renaissance is disingenuous because they comprise the largest number in most societies. Mda shows that the voices of women can especially not be suppressed because he sees women as being at the center of an African renaissance because of the community work that they do. Women are also

central because in the main, they uphold the spiritual and material well being of their families - because they are central in performing most community rituals such as funerals, weddings, baptisms etc.

Mda's assertions that although historically marginal in spaces of official power, women are central to the survival of their communities echoes those of South African feminist Nomboniso Gasa who at the launch of the African Union in July 2002 wrote about the need to include women in the AU agenda:

> As I watched the creation of the African Union (AU) unfold in Durban last month, and listened to African presidents present at the ceremony laud the "founding fathers", I was reminded of ukutshayela[24]. Noting the silence on the subject of women, who were part of the earlier African independence movements, those women's names came flooding to mind: Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and Margaret Ekpo of Nigeria were an obvious entry point. As far back as 1929, women in the southern part of Nigeria combined the struggle for independence with attempts to address gender-specific issues. (2002: 4)

Gasa stated then that it was important for women to be included in official spaces of power, because they have been at the forefront of grassroots struggles against oppression in their communities, and could thus contribute towards closing gaps between the citizenry and leaders in power. She cautioned that leaving women out of the AU's power structures would be counter-productive because they are integral to the transformation of their societies. Mda's texts echo this assertion - that whenever the work of transformation needs to take place, it is usually women who get their hands dirty and

[24] Ukutshayela is a form of praise poetry where Xhosa women sing praises about the achievements of their loved ones. They get quite creative and go to town bragging about the status of the person being praised.

volunteer in community building projects, feeding schemes and so on. Whether in an urban or rural setting, Mda depicts women as the ones who bear the brunt of the poverty caused by intersecting racial and patriarchal economies, and they are the ones who work hardest to alleviate this deprivation within their communities. For example, Cynthia in the radio play *Banned* (from *And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses*) decides to work for the most marginalised members of society:

> Cynthia: Then I heard of a group of community workers who were helping the squatters. Of course you know about the squatters. You have seen their shelters of plastic and cardboard. You have seen bulldozers flattening these shelters, and you have seen them rise again like a phoenix in a matter of minutes. You have seen those women and children, determined to live together as families, stand up in defiance of the police and government officials who are eager to send them to their so-called homelands. I joined the community workers and we tried to help the squatters in various ways, such as collecting donations of blankets, firewood, food and clothing from those of us who were better off. Indeed people's hearts were touched when they learnt of mothers and their babies, out in the freezing cold and rain, having makeshift plastic shelters destroyed and the plastic confiscated by officials. We went to the squatter camps, dispensing mugs of hot soup to the women and children. Children. Some living alone. (*Banned* in *And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses*, 72)

Like Noria, Cynthia dedicates her life to helping women and children. The play, and Cynthia's speech above shows how the state tried time and again to break up families, and to break the spirit of communities - and the women and children worked together so that their communities could "rise again like a phoenix". Like in *Banned*, the time line in *Ways of Dying* covers the period in South African history when the vulnerability of women and children was legislated. In the apartheid and immediate post-apartheid era black women and children were targets of various forms of violence, and were definitely

excluded from state power. And it is the women who in the main, worked for the re-birth and reconstitution of their communities at a grassroots level. This could be explained by the fact that more women than men were not formally working within the machinery of apartheid capital.

It was mainly men who were recruited to work in the mines and factories, and thus because women worked from their homes running small businesses they were more in touch with day to day community issues, and could be involved in community church groups for example, and other voluntary community work. In *Ways of Dying* Mda writes that women can be central in using creative power to build their communities, such as the creative power of Noria's songs, or That Mountain Woman's various herbal remedies.

Margaret Mervis (1998) makes the pertinent point that there are structural and thematic links between Mda's plays and *Ways of Dying*; and particularly "Mda's interest in transformative power of creativity" (41). Mervis outlines that the themes in *Ways of Dying* are similar to those in Mda's plays. For example in *The Hill* (1980) and *The Road* (1982), the exploitation of the black working class through the capitalist migrant labour system, and through land dispossession is explored. In *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland* (1981), Mda imagines a post-independence state where those who fought for freedom are quickly discarded, becoming unemployed and embittered. In *And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses* (1993), the corrupt state whereby civil servants misappropriate food aide meant for distribution among the poor, is questioned. The concern with the dispossessed classes in the post-apartheid post-independence nation state which

characterises Mda's theatre extends to all Mda's novels. In his plays and in his novels Mda explores the limits of nationalism in successfully addressing oppression. He recognises the strength of nationalism's call to unity; and at the same time disavows the kind of unity that does not sufficiently address divisions and oppression amongst the oppressed and marginal.

Similarly, Mda's fashioning of a magical realist narrative voice to suit his developmental agenda permeates his novels of transition. Mervis describes Mda's transition to novel writing as follows:

> In the hiatus between old and new, between ways of dying and ways of living, Mda employs a genre new to him - the novel - to explore new ideas and an alternative ideology through which he can envisage a place for himself and his art in future. *Ways of Dying* points to new ways of living which are able to free the social imagination of the oppressed from the mind-set induced by conditions in apartheid South Africa. (42)

Mervis calls Mda's novels 'fiction for development' and explains as follows Mda's poetics of transition:

> With the writing of 'developmental fiction' based on his theories of Theatre for Development, Mda has moved beyond his own anger at apartheid and the call to arms, to a transitional stage in which individuals and communities have to reconstruct themselves and the societies. In the dialectic between the values and preoccupations of past and present out of which will come a future social order, the question of maintaining or breaking with tradition is of paramount importance. (44)

Mervis identifies the big difference between Mda's plays and his novels as the tangible sense of optimism that runs through *Ways of Dying* when compared to the majority of his

plays. She sees the work of *Ways of Dying*, beyond the gloom of the myriad funerals, as being re-constructive. This is because ultimately the novel confronts death as part of life, and encourages grieving and healing after periods of extreme trauma and pain such as the passage from slavery to post-colonialism, to post-apartheid. In describing the re-constructive work of *Ways of Dying*, Mervis borrows from Chapman (1996) in explaining Mda's move from protest theatre:

> "In *Ways of Dying*, Mda moves from the 'epic' stage of protest and struggle evident in the pessimism of his plays, towards what Michael Chapman calls a "theory of reconstruction" (1996: 427).". In this process, he seems to foreshadow Chapman's recommendation that "the past, even the near past, should not be consigned to the dustbins of history, but...need[s] to be continually recovered and reinterpreted as usable, in the search for new canonisations derived from African challenges and demands" (45)

Mervis states that in *Ways of Dying*, Mda re-creates his theatrical model of the factors that are needed to effect societal change. In his theory of Theatre for Development Mda describes the main agent of change within a society as the "catalyst". This is a person who usually views the society at some distance, so as to be sufficiently critical of it, and to introduce new ideas about how to improve things. Mervis sees Toloki as being the outsider in Noria's informal settlement and so the “'theatrical' role-player and catalyst in the process of employing art to stimulate both individual critical awareness and group conscientisation” (40). As Mervis states, Toloki sees many facets of informal settlement life to which the day-to-day inhabitants have become numb. He realises that the material environment does not have to be drab and depressing, and so builds a shack for Noria that is so beautiful, it looks like a work of art. Mervis further suggests that Mda uses Noria as an “opinion leader” to advance and aide the role of the catalyst:

> In accordance with the requirements for conscientisation given in Mda's blueprint for development communication through theatre it is necessary for a heterophilous catalyst to employ intermediaries or “opinion leaders” (Mda 1993: 85) from within the community. These opinion leaders are generally characterised by a greater empathetic ability, more social participation, perhaps a higher social status or more formal education, and a greater readiness to adopt new ideas than other members of their community. They also have a degree of homophily, being closer to the community or audience. A close working relationship between catalyst and opinion leader is then able to achieve a state of “optimal heterophily” (85) in which disadvantaged members of a community, trapped in a culture of silence, are not only introduced to new ideas but encouraged to create their own messages, thereby effecting social change. (47)

Noria is the ideal 'opinion leader' because she knows the informal settlement very well, and she has survived through a healthy and functional interdependence with other women in the community (e.g. Madimbhaza), and thus becomes the ideal partner for Toloki to begin change in the community. Mervis concludes her points by stating that in *Ways of Dying* Mda plays a similar role to that of Toloki as the catalyst within his own community: he puts forward the idea that society can create communities that are more equitable and transformed. She states that he does this in a form that borrows both from the West and Africa's ways of story-telling:

> *Ways of Dying* is ultimately a combination of Brechtian didacticism and indigenous African participatory story-telling, in which the difference between artist and 'audience' is virtually non-existent. With this novel Mda explores creative ways of resolving race, class and gender-induced oppression in the post-apartheid environment of a black community. Aligning himself with his artist-protagonist, Mda is able, tentatively and self-consciously, to envisage a future which can accommodate his role as catalyst in the development of his people. (55)

Mda's 'fiction for development' addresses Ndebele and Mamphele's concerns about how

marginalised people survive with very little material resources. In his 'Fiction for Development' Mda writes women who are central to transforming the societies and lifting them out of economic oppression. The women access the community and spirituality as resources, and rely on the philosophy of ubuntu to support each other and to improve their lives. Women like Noria and That Mountain Woman and Madimbhaza are colourful, transgressive characters, whose extraordinary life-dramas and efforts at improving their lot are the substance of the African renaissance.

Wayward Mothers

In constructing the women in *Ways of Dying*, Mda draws from a range of symbols that circulate within societal constructions of womanhood, as well as within the African literature canon established by Achebe, Ngugi and others. Mda often uses these symbols in a contradictory manner, where the same character symbolizes both growth and destruction (Moffet 1996). The range of symbols employed by Mda include the mother (symbolizing growth and birth), the healer (healing the nation during and after a period of trauma), as well as the artist/muse (also taking care of the nations' spiritual needs), the virgin, and the destructive whore and witch.

In discussing Mda's use of symbolic representation, I will adopt Leon Strydom's definition of symbolic representations within the visual arts, and how they function. Strydom's description is useful because it goes to the heart of the instability and ambivalence which embodies symbols as a means of communication. The fact that signs are an agreed upon shorthand for communicating means they leave plenty of room for interpretation.

They are also, as Strydom states, best suited to communicating what is spiritual or considered "mystical truth" (Strydom 1983: 12). Hence Mda's use of symbols of womanhood which circulate within African literature and within South African society draws on a measure of shared understanding of the meanings of the symbols; as well as leaving space for interpretation. Strydom gives this description of symbols:

> A symbol is a sign that represents the whole by a part or an abbreviation, the part implying the presence of the whole. A sign used as a symbol acquires a symbolic significance that transcends its immediate, factual meaning. Second, symbolism is based on the principle of complementary association. To grasp the meaning of the symbol, one needs to know what the symbol is a sign of, and to associate that acknowledgment with the sign. Symbolism requires the co-operation of the viewer. Symbols can be rich in significance. The fact that a symbolic sign is an abbreviation or simplification of an object or experience, makes it possible for several objects or experiences to be identified or recalled by the same symbol. (Strydom 1983: 13)

Using the definition above, the representation of That Mountain Woman, Mother of Toloki, and Noria in *Ways of Dying* pushes the limits of how symbols function. As stated by Moffet, one character will have (sometimes simultaneously) contradictory meanings. This results in representations which are unstable, quirky and which do not fit stereotypes of what a particular category of "woman" is supposed to be. Mda craftily plays on the fact that we have more or less similar understandings of what a traditional healer such as That Mountain Woman is symbolic of (kind, humble, modest, very concerned about the community's well-being...). However, each one of us will embellish the image according to our experience and wishes. Mda has characterised That Mountain Women as a healer, but without the usual healing and comforting qualities that

would be expected of a healer. That Mountain Woman is a quirky, abrasive person, who is adept at flouting the rules and sensibilities of her community.

All three women in *Ways of Dying* are written with interesting quirks, they all do not try or pretend to fit into images of calm, "good" women that a patriarchal value system propagates. They seem to revel in behaviour that contradicts and upsets notions of ideal womanhood. They are the kind of outspoken, boundary-pushing women that Pumla Dineo Gqola refers to in the phrase "ufanele uqavile"[25] (2001), a term meant to insult or praise depending on where the user is coming from.

In portraying That Mountain Woman and Toloki's mother, Mda does not go far beyond their symbolism. Possibly because they are supportive characters, their back-story is not explored and unpacked in detail, as is Noria's. We do not fully know who they are, their family background, their likes, dislikes and so on. Their birth names remain a mystery, as the village renames them according to how it perceives them (Twalo 2001). Toloki's mother is not given an identity beyond being Toloki's mother. The novel introduces Toloki's mother as not being particularly kind:

> The earliest reference to Noria as a stuck-up bitch was first heard some years back when Toloki's mother was shouting at Jwara, her angry eyes green with jealousy, 'You spend all your time with that stuck-up bitch, Noria, and you do not care for your family!" (29)

Toloki's mother is not happy with her self-absorbed husband, who indulges himself by spending hours (with Noria as his muse) creating iron figurines, whilst there is no food in

[25] The phrase can mean: " yes, ofcourse she is wayward/uncouth" or " she is wide-awake, brilliant, resourceful…"

the house. Mother of Toloki not only makes her displeasure known, she shouts it, so that Jwara and anyone else within hearing distance will also know. Similarly, Mda introduces Noria's mother as someone who does not conform to patriarchal laws that she be humble and obedient in her husband's presence. The first thoughts or words from That Mountain Woman are aimed at her husband whom she chastises for not supporting their daughters' creative talents:

> 'How dare you, Father of Noria, interfere with the process of creation! Who are you, Father of Noria, to think that a piece of rag like you can have the right to stop my child from doing what she was born to do?' (30)

Toloki's mother has no history beyond her life with Jwara as Toloki's mother. When Jwara destroys Toloki's confidence by failing to acknowledge him after he wins an art competition in primary school, Toloki's mother stands up for him: 'Ha! The stupid images that you make have never appeared in any calendar. Toloki's picture will be seen all over the country' (68).

Although protective of her son, Toloki's mother does not typically symbolize the nurturing, loving and well-behaved mother. She shows no tenderness towards her son or her husband. Her marriage to Jwara seems to be one of necessity as before his madness and death Jwara makes a good living as a smithy. When Jwara dies, Toloki's mother does not seem to care. She only discovers he is dead after some people come to buy his blacksmithing equipment. When she takes them to Jwara's workshop, after years of his refusal to eat or leave his workshop, she finds him dead and almost skeletal. She

promptly sells his equipment, and goes back to living her life, later moving in with Xesibe, Jwara's friend. Mda seems to suggest that the lovelessness in Toloki's home is what leads to the sadness and hopelessness Toloki feels in his life. As an adult Toloki resolves to free himself by leaving to go to the city in search of "love and fortune" (104). Unlike That Mountain Woman and Noria, Toloki's mother has no special skills or talents. The only other information about her is that after Jwara's death, she is forced to "get a job doing washing for the manager of the general dealer's store" (110) .

That Mountain Woman is portrayed with more detail than is afforded Toloki's mother. We are told about where she comes from in the mountain villages, and that she established a reputation long ago for being outspoken and doing as she pleases. After marrying Noria's father and moving to his village she was then given the name, That Mountain Woman, to bring her down a notch or so by implying that mountain people are uncultured and do not know how to behave in society. Even more offensive to her husband's fellow villagers is that her background seems to have neglected equipping her with the correct manners for womanhood:

> It was not only the razor blades that made people wary of That Mountain Woman. It was also because she was different from us, and her customs were strange, since she was from the faraway mountain villages where most of us had never been. We wondered why Xesibe had to go all the way to the mountains to look for a wife, when our village was famous for its beautiful women. That Mountain Woman had no respect for our ways, and talked with men anyhow she liked. (34)

Desiree Lewis' article (*Mail and Guardian* 2003: 23) on the reactions to Winnie Mandela as a "signifier of resistance" for black womanhood on the margins of a society guarded by intersecting misogynist and racist discourses echoes the villages' reactions to Mda's wayward mothers. Lewis comments that by constantly being at the center of controversy Madikizela- Mandela "offers a symbol of contradiction, of subversion, of disrespect, of impatience, an anarchic symbol, a symbol that appeals to those who have nothing at stake in the available status quo". Madikizela-Mandela's tragic transgressions elicit responses that are less about their gravity, but more to do with the fact that as woman, her wrongs are judged more harshly. That Mountain Woman is seen as other by the village, as she operates within and outside village codes as she sees fit. She will not be controlled by an illegitimate system that discriminates against women and elevates men regardless of their worth or value as individuals. I discuss further how Madikizela-Mandela's mother-of-the-nation image circulates in public discourse when reading Njabulo Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* in relation to motherhood in *The Madonna of Excelsior*. Twalo also makes Lewis' point that in a patriarchal society, it is not so much the nature or extent of women's wrong-doing, that is questioned, but rather that the woman dares to disregard patriarchal codes. And Mda challenges these codes "by privileging female voice" (Twalo: 40).

Although other within the community, That Mountain Woman is also well known and respected for being able "to make potent medicines for all sorts of ailments"(34). However there are also rumours that she can curse people (79). Like the Prophetess in Njabulo Ndebele's *Fools* (1983) her possession of healing powers gives her access to

material resources she normally would not enjoy. Unlike the Prophetess, That Mountain Woman is a more complex character, with her own motives and agendas. She has redefined a role for herself within the community as active, a role that goes beyond that occupied by many women during apartheid especially in the rural areas. However, her symbolism as well as her sense of agency still remains within the realm of what is possible for a black woman at that time.

That Mountain Woman's portrayal as mother does not draw on stereotypical ideas of motherhood. As Florence Stratton (1994) states, the mother in the African literature canon is nurturing, protective and often representative of the land that is fertile and must be cared for, and in turn will care for those who live off it (39). Unlike the stereotype of the fertile reproductive mother who resides in the rural area, That Mountain Woman only has one child whom she spoils quite badly. Both That Mountain Woman and Toloki's mother are atypical in this sense, unlike many rural women of their generation, they are not overly burdened by many children. This could be in line with their role as symbolic of motherhood, and not fully engaged in the rigors of conventional motherhood. Motherhood for That Mountain Woman and Toloki's mother does not seem to center around patriarchal preference for male heirs.

They both have one child each, and they are not concerned with the social capital they represent. This is in sharp contrast with a character like Nnu Ego, the female protagonist in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979). Nnu Ego bears many children because of society's expectation that she give birth to sons. Nnu Ego's first marriage

ends in despair because she initially cannot conceive. Her first husband rejects her because of this. She then remarries and succeeds in giving birth to many children whom she struggles to clothe and feed. Her children ironically don't bring her the expectant joys of motherhood, they abandon her, ultimately leaving her to die desolate and alone by the roadside. *Ways of Dying* similarly does not over-valorise motherhood, nor is the act of bearing sons exalted. That Mountain Woman is not at all concerned about bearing sons. She is happy to dote on and support her daughter Noria. She does not seem to consider motherhood as a state to be revered. This is apparent when she does not hesitate to have a sexual encounter with the doctor who delivers Noria! She also often refers to those who anger her as botched abortions (73). Toloki's mother similarly does not seem to view her role as a mother as social currency. She is satisfied with her one son; she does not see any need to have more children, and her husband, Jwara, and her community does not comment on her decision not to have any more children. In fact, Jwara practically ignores his only son Toloki, and Toloki's mother's defense of him is against Jwara's bullying and not because of his social currency as a son.

Lewis' exploration of "depictions of black women as mothers" (1992) reveals how texts can play into, resist or negotiate prescribed patriarchal myths about the role of women. Her analysis of the way Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call Me Woman* (1985) naturalizes supposedly feminine virtues of "orderly, obedient, nurturant and domesticated" (39) motherhood challenges the restrictive stereotyping of either being good orderly mothers or deviant (barren women, spinsters, or prostitutes). Mda upsets such binaries by portraying Toloki's mother, and That Mountain Woman as taking on motherhood in ways that resist

patriarchal prescriptions. That Mountain Woman especially is not the typically "good" mother whose world revolves solely around her child. In addition to being Noria's mother, she is also a healer and a beer brewer. The society also does not brand her "mother-of-so-and-so" as they do other mothers in the community. They stick to the derogatory, That Mountain Woman; the name she is given when she arrives in her husband's village. That Mountain Woman does, however, have at one level a nurturing role in the community because she works as a healer. Her healing work embodies the strong mother Africa trope; in this light, she is the salt of the earth that nurtures and cures illness. The community gladly accept her gifts of healing, choosing out of necessity to temporarily suspend their disdain. Mda's writes That Mountain Woman as both strong and weak. Her weakness is revealed when she, ironically, cannot heal herself and eventually succumbs to womb cancer. Her weakness reveals that, That Mountain Woman is just human after all, and cannot walk “on the rainbow” (34) as she had claimed when she first arrived in the village. That Mountain Woman's illness does not, however, take away her fighting spirit which prevails till her death. Noria, who is the “Nurse” at the funeral describes how her mother “did not just succumb like a coward but fought bravely against death. She was as much of a fighter in death as she had been in life. Even the specialist from the city had exclaimed in wonderment, as people who suffered from her disease did not last that long…” (94). After her death the village becomes aware of just how integral, and important That Mountain Woman was to the community. Her death brings a profound sense of loss that lingers in the village; it dawns on those she leaves behind she was "the invisible backbone that supports the community” (Moffet: 15). When she is no longer alive, the village realises that her gifts of healing were a precious resource which she

shared with generosity and dedication. The respect and awe she commanded during her life is evident by the number of people who come to honour her funeral (94).

The character of Noria is central and is given even greater space for complexity, expressing a gendered identity in flux. The multiple roles inhabited by Noria embody an identity and subjectivity created at the place where patriarchal discourse, material conditions, and her agency intersect. In portraying Noria, Mda has combined the real and imagined in an interesting and contradictory manner. Noria is a combination of the mother, virgin, prostitute, artist and activist.

Growing up, Noria is pampered and spoilt, she is absorbed in the attention that her beauty and vocal talents bring her, earning the name “that stuck up bitch Noria” from Toloki’s mother. Noria is described as beautiful and talented. Her ability to spread joy throughout the village just by laughing is recognised when she is still a baby:

> It is rumoured that when Noria was a baby, she already had beautiful laughter. We say it is rumoured because it is one of the few things we do not know for sure. When That Mountain Woman was pregnant she went to give birth in her village in the mountains, as was the custom with a first child. Since we never had anything to do with the mountain people, we only know about the events there from the stories that people told. They said the nursemaids and babysitters used to tickle Noria for pleasure of hearing her laughter. This went on until her mother had to stop the whole practice after baby Noria developed sores under her armpits. After that, when she was tickled she did not laugh but cried instead, which seemed to spread a cloud of sadness, not only among those who heard her cry, but throughout the whole mountain village. (32)

This magical quality that Noria has to spread joy and laughter is constant throughout her life. However, as the extract indicates, she has equal ability to spread misery, as when

the nurses parasitically feast on her gifts of spreading laughter and cause her to cry. The nurses' parasitic and selfish admiration of Noria is how the village appreciates her. Their admiration is not generous as in the same breath with which they admire Noria they utter just how ugly and unpleasant Toloki is, saying "He looks like something that has come to fetch us to the next world" (72).

Noria develops her gifts of spreading joy, when she discovers that she is able to inspire great art through her singing. When she sings, Toloki's father, Jwara can make weird and wonderful iron figurines. Like the village, Jwara has a voracious and selfish appetite for Noria's gifts. So much so that he once kept Noria singing for a week as he was lost in trance creating his figurines (29). Although inspired to create great works by Noria, Jwara does not share anything substantial with her, except to give her sweets. He also does not share his works of art, he keeps them locked away in his workshop. It is only at the end of the novel, after he dies, that Jwara bestows his figurines on Toloki (he tells Nefolovhodwe through a dream to deliver them to his son), a sign that he recognises the error of his selfishness and lack of support for his son's art.

The kind of superficial, parasitic admiration that Noria gets from the village makes her pompous and unkind, qualities that earn her the title "that stuck up bitch Noria" from Toloki's mother (29). Like her unconventional mother, she carries the title with pride and disdain. During her teenage years, Noria leaves school, and starts to prostitute herself to bus drivers. She enjoys the financial freedom, and other treats and presents this lifestyle brings her (72). Noria initially enters prostitution of her own free will. Her father, Xesibe, is

quite well-off and Noria is privileged because of her father's position as a prosperous farmer. Noria is generally better dressed than her peers, she is described as having "... cut a pretty picture in her khaki shirt and pitch-black gymdress, which was ironed every morning by That Mountain Woman. Unlike the gymdresses of other pupils at school, it maintained its sharp pleats, and it was not patched" (71-72). But even though Noria is materially well-looked after by her parents, she still makes the choice to dispense pleasures to taxi and bus driver in return for presents. Adventure and greed is the likely reason for why Noria starts to sell her body to bus and taxi drivers. Noria's decision to exchange sex for favours, echoes that of Lady in *And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses*. When Woman asks Lady why she became a sex worker, she declares "Choice! Godammit, can't a woman choose what she wants to do with her life?" (13). Lady goes further than Noria in developing her sex trade, and passes it on to her teenage daughter, who takes to sex work to keep herself in "Flashy clothes and jewelry" (15). Mda pushes the bounds of controversy by putting forward the idea that some women are not necessarily forced into sex work, but choose that particular way of life. The limits of Noria and Lady's choices are however revealed when, as they get older, sex work ceases to become lucrative because clients prefer younger women. As time passes, Noria gives up prostituting herself when she falls in love with Napu, whom she marries after falling pregnant.

As a mother, Noria moves beyond the unconventional into the absurd. She gives birth to the same child, Vutha, twice, and each time the pregnancy is fifteen months long. When she gives birth to Vutha for the second time, it seems to be by immaculate conception.

Here Mda collapses the two symbols of mother and virgin together. When she gives birth to Vutha for the first time, Noria is a teenage drop-out who has no means of supporting herself or her baby.

Like her mother, That Mountain Woman, Noria has a taste for the risqué and finds herself with a baby and no money (her father refuses to support her), she then makes the choice to follow Napu to town. However, after becoming a mother and wife, Noria is unable to extricate herself from the cycle of poverty and Napu's verbal abuse. Even Napu's grandmother, whom she stays with briefly after the birth of Vutha treats her badly and tries to bewitch her (77). Napu's grandmother supports the patriarchal system that sees women as objects to be abused (Twalo: 48). She tries to insist that Noria stay with her, so that she can have access to the monthly allowance that Napu sends. Noria refuses to give in to Napu's grandmother's bullying, and insists on returning to town with Napu. Napu's relationship with Noria is oppressive and not life giving. The two are trapped in mutual dependence. Noria depends on Napu's meager wages, and Napu's ego feeds off Noria's financial dependence (Napu forbids Noria to work (85)). After the initial breakdown of her marriage to Napu, Noria returns to her parents' home, and it is then that she is forced into prostitution because she has no money to look after herself and her son. Noria becomes determined to give Vutha a good education despite her poverty, she resorts to sex work to finance his expensive private school education. After some months of staying at her parents home, Noria has a fight with her father and returns to Napu's shack. She becomes more headstrong when dealing with Napu's escalating abuse:

> Noria was hardened by now, and she fought back every time Napu tried to be rude or cruel to her. The bravado that he used to muster when he dealt with That Mountain Woman had fizzled out. On the days when he came home drunk, he would try to assert his manhood. But she would put him in his place. (92)

The war between Napu and Noria peaks when Napu kidnaps Vutha and disappears. Napu later leaves Vutha tied to a pole, whilst he goes on a drinking spree. He finds Vutha after a few days, the child having been devoured by dogs.

Noria's life with Napu echoes Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's description of the multiple systems of oppression that black women are burdened with. Noria's life is limited by the burden of apartheid whereby black women could only exist and work in certain places. This greatly reduces her chances of having access to economic resources. Her chances are further reduced by Napu who bullies her, and forbids her to work. Noria is also the victim of the patriarchal society in which she lives. Napu's grandmother sees nothing wrong with the disrespect with which she treats Noria, she shouts at her constantly, and attempts to bewitch her. Noria's father also adds to his daughter's oppression by forcing her to stay in an abusive marriage. In Xesibe's world, women are owned by men, and under no circumstance is a woman to decide for herself that she no longer wishes to be with her husband. Lastly, for many years, Noria is burdened by her own decision to stay with Napu. Noria stubbornly remains with Napu until Napu carries out his threat to desert her and kidnap Vutha. Noria's decision to stay with Napu has tragic consequences for her son; perhaps if she had never gone back to Napu, she could have saved her child.

After Napu's disappearance, Noria goes to live in a squatter settlement. At the settlement, she again conceives another child, Vutha (The Second), immaculately. Noria's pregnancy with Vutha The Second also lasts for fifteen months. Noria's strong-headed nature again surfaces when she stubbornly ignores the warning of the community that she not give her a child a name as tragic as "Vutha" which means "to burn" in Nguni. Noria's prophetic naming is fulfilled when at the age of five Vutha The Second is burnt alive ("necklaced") by The Young Tigers (the settlement's self-defence unit). Vutha's necklacing exposes in a grotesque and exaggerated manner one of the saddest casualties of South Africa's race wars - the sacrifice of childhood and innocence. The 1980s mass-based activism swept up even children as young as ten. Mda's critique of very young children in the liberation struggle is leveled at both the political movements, as well as the parents of the children. The Young Tigers[26] see nothing wrong in training children as young as five to be fighters in "the struggle". Vutha's political experience is described as follows:

> At the age of five, Vutha was already a veteran of many political demonstrations. He was an expert at dancing the freedom dance, and at chanting the names of the leaders who must be revered, and of the sell-outs who must be destroyed. He could recite the Liberation Code and the Declaration of the People's Rights. Of course, he did not understand a single word, since it was all in English. He mispronounced most of the words, too. He also knew all the songs. Even when he was playing with mud in the streets, or with wire cars with the other children, he could be heard singing about freedom, and about the heroic deeds of the armed wing of the people's movement. He, of course, was not displaying any particular precociousness in this regard. All the children of the settlement, even those younger than Vutha, were (and still are) well-versed in these matters. (179)

[26] A refence to the African National Congress's Youth League, known during the anti-apartheid struggle as "The Young Lions"

The "liberation movement" and especially the "Young Tigers" are criticised for using as canon fodder children who could not possibly have a clear understanding of what the fight for freedom was all about. In Vutha's five-year-old mind, freedom songs about overthrowing the oppressive apartheid regime also apply to his mother who is determined to curtail his freedom to bully his playmate Danisa, or to go fishing in the marshlands. What is even more tragic is that "Noria was very proud of her son's political involvement" (179). She does not understand her primary role as Vutha's mother as being to protect him at all costs. Noria is satisfied that Vutha The Second is able to join "the struggle" as an able cadre. The only concern she has is that Vutha should try not to be in front during demonstrations! She shares the community's belief that the children are not too young to be trained as "the leaders of tomorrow" (185). This overburdening of Vutha and his peers with war and politics backfires very badly when the followers of the "tribal chief" who reside in the hostel manage to get Vutha and a friend to betray the details of a planned revenge ambush. The Young Tigers discover the "betrayal" and murder Vutha and his friend by dousing them with petrol, putting tires around their necks and getting Danisa and another young child to set them alight. The Young Tigers are convinced that Vutha and his friend deserved their fate because they are "sell-outs". The community shares their view, as they refuse to tell Noria who exactly ordered the death of her child. Furthermore, her shack is set on fire by faceless, nameless people. The community demonstrates its cold and cruel face when it demands that Noria conspire to conceal and forget her son's murder.

Noria is promised by the leaders of "the political movement" that they will apologise to her in public about the death of her child, and acknowledge the pain she must feel as his mother. This promise is made on condition that Noria quietly accept her child's death. However, the political leaders betray their promise, and grudgingly apologise in private whilst still demanding that she not raise the matter:

> The kind of silence that everyone is demanding from her is that she should not condemn the perpetrators in any public forum, as this would give ammunition to the enemy. Now she sees that what they really want is that she, like the rest of the community, should accept her child's guilt, and take it that he received what he deserved. If she keeps quiet, the whole scandal will quietly die, and no one will point fingers and say, 'You see, they say they are fighting for freedom, yet they are no different from the tribal chief and his followers. They commit atrocities as well.'(178)

Noria, true to form, is not prepared to let the matter disappear:

> Noria, however, refuses to be silenced, and tells Toloki that she will fight to the end to see justice is done. She has kept quiet all these days because she believed that when the national leaders came, they would address the matter openly and with fairness, instead of sweeping it under the carpet. (178)

Despite Noria's determination to fight for the truth about her child's death, the novel does not resolve Vutha's murder. It is not clear whether justice is meted out to Vutha's killers, or whether they remain anonymous, and continue with their lives. Noria continues working and living in the community despite the community's and especially the political leadership's betrayal. She tells Toloki that she is determined to continue working for and helping the community, regardless of what The Young Tigers and the political leaders do and say.

There is a sense that the underlying tension and outbursts of violence within the community continue, it is the way of the times. It is also not certain how or when the many ways of dying will cease - in the interim, mothers like Noria, and children like Vutha are the casualties. In the meantime, the community uses concealment and silence is a coping strategy. Here, Nthabiseng Motsemme's assertions about how silence can be a powerful coping tool during periods when unspeakable violations take place applies. Motsemme has written extensively about how the language of silence was pervasive in South African townships during the harshest end-years of apartheid repression. Motsemme's description of the silence that cloaks communities during times of crises, echoes Mda's portrayal of the twilight, semi-conscious existence of Noria's community after Vutha's death. Motsemme describes the tense, zombified and silent state of many communities in the eighties as follows :

> While it is clear that violence fragments communities, the question remains of how people come to negotiate their 'sense of community' when their neighbourhoods are characterized by fear, secrets and mistrusts, and the community streets become killing fields. This diminished sense of 'community as one knows it' may become evident in simple things like children being told by adults not play with 'others' in the township; when households can no longer talk to one another for fear of being associated and thus labeled (for instance, ANC, Inkatha, informer) and possibly attacked; when people become afraid to share general public spaces such as soccer fields, and the main function of a community hall becomes to hold funeral services. In many South African townships the everyday then became a site that was infused with a potential for random acts of violence, which simultaneously reconfigured community networks and interactions. (Motsemme, 2004: 923)

It is the sense of "fear, secrets and mistrusts" which results in the gruesome killing of Vutha. Vutha does not fully comprehend why the hostel is out of bounds him. He is not privy to the adult understanding of the far reaching ANC/Inkatha war. So when his five-

year-old mind takes him to the hostel, he happily accepts the sweets and meat for which he tells the hostel "uncles" about the ambush planned by The Young Tigers. When The Young Tigers find out about Vutha's "betrayal", their reaction is in line the lack of normality that prevails in communities which have experienced so much violence, they start to tear themselves apart. The Young Tigers do not see the madness of killing a five year old for being a spy, they are numbed by the paranoia and state of war that knits their reality.

Ways of Dying narrates two other instances where human beings turn on each other, and whereby a numbed kind of peace and silence takes the place of reality and human interaction. In his odyssey to the city, Toloki encounters a village that turns on a group of thugs who terrorise the community and rape women. The community avenges these acts by stabbing and burning the thugs. The outburst of violence numbs the community and forever shrouds it in "the smell of burning flesh" (66). Elsewhere, a racist white employer burns his black employer, and defends himself by saying that it was an accident, a joke gone wrong. Noria's shack is also set alight after she goes in search of Vutha's killers and "The whole community was numbed by what had happened"(190).

These tragedies all unfortunately mirror the state of madness that was and in many ways still is South Africa, a paralysed cycle of violence creating more violence. This sporadic, random, never-ending violence that Motsemme writes about created an atmosphere where normal human relations and reactions were not the norm. Death by fire was a reality. The TRC told us of officers who simultaneously braaied meat and people they

had just assassinated, and then went home to their wives and children. Friends, families and neighbours feared each other and sometimes turned on each other because of the constant threat of random violence from the state, and from within a community under unbearable stress. In an environment disfigured by war, silence, as Motsemme theorises, is put to many uses. I will expand her analysis of silence in chapter three, here I refer only to the uses of silence to keep shameful community and family secrets, or dangerous secrets; and silence as a state of numbed indifference. Noria's community is overcome by extreme shame after Vutha's murder, and it tries to cope and recover by silencing Noria. Although she initially refuses to be silenced, Noria ultimately loses the battle over speaking out against the brutal murder of her child. She does not pursue his killers. Noria's decision to continue to work in the community that betrayed her, can arguably be a triumph over violence and loss. Her spirit triumphs over bitterness and hurt, and she continues contributing positively to the community.

Despite the sense of despair, anxiety, and uncertainty within the text, *Ways of Dying* is a hopeful and optimistic novel. Noria's path is undoubtedly one of redemption, and growth through love and art. She re-unites with her childhood friend, Toloki, after having journeyed separately to the city. They fall in love and resolve to teach each other “how to live” (115). It is through their love for each other, that is without reference to materialism, that Noria and Toloki find happiness and freedom. Through love, they also find the ability to express their art (Noria sings and laughs again, whilst Toloki paints), and share joy and happiness with others.

The world of material wealth is denounced through Mda's portrayal of the overweight and exploitative Nefolovhodwe, who like Noria and Toloki comes from the village. Nefolovhodwe also journeys to the city to find riches. He finds his fortune through making expensive coffins for rich people. However Nefolovhodwe cannot find happiness (except through playing with the many fleas on his overfed body).

Noria's final turn from dispensing pleasures for money is articulated through her refusal of Bhuti Shaddy's offer of marriage (81). She resolves to stop taking things from men and to live a life of service and love for human kind. Only then does Noria regain her gift of singing and laughter, which she loses after leaving the rural areas. As artist and muse, she symbolizes a moral and spiritual power that is to some degree rooted in the village that produces her. Noria helps Toloki regain his gift of art, when she sings for him he is able to draw human faces, which he was unable to do before.

The journeys of women like Noria, That Mountain Woman and Toloki's mother, who have had to cross boundaries carrying the mountains of racism and patriarchy on their backs makes pertinent the emphasis by bell hooks for a need to end the politics of domination. Like Mda, hooks advocates a politics based on a spirituality that is fair and inclusive. hooks makes the point that vigilance around oppression is paramount because freedom fighters in one context can be oppressors in another:

> It has always puzzled me that women and men who spend a lifetime working to resist and oppose one form of domination can be systematically supporting another. I have been puzzled by powerful visionary black male leaders who can speak and act passionately in resistance to racial domination and accept and

> embrace sexist domination of women, by feminist white women who work daily to eradicate sexism but who have major blind spots when it comes to acknowledging and resisting racism and white supremacist domination of the planet. Critically examining these blind spots, I conclude that many of us are motivated to move against domination solely when we feel our self-interest directly threatened. Often, then, the longing is not for a collective transformation of society, an end to the politics of domination, but rather simply for an end to what we feel is hurting us. This is why we desperately need an ethic of love to intervene in our self-centred longing for change. (hooks 1994: 244)

hooks also cites the Black Power movement of the sixties as one where the love of self was not fully realised through the love of others. The emphasis on black people gaining power was necessary, but without compassion, it led to blind spots and a masculinist militarism which escalated the movements' ultimate collapse when faced with the might of capital and state aggression. She rightly credits the movement with strengthening the struggle for liberation through shifting the political perspective from reform to revolution, but she maintains that "masculinist sexist biases in leadership led to suppression of the love ethic" (hooks 1994: 245). She states that:

> the new militancy of masculinist black power equated love with weakness, announcing that the quintessential expression of freedom would be the willingness to coerce, do violence, terrorize, indeed utilize the weapons of domination. This was the crudest embodiment of Malcolm X's bold credo "by any means necessary" (hooks, 1994: 245)

hooks writes that Black Power did result in a stronger anti-imperialist consciousness: "Hence progress was made even as something valuable was lost" (hooks: 245). She laments that neither Martin Luther King, who preached about loving the other, nor Malcom X, who emphasized self-love, lived long enough to realise the fusion of self-love and love for others. In practical terms, hooks explains that the realisation of a love ethic is

grounded in service to others. This resonates with Noria and Toloki's service to each other and those around them without necessarily focusing on material gains. This love ethic of service disarms the absurdity of material greed. In her inspirational Ruth First Memorial Lecture, Pregs Govinder states that the aspirations of the ANC-led South African struggle for freedom was rooted in "love and courage". Like hooks, she argues for a politics of compassion:

> The African National Congress, in its alliance with the South African Communist Party and the Congress of South African Trade Unions, maintained that the struggle against a racist, unequal and misogynistic state must be guided by equality, non-racialism and non-sexism. This reflected an understanding of power, which proclaims in the Freedom Charter that "South Africa belongs to all who live in it..."Ours was a movement that recognised the need to transform the systemic power of race, class and gender within a commitment to the poorest" (Govinder 2004 M& G April 23 to 29: 12)

Govinder commends the ANC-led transformation agenda which has shown commitment to positive change through allocating resources to marginalised groups. However, her concern is that there needs to be more courage to face the challenge that "Globally women bear the brunt of poverty, HIV/AIDS and violence" (13). She challenges South Africa to live up to the ideals of the Freedom Charter by seeing the world through the eyes of "the other" - that is, women and children who do not wield a lot of power, the eyes of those that Mda privileges in his novels. Mda counters a politics that shuts out those it deems marginal; he voices absurdity and portrays the realities of the oppressed. The worlds of his characters, however, are not patronised into a sentimental misery - the characters live in a world of magic where the grace of compassion, art, laughter and creativity are integral.

Laughter, Art and Redemption

A number of critics have drawn attention to the role of the absurd and spirituality through artistic expression in how *Ways of Dying* narrates South Africa's transition. Rita Barnard (2004), describes the novel as "Janus faced" looking back at the horror of apartheid whilst at the same time hoping for a good future. Barnard draws from Bakhtin's thesis on laughter as an expression of freedom (especially when the under-classes mock and parody official discourse). The janus-faced nature of the novel escalates into the absurd and grotesque, hence eliciting a liberatory laughter. Barnard expands that Mda's use of laughter also embodies cruelty (as in the case of Toloki's boss who kills his friend and then laughs (65)), and laughter can turn to mourning or sadness (Noria's friend dies laughing (44)). Barnard's points can be expanded to include the novel's use of laughter as a way to gain life and happiness. Noria's laughter uplifts the village and spreads happiness:

> We were not surprised, really, that Noria had all this power to change mediocre artisans into artists of genius, and to make the birds and the bees pause in their business of living and pay audience to her. In fact, one thing that Toloki used to be jealous about even as a small boy, was that we all loved the stuck up bitch, for she had such beautiful laughter. We would make up all sorts of funny things in order to make her laugh. She loved to laugh at funny faces, and some villagers gained great expertise in making them. A particular young man called Rubber Face Sehole knew how to pull all sorts of funny faces, and whenever he was around we knew that we would all be happily feasting on Noria's laughter. (31)

Barnard also states that in the novel, "Zakes Mda celebrates the generative power of African popular creativity. The closing pages of *Ways of Dying* represent the people not as consumers, recyclers, and scavenger, but as fertile and imaginative producers."

Hence the mental and spiritual high induced by laughter and creativity can propel individuals to creatively reproduce and change their environments. However, Barnard's critique of the "liberating power" of laughter in the novel, does not explore the tension that threatens to eclipse and silence that laughter, a tension that is caused by the twist of contradictory and strange images. Barnard explores the various images that point towards frivolity but does not pay attention to tensions that arise. Does Mda not threaten to collapse his anti-materialist message, through fashioning a work that is at some levels so bizarre that it ceases to be believable?

Mpho Mantjiu (2000) also explores the spiritual and creative as a way to renaissance:

> *Ways of Dying* is a story of survival and revival, a restoration of human dignity. Toloki, the main character, is always at the margins of things, he grew up in a village detested by everyone…His redemption does not come through the fulfillment of city life but through love and respect that he finds from his childhood idol, Noria who comes from the same village with him. (3)

Mantjiu points out that Mda sees love and respect as a way of living. Through love individuals can be pushed to lift themselves as well as their communities. And it is creativity that fuels the love between people:

> The development of individuals sometimes lie in their creativity and both Toloki and Noria are creators in their own right. Toloki is good at drawing pictures but could never manage to draw human faces until he is influenced by Noria's singing. It was Noria back in the village who used to sing for Toloki's father and he would be possessed by creative spirit which would last as long as Noria is singing. (9)

Mantjiu sees *Ways of Dying* as articulating how ordinary people are achieving the ideals of rebuilding the nation. However, he does not mention the fact that some of the strategies are quite fantastic and unrealistic. He compares Mda's novel with Seitlhamo Motsapi's poetry in *earthstepper/the ocean is very shallow* (1995). Motsapi's poetry is anti-materialist and almost prayer-like in its elevation of spirituality. However, Motsapi is rooted in a spirituality that is concretely linked to prayer and the respect for nature and all living things. In his later novels, Mda does explore more fully the link between spirituality and nature. However, *Ways of Dying* explores a more abstract, and bizarre, idea of redemption. Toloki has concocted for himself a religious order vaguely based on Buddhist monks, and like them he, for a time, suspends sexual relations, and periodically takes time away from interaction with people. His religious regimen also includes eating swiss rolls and green onions, and is, more importantly, the motivation behind his vocation of Professional Mourner. However, Mda's way of making the point that spirituality and creativity are a powerful tool for survival and liberation is so bizarre that it can leave the reader wondering whether he is in fact criticising those tasked with governance for expecting the poor to live on love and the holy spirit. What should the unemployed do? Become Professional Mourners like Toloki? Mda is a mischievous enough writer to pose such double-edged solutions. His later works do, however, point to Mda's earnest belief that creativity and spirituality can lead to new ways of living. Dikosha sings and dances; so does Qukezwa and the Seller of Songs.

The end of *Ways of Dying* presents a problem which Mda poses to the reader throughout the novel. The problem is in the form of Nefolovhodwe who arrives in Noria and Toloki's

shack with Toloki's inheritance. The inheritance is a truckload of Jwara's metal figurines that he has instructed Nefolvhodwe, through dreams, to take to Toloki. The figurines are so numerous that they don't fit into Noria and Toloki's shack. The lovers are stuck as to what to do with the thousands of iron creatures:

> Toloki and Noria have still not worked out what to do with the figurines. They decide that they will keep one of the figurines in their shack, next to Toloki's roses, to remind themselves where they came from. 'With the rest, Noria, perhaps we should sell them as Nefolovhodwe suggested, and take the money to Madimbhaza's dumping ground.' 'Or we could let them stay here with us, and bring happiness and laughter to the children. We could build a big shack around them, and the children could come and laugh whenever they felt like it.' (211)

Both the suggested solutions of what to do with the figurines are not sustainable. They could sell the figurines and feed the children until there are no more figurines to sell. And finding the space and resources to build a bigger shack for the figurine museum is close to impossible for Noria and Toloki. Mda seems to be suggesting that finding a way to live in the poverty and limited living space of the urban areas is close to impossible, and perhaps Noria and Toloki should go back to the village (unless, of course, Toloki's vocation of professional mourning catches on). Mda's pessimism about the urban space permeates his narrative and thematic over-reliance on the power of the spiritual and creative, without sufficiently grounding it in material realities. Perhaps magic is the only way to survive the urban spaces?

Throughout Mda's beautifully written novel, jarring and conflicting images are forced together, distancing the reader and forcing a process of constantly re-evaluating whether certain ways of living are in fact ways of dying. Or if the dying ways of living are ways of

living? Is the African Renaissance that places importance on materiality and engaging the global economic agenda a way of living? Mda envisions a renaissance that is grounded in the power of spirituality, creativity, love, generosity and compassion - resources ordinary people, regardless of their material status can access. This privileging of the needs of the spirit requires a high commitment to "keeping faith", and a belief in the regenerative and transformative power of love in the face of a world concerned with amassing material, and willing to dominate and bully groups of people in order to amass wealth.

I end this chapter on Pregs Govender's insights that in order for us to successful transform our society we need to *listen* to the needs of the marginalised. And the act of listening, necessitates a period of silence:

Silent

I listen

And hear my voice

Freed of judgment

It speaks

Of possibilities

Wild

Untamed

Being

Whole

Undivided

Connected

To all of life

It speaks of love

From which courage grows

(Govender, 2004 M&G April 23 to 29: 13)

CHAPTER 3: Silence and Violence in *She Plays With the Darkness*

In *She Plays with the Darkness* Mda weaves a multi-layered narrative which looks specifically at political, patriarchal as well as matriarchal aspects of social violence, against a backdrop of Lesotho's turbulent history. Through the central character, Dikosha, Mda explores the possibilities as well as limits of silence as a strategy of resistance and healing. Dikosha reacts to the systems of domination within her society through a complex politics of alternately disengaging and literally giving up speech, and communicating through song and dance.

This chapter will explore silence and violence in the text through, firstly, looking at how the text draws attention to its own strategies of resistance to how violence has historically been accepted and perpetuated. I'll then explore the notion of silence(s) as a way of resisting violence within the text, and how strategies of song and dance are put forward and complicated as communicative and transformative vehicles.

She Plays with the Darkness is Mda's second novel, published at the end of 1995 after *Ways of Dying*. The novel is set in Lesotho where Mda spent many years in exile. The

text is framed by Lesotho's three coups, in 1970, 1986 and 1994. Mda uses the same time period to narrate the personal histories of his fictional characters. In this part fictional account of turbulence in Lesotho's history, narrative layers inter-cut and disrupt each other drawing attention not only to the act of recovery, but also to a violent reality.

In *She Plays with the Darkness*, Mda's concerns with violence speak to the idea of an African renaissance, warning African countries that the renaissance cannot thrive in the midst of violence caused by coups, wars, patriarchy, disease, poverty and various intersecting structures of domination. *She Plays with the Darkness* exposes the power struggles among the power-hungry elites within post-independence Lesotho. Mda explores how competing systems of domination clash and intersect at the historical, political, societal, as well as personal levels. The way violence erupts at various points of contact is explored poignantly in the text. Through the text, Mda explores history's constructs, revealing the changing roles of women through time and space, and what those changes mean for a future free from violence and poverty. As in *Ways of Dying*, *She Plays with the Darkness* maps out and questions strategies of resistance and healing, placing women at the center of society's re-constructive processes.

It is important to emphasize that when Mda writes about violence in Lesotho and South Africa, he is careful not to add to the myth that violence is the preserve only of the African continent. He, for example, points to some of the global roots of local poverty, as when his text laments the fact that Lesotho is forced to import staple foods and other basics because of the chaos caused by Western backed coups and wars (81).

Historical narrative as resistant

She Plays with the Darkness as a work of historical fiction is "engaged in the production of a particular sense of the historical" (Green 1997: 11). Michael Green's exploration of historical narratives in African novels focuses on the historical form that he describes as *resistant.* By this he means the form firstly draws attention to its construction, focusing on - rather than erasing - the difference and distance between the present and the past; secondly and more pertinent to this paper, the resistant form points the reader to links between political history and personal stories in a way that the text's themes and concerns become highlighted. In *She Plays with the Darkness* the construction of histories as *resistant,* forces the reader to think about the existence of violence in the present and past, raising questions around why political and patriarchal violence continues unabated.

Political and Personal Histories

Like most of Southern Africa, the area which Lesotho occupies (right in the middle of South Africa) was up until a few hundred years ago inhabited by San communities. However, the San have been displaced by the nearly two million people who reside in Lesotho today. Presently, the population of Lesotho is a mix of the various descendants of peoples who fled the Zulu nation's imperial aggressions (the Mfecane or Difaqane wars of the 1800s). Between the mid- 1800s and the early 1900s, baSotho fought long battles against colonisation by the British, the Cape Colony and later the Union of South Africa. On October 4 1966, Lesotho became independent, and the National Party of

Leabua Jonathan came to power.

Since independence, Lesotho experienced three coups. In 1970 the opposition Congress Party (which later became the Basotho Congress Party, the BCP, and later still the LCD) apparently won the elections. However Prime Minister Leabua Jonathan refused to step down, and instead imposed a state of emergency. In 1974 the government accused the BCP of plotting a coup, and outlawed it. Throughout the 70s clashes between the government and the BCP continued, and hundreds of people died. In *She Plays with the Darkness*, Mda titles three chapters after the country's coups: "The Coup - 1970" (Chapter 3), "The Coup - 1986" (Chapter 7) and "The Coup - 1994" (Chapter 13). In each of these chapters he begins by describing the coups - that is, he gives details of the broader historical narrative. The reader is given a detailed description and analysis of the country's political turmoil during three very unstable decades. This highlights the first point about resistant narratives that they emphasize the passage of time, marking historical moments as specific, and hence resist being subsumed unproblematically into different epochs. Mda encourages a thorough thinking through of each moment in time. In the text the first coup is described as follows:

> At first nobody believed that the government could be so crazy as to declare a state of emergency. The ruling National Party had lost the elections to the opposition Congress Party. But instead of handing over power, the National Party had instructed the Police Mobile Unit to round up the Congress Party leaders and lock them up at the maximum security prison in Maseru. They nullified the elections and continued to rule by decree. People thought the whole thing was a big joke. It wouldn't last, they said, for the masses would rise and overthrow the undemocratic National Party. Everyone knew that the coup was led by two white officers, Roach and Hindmarsh, who had been seconded to the government by Western Powers. These men advised Prime Minister

> Leabua not to hand over power to what they termed 'a communist opposition'. (22)

The master historical narrative which frames the text is told in a way which is accessible and easy to follow. It is also communicated as heard via the popular and far-reaching medium of radio. Mda engages with the discourse of history, which is usually a subject discussed in the hallowed halls of academia, through popular narrative and even gossip. He demystifies the discourse of history, and makes it something that ordinary people can discuss, engage with and analyse - as they do indeed in the shebeens and taxis of Lesotho. He goes further in opening up a politics of popular history by using the broader political turbulence as a frame for the personal histories of the two main characters, siblings Dikosha and Radisene, and those around them. The coups are filtered through their eyes, and we read how their lives are affected, and how they also influence the course of history. Through their stories we witness political violence disrupting the lives of ordinary baSotho. More importantly we see how, as in *Ways of Dying*, violence begets more violence and pervades all levels of society. In the text, Mda uses a dual narrative structure. The first narrative is about the political coups, which is told in more detail through the second narrative, which is Radisene's journey from his village in the mountains to the city in the lowlands, and Dikosha's refusal to have anything to do with the turbulence of the city and its political upheavals.

During the first coup, we learn that Radisene is having some success working as a part-time night school teacher. This is after he leaves his sister Dikosha and his mother, Mother-of-the-Twins, in the mountain village of Ha Samane, when he is offered a

scholarship by the church to finish high school in a lowland city school in Mafeteng.

By the time the 1970 coup occurs, Radisene is living a relatively successful life when compared to the poverty around him, and the poverty he left behind at Ha Samane. Through this chapter, we see the coup from Radisene's point of view, as he keeps up with the news via radio and via the gossip at the local bar. The state of emergency touches Radisene personally when one of his drinking companions, a policeman called Trooper Motsohi, tries to show just how macho he can be and beats Radisene up quite badly for breaking the curfew. The other policemen with Motsohi, rape Radisene's female colleague, a fellow teacher, Cynthia; and they kill his other colleague, old man Makhele. When Radisene tries to report what happened to a policewoman, she just laughs at him, and threatens to throw him in jail for breaking the curfew. By depicting the malicious policewoman, Mda makes the point that violence is not only perpetrated by men. In fact, the vicious policeman Trooper Motsohi is a victim of violence perpetrated by his wife Tampololo, who beats him regularly. The more Tampololo beats Trooper Motsohi, the more viciously he enforces the curfew. Mda shows the links between different forms of violence (political, patriarchal and matriarchal) and the ways in which violence escalates. Mda does, however, focus more on patriarchal violence as the root of most of society's ills.

The state of emergency imposed by Leabua and his fictional allies Trooper Motsohi and Roll-Away continues to unleash more brutality, turning Lesotho into a war zone. In this violent and chaotic environment, trust and humanity are betrayed. Even close family

members turn on each other:

> The days that followed were the saddest that the people had known in living memory. It was as though they were back in the days of Difaqane, when cannibals like Motlejoa ruled the roost, and neighbour cooked neighbour for dinner. As days became weeks, and weeks became months, hope burned in their hearts that things would improve and the beautiful carefree life would return. But things did not improve and the beautiful carefree life did not return. They became worse instead. Something ugly had been unleashed. An ugliness that people had never even suspected lurked inside them paraded out into the sunlight. They amazed themselves, for they had not known this ugliness was there all the time, hiding in the recesses of their blissfulness, waiting to emerge at the slightest provocation. They had woken up in the mornings, smiled at their neighbours, and greeted them with the age-old greeting: Kgotsong...Peace to you all, mothers and fathers...peace to you my children...Peace to you old people...Beautiful people...Peace to you people of the crocodile, and to you people of the lion...Peace to people of the rabbit, of the cat, of the hippo, of the elephant...And to you totems of the east, people of the big tree, and of the red ochre...Children of Sekonyela - Peace! Yet they were shamelessly rendering the greeting meaningless. Sibling turned against sibling as they took different sides, some supporting the Congress Party and others the ruling National Party. (34)

The horror of the 1970 coup is more jarring and questionable when compared to the Difaqane of the 1880s. Mda's description of cannibalism during the time of Motlejoa resists appropriation by emphasizing aspects of the war that appear grossly inhuman when viewed from the text's present. By reconstructing the “radical difference” of the past, the novel emphasizes Green's point that the past resists being subsumed into the present, thus providing a more critical and active position from which to understand the present. Mda warns that in the present (of that chapter being 1970), violence is being given free reign, and he reminds us of the darkness that the human heart is capable of, by calling on the memory of Motlejoa. Mda seems to be warning us that if the violence unleashed by Motlejoa could have then, what's to stop it happening now? His warning

makes stark the reality that the difference between peace and war is fragile - and one can quickly turn to the other.

And often, peace is only a mask for lurking danger and distrust. This is demonstrated by the hypocrisy of friends and neighbours who beat and kill each other during the night-time curfews, and by day shamelessly greet each other with the age old greeting of love and respect; "Kgotsong...Peace to you all". The text strips this veneer and lays bare the facts of violence and degradation to which power hungry-politicians have dragged the nation.

She Plays with the Darkness draws sharp contrasts between the world of official politics and historical events, and the histories and lives of baSotho who reside on the margins of the world of official power and politicians. The marginal world is represented by the villages of Ha Samane and Ha Sache and by the world of the mainly working class people of Lesotho who get mistreated and disrespected by the elite in power. Mda successfully juxtaposes the horror and mayhem of the many coups effected by powerful people jostling for more power, and the extremely funny and irreverent characters and scenes which occur in the villages and between the working class residents of the lowlands. Amidst the sadness and pain of instability, poverty and corruption, Mda places a medley of anti-heroes. These characters, like most characters in Mda's novels, have no access to official power, and their quirkiness has the effect of subverting that power through humour and irreverence. They represent the comic, within a deeply troubling and violent reality and history. They are part of Mda's bag of tricks in creating a tragicomedy

that pokes fun at, and unravels the weaknesses of nationalism's aspirations of African unity and progress.

And in the case of Lesotho, nationalistic aspirations include putting forward an image of Lesotho as a peaceful country; the country of King Moshoeshoe I, who favoured using his wisdom and ingenuity rather than resorting to violence like foes such as Shaka. Mda shows the fragility behind Lesotho's image of past peace and tranquility. In reminding us of past brutality, Mda directs us to look more critically at the present. Hence time is used effectively not only as a marker of difference between two epochs, but as a way to reflect, contrast and compare that difference, a process which brings clarity and understanding, resisting easy generalisations. Further, by reflecting back on official history through the personal histories of his unusual and disempowered characters, and by juxtaposing the tragic with the comic, Mda creates a novel that forces a closer look at the workings of power, and how oppressive systems intersect.

In narrating the events around the 1986 military coup (half-way through the text), Mda replicates the way he described the first coup in chapter three. He narrates the coup as it is perceived by his fictional characters. Leaving no doubt in the reader's mind about the need to question the myths about the supposed peaceful and gentle nature of the Mountain kingdom, the reader is asked to consider power suspiciously. Mda shows that, like any nation in the world, the descendants of the famous King Moshoeshoe can also fall into a frenzy of power and mayhem. Power can corrupt anyone - as it happened in 1986 when the army, backed by foreigners (once again), staged a coup and installed

King Moshoeshoe II as leader. But the king and the army couldn't agree, and Major general Justinus Lekhanya forced the king into exile, and installed his son King Letsie (1990) as a ceremonial monarch. Mda describes the second coup as follows:

> Against the background of martial music, Radio Lesotho blared out the news: there had been a coup.
> It had finally happened. The government had fallen. Sixteen years after the National Party had refused to hand over power to the rightful winners of the elections, Leabua's government had been overthrown by his own soldiers. And down on Kingsway people were singing songs in praise of the military. They were marching towards the border post, waving branches of trees and bathing their battered souls in what they thought was a new-found freedom (79).

Mda's description of the second coup is told through Radisene's changing fortunes and thus maintains a critical energy. Radisene lost his job as a night school teacher during the first coup because of the 6 o'clock evening curfews imposed (many adult learners were too afraid to attend night school). He resorts to opening a fraudulent insurance claims company, where he pretends to be a lawyer and gets the victims of car accidents to sign over the rights for him to claim accident insurance on their behalf (this is after he did a short spell working in the same business for the corrupt lawyer AC). The victims of the many horrific car accidents usually sign away power of attorney to Radisene just before they die, leaving Radisene to take much more than his share of the insurance money, and leaving the rest to the grieving spouses and family.

Radisene gleefully benefits from the violence and mayhem on Lesotho's unreconstructed roads. In keeping with the corruption and greed which runs through the government, Radisene runs his own side scam, ripping off the poor, and benefiting from their deaths.

Radisene, like Nefolovhodwe in *Ways of Dying*, profits from death and destruction. Radisene uses some of his new found riches to build a huge mansion for his sister Dikosha and his mother up in the mountains. But they refuse to set foot in it because they say it's a waste of money to build such a big house for just two people, and they continue living in their hut next to the mansion. When he first opens his business, Radisene hardly ever goes to visit his family or his big mansion, because he is afraid his competitors in the ambulance-chasing business, especially A.C., will gain the upper hand. He only goes to the village once or twice in two decades just to show off his wealth. Radisene's escalating greed and corruption mirrors Lesotho's decline into more violence and strife.

It is interesting that the drama of the political history narrative happens mainly in the lowlands where Radisene resides. But in the village where his sister and mother live, and where mainly women reside, the political violence is physically and metaphorically far away. However, the violence does begin to encroach on the mountain villages during the first coup. Clashes between National Party and Congress Party supporters are transported to the villages: "After the state of emergency had been declared two years before, the troubles of the city had slowly crept to the mountain villages. Soon neighbour was attacking neighbour. Neighbour was burning neighbour's house."(49). But in the main, the political violence, and the victimisation of the Congress Party by the National Party is confined to the lowlands. The women in the mountains are absent from the chaos and brutality of politics in the lowlands, they remain silent, and go on with the business of developing the rural areas. On one of the rare occasions that Radisene

ventures to the mountains he sees the women building roads:

> Radisene had driven past the self-help workers about five miles from the village. They were breaking rocks with huge hammers and building the road one stone at a time. As was always the case in such development projects there were only two men among a whole drove of women. Men generally did not like to work in self-help projects, even at those times when they were not digging the white man's gold. When the farming season was over they preferred to sit under the trees, drinking beer and playing morabaraba.
> Most of those who worked at self-help projects were women who held families together and single handedly brought up children to manhood and womanhood. (108)

The passage quoted above is a refrain in all Mda's novels, where he laments the Madonna phenomenon in South Africa and Southern Africa - a phenomenon which is the direct result of the slave-like conditions of the migrant labour system. The system forces many men to leave their homes to go and work in the mines and factories of big cities, whilst women stay behind to raise children by themselves. In the mountain villages of Lesotho, there are countless Madonnas, "gold widows" (108) who work hard to try and develop their environment. In the process, countless children are robbed of the love and care of their fathers.

Mda's narrative goes back and forth between the lowlands and the mountains reinforcing the contrasting political and social climate between the city and the village. As a space inhabited mainly by women, the village is relatively peaceful and productive. However the mountains are not utopia, many of the villagers are short of food, especially during droughts. The village also harbors a less visible form of violence against women in not according them the space to advance. This patriarchal violence escalates and is exposed when Mother-of-the-Daughters is raped by an inhabitant of the lowlands,

Trooper Motsohi.

Mda's narration of the final coup (1994) explores how the violence in Lesotho affected the entire Southern African region, especially the newly democratic South Africa[27]. Mda makes a direct reference to democratic South Africa, through the chapter titled: “The Coup – 1994”. In this chapter we are told about how in 1994 democratic South Africa intervened to stop the coup in Lesotho. The origins of this coup seem to have been a disagreement between supporters of the King and those of Mokhehle in the army (in 1993 there were elections (the first in 23 years) and again the BCP won, this time led by Ntsu Mokhehle). The King then decided to put himself back in power. However, he was pressured by Southern African nations (led by South Africa and Botswana) to reinstate Mokhehle. In 1998 there was the very controversial invasion of Lesotho by South Africa and Botswana, after riots broke out when supporters of the King suspected that the elections were rigged. Mda describes the 1994 coup as follows:

> The main topic of conversation in the shebeens of Thibela, and in the whole country, was the announcement by King Letsie the Third that he was suspending both the constitution and the one-year-old Congress Party government of prime minister Ntsu Mokhehle. He had chosen a new ruling council composed of politicians who had lost to the Congress Party in the elections the previous year. The chairman of the council, and therefore the de facto prime minister, was a young ex-convict who referred to himself as a human rights lawyer (173)....
> South African television reported that all Western governments had suspended aid to Lesotho until the restoration of the legitimate government. The trade union movement in South Africa was also threatening to close the borders between Lesotho and South Africa if the Congress Party was not restored to power, and to prohibit their members from handling goods moving into or out of Lesotho. The king and the overthrown prime minister had been summoned to

[27] See Adam and Moodley

> Pretoria for a meeting with Presidents Mandela of South Africa, Masire of Botswana, and Mugabe of Zimbabwe. The young king's actions had destabilised the whole subcontinent. (176)

This passage highlights the point that an African renaissance will not take place if all the continent's countries are not committed to peace. An unstable Lesotho clearly affects the region, and the continent because economies are connected.

Johan Jacob's paper titled "Zakes Mda and the (South) African Renaissance: Reading *She Plays with the Darkness*" (2000), looks at how the novel's engagement with the idea of renaissance translates into the text's forms of storytelling. As mentioned in chapter one, Jacobs begins with a detailed description of the discourse of the African Renaissance as introduced by Mandela in democratic South Africa and developed by Mbeki. He goes on to write that Mda's combination of the symbolic and the real is a new experiment in literary expressions of Africa's renewal, and can be compared to renaissance art in fifteenth century Europe (61).

At a narrative level the idea of renaissance and re-birth is emphasized through the cycles of the coup which happen again and again, as well as the seasonal cycles which bring about natural disasters: "The Great Drought", "The Great Snow", "The Great Rains", and "The Great Mist" (67). Mda writes about the seemingly endless cycle of political and natural disasters which collude to bring about a harsh, unforgiving reality. At the level of character, Jacobs states, firstly, that Mda's quirky characters are part of his attempt at a literary renaissance whereby narrative and character are depicted in unexpected ways:

> Unlike the stereotyped figures in the liberationist stories of Sepamla, Mzamane and Tlali, the characters in Mda's narrative, which relativises the actions of the rulers of Lesotho and of the apartheid state, are allowed their complex, and (extra) ordinary, individuality. The text presents a range of idiosyncratic people: Hlong, "the club-footed old man who [is] the manager and the sole employee of the airfield" (7) and is reputed to be able to call down lightning on his opponents; Ngomo [sic], Dikosha's fiery grandmother who is rumoured to have killed her disabled husband with his bedpan when she finally grew sick of his boasting about his womanising when working on the Johannesburg mines in the 1940s; the good-natured Mother-of-Daughters, who is eventually raped by her son-in-law; Trooper Motsohi, the delicate and handsome policeman who can only assert himself during the terror of the emergency, but who is later in the pay of Radisene, to whom he also surrenders his wife, Tampololo; Tampololo, a university graduate and virago who regularly beats up Motsohi, later turning into the jealous, teddy bear-clutching mother of Radisene's child; A.C. Malibu, lawyer, ex-alcoholic, confidant of Prime Minister Leabua, and the person who first employed Radisene in the lucrative business of third-party claims; and Sorry My Darlie, national football hero and dandy from the village of Ha Sache who eventually loses his imported 'threads', his Valiant and his international hotel lifestyle when he suffers an injury which leaves him incontinent, stinking of urine and covered in flies, and still hopefully pursuing Dikosha.(68)

Amongst the odd medley above, Jacobs identifies Dikosha and Radisene as representing "diametrically opposed lives" (69); the twin characters embody the clash between culture and modernity which is at the heart of Mda's thematic explorations (covering his entire artistic oeuvre). The clothes they wear (Dikosha's red dress (red being the colour of the diviners and healers) and Radisene's grey Sales House suit (69)), and the spaces they inhabit (rural vs urban) symbolise the clash, which the text suggests is in part responsible for the escalating corrupt and violent behavior of the society. Mda's novel tries to find a way for culture and tradition to co-exist. Jacobs points to Misti's graduation celebration as an example of this meeting of worlds (71). At the ceremony, different art forms are celebrated, and the mix of indigenous and western knowledges is dynamic and vibrant. Jacobs concludes with a pertinent point about how the novel's open

and tentative dance with different worlds expresses and embraces the philosophy of ubuntu:

> The fictional choreography of *She Plays with the Darkness* is by no means fixed; it is incomplete, even improvisational, mediating a culture in the process of transition and renewal. At the end of the novel, Dikosha, still amazingly youthful, and Radisene, now prematurely old, are sitting at the top of a hill, as dawn breaks, and wondering what will become of them. Renaissance, Mda suggests, might lie in restoring humanity to his worldliness, and in finding a place in the world for her humanism.(73)

As in *Ways of Dying*, and his other novels, Mda puts forward creativity as a means towards discovering our mutual humanity, it is one of the ways to achieve the healing necessary for a renaissance to begin.

Jacobs identifies the novel's thematic search for humanity as embedded in its search for a new narrative form and rhythm that fuses the best of Africa and the world. For Dikosha, as I will expand, healing begins with the language of art, whereby she re-discovers the ancient songs, dances and paintings of the San. Her new-found forms of expression, especially during her periods of silence are often the only way she is able to navigate a brutal and dehumanising reality.

Silence as Resistance

Silence and solitude is the strategy Dikosha uses to voice her contempt for a society that has no respect for her as a girl and later, as a woman. Dikosha responds with silence towards, firstly, the patriarchal village community that views women predominantly as nameless bearers of children (Mother-of-the-Daughters, and Mother-of-Twins); and as

hands to do all the cooking, and all the endless tedious work women do in the rural areas like fetching water, carrying wood, and working in the fields. Secondly, silence is Dikosha's voice against what her brother Radisene aspires to, which is a life of power - the same hunger for power that causes the political turmoil of the lowlands.

It is not clear exactly when Dikosha's silence begins. She seems to have been born somewhat melancholy and not very talkative - almost as though she was unimpressed with the very fact of having been born into such a problematic reality. Dikosha is known throughout her village of Ha Samane for not speaking much and for being an excellent singer and dancer:

> Songs always rang in her head. Perhaps that is why she did not want to speak, for speaking would interfere with the flow of the songs...
> In her dreams she saw the new dance steps that she was going to teach the girls the next day. Even when she taught the girls she never spoke: she just danced the new steps and the others followed suit. Her dreams were always rich with new songs and dances. Her worst nightmare was that some evil people would steal her dreams, and take her dances and songs away, leaving her as empty as a hollow shell. (3)

The people of Ha Samane seem to tolerate and excuse Dikosha's behaviour, speculating that it stems from the fact that her mother conceived her under somewhat controversial conditions at a night dance. However, unlike the celebratory, communal conditions of her conception, Dikosha (whose name means "songs") is not at all joyous:

> Dikosha's loneliness was self-imposed, for people of the village lived in what appeared to be happy communion. She was happiest in the world of sadness she had created for herself. She felt that if there was neither song nor dance, there was no need to be bothered with people. (4)

Dikosha's isolation is intensified by the necessity for her to leave school after completing standard seven because her mother could no longer afford the fees, and the Catholic fathers from the school pass her over for a scholarship in favour of her brother Radisene, even though she is a much better learner than her somewhat mediocre brother. It is obvious that Dikosha is passed over because of her gender. The incident makes Dikosha's episodic withdrawals into silence from a society which violates people of her gender more resolute. Dikosha rebels on a personal level against a patriarchal society that constantly bombards her with messages that because she is a girl, she is not worthy of care, respect and a good education. Dikosha chooses silence to speak her rebellion.

In interpreting Dikosha's silence, Nthabiseng Motsemme's work on the need to read beyond “oppositional hierarchies of silence and speech” (2004) is useful. Motsemme's has done extensive research and writing on interpreting South African women's silences during the Truth and Reconciliation hearings. Her analysis allows a space where ”words, silence, dreams, gestures, tears all exist interdependently and within the same interpretive field,” and where “the mute always speak “ (910). Motsemme interrogates a post-structuralist Lacanian privileging of the spoken word, and explores a more open signifying system. She is careful to explain that her reading of silences is not put forward to take away from feminist readings where in certain contexts, women are dis-empowered through being silenced. Rather she distinguishes between women being silenced, and women choosing to refrain from speaking. She states that at certain instances during the TRC hearings, women simply sat and did not speak. Her reading is that the women's silences subverted a space which was only prepared to pay token

acknowledgment to the pain and chaos of the women's lives, through an insistence that they speak. She states that: "These repressed utterances then produce a counter-memory vis-à-vis official ones" (922). So by remaining silent within the TRC space, South African women refused to legitimate a process which did not demonstrate a full understanding and hearing of their trauma - especially when the women witnessed the alleged perpetrators of violence against their children and partners give sugar coated "confessions", and in some cases outright lies and deny the level of their involvement in atrocities.

Motsemme explores the different meanings of silence and categorises them as follows: "silence as resistance and courage; silence as the illusion of stability; and silence as a site of coping and the reconstitution of self" (910). She cites examples of black mothers and wives who during apartheid refused to give information to the security police, as an instance whereby the violence and bullying tactics of the state were resisted through silence. Her point can be expanded to include women activists who were arrested and suffered long periods of harassment by the state police, and still refused to divulge information about their political activities. Her second description of silence details how not speaking provided families and communities with the necessary illusion that all was well - even as nights were interrupted by gunshots and running footsteps. Motsemme cites the poignancy of mothers who refused to mention or refer to the horrors of the nights before, and still insisted on performing comforting and nurturing morning rituals such as ensuring that porridge is prepared for breakfast, and that school uniforms are meticulously ironed before the household faces another day of school or work. These

seemingly mundane activities of daily life became more important as they became part of the shield of silence necessary to keep body and soul together. Her third description of silence as a coping, re-constructive strategy is a powerful demand for stillness and space to recuperate after a traumatic experience. Within the drama of the TRC, where speech was privileged, and witnesses were expected to do their part and tell "the nation" what had happened to them, these women's refusal to be coherent - instead choosing the language of tears, screams and steely silence was an act which demanded to be listened to.

Their tears and silence forced a confrontation whereby the unfathomable depths of their shattered lives had to be acknowledged. They also made it absolutely clear how they felt about their children's murderers, by refusing to let the filth of apartheid pass their lips. They were not willing to hold up their end of "the deal", whilst the former security police day after day told half-truths in a bid to escape prison sentences (without even so much as a considered willingness to carry out acts of atonement such as community service, or paying reparations). The women also made it clear to the TRC that healing and forgiveness is a process and will not happen over-night. Ultimately, Motsemme's theories on silence highlight "the limits of verbal language and moves on to suggest that we reinterpret the meanings of silence during violent times." Motsemme's also explores "the diversity of ways women used silence to formulate new meanings and enact agency in constrained surroundings" (914).

A fourth reading of silence in a South African context, that can be added to Motsemme's

theories is that discovered by Mmatsilo Motsei, whereby in seTswana culture one is encouraged "go hupa kotana". In her autobiographical book *Hearing Visions Seeing Voices* (2004) Motsei describes the concept as follows:

> It was at a rural workshop on African culture and gender violence that I facilitated in Kgomo Kgomo in 1997 that I learnt about the concept of go hupa kotana, which literally means keeping a stick in your mouth to prevent you from talking - the English equivalent would be "don't answer back". When I heard this for the first time, my initial reaction was to reject it outright because it reminded me so much of what girls growing up are told: never answer back when a man speaks to you. To my mind, that reinforced the voicelessness imposed on women the world over. However, when I explored this concept further with women elders, I gained a new insight. Yes, the expression does mean that a woman should not answer back. However, there is more to this silence than simple subservience. The difference, these women elders explained, is that not answering back is a conscious and strategic choice rather than a reaction rooted in fear of the repercussions, which may even include a physical beating. Learning to choose our battles and how we fight them, they explained, is one of the most crucial strategies that anyone requires in the fight against dominant forces. (Motsei 2004: 163)

Motsei later discussed the strategy of holding a stick in one's mouth with a colleague from ADAPT[28] who then shared with her advice that she was given by her grandmother who used to tell her "Nke le ithute go fenngwa", which means "Allow yourself not to win all your battles". This way of thinking is radical in its determination to find victories in "defeat", whereby women learn to carefully choose their battles, and not suffer unnecessary confrontations and trauma.

Dikosha's silences shift and change throughout the text, and reflect some of the readings of silence put forward by Motsemme and Motsei. As explained, the origins of her silence and solitude are tenuous. Her silence starts gradually as a resistance and then rebellion

[28] The non-governmental organization founded by Motsei in 1994 aims to protect women and men from domestic violence.

against the society she is born into - a patriarchal society, wracked by political upheaval. Furthermore, the world of the village and the songs that she loves seems to be vanishing quickly. So her initial silence towards the world around her can be read as a stance of "resistance and courage" as theorised by Motsemme (910). For Dikosha to take such a stance, in a community that prizes living in communion above all else, takes incredible strength and integrity. Dikosha's determination to live life as she sees fit, away from society's oppressive rules and regulations initially invites negative comments from her community. However, in time everyone gets used to her "strange" behavior, and dismisses her solitude saying "Dikosha is Dikosha. She does what she likes" (169). Dikosha's rebellious stance is physically reinforced by her decision to wear her hair in dreadlocks, and to always wear the red dress that Radisene gives to her.

At first Dikosha only reserves speech for her beloved "twin"[29] brother Radisene, whom she loves dearly and views as her ally. But when Radisene returns to the lowlands after a brief visit, she becomes even more reserved:

> After Radisene left Ha Samane and went back to his teaching job in Mafeteng, Dikosha's silence became even more intense. She did not utter a single word. She seemed to have lost interest even in the songs of the pumpkin. The other girls came to her house, stood outside the door, and pleaded with her, 'Dikosha, please come to the village playground. We miss your new songs and your dances. Please Dikosha, come and dance with us.' She did not respond. Instead she walked out of the house, passed the girls as if she did not even see them, and disappeared into the veldt. (37)

When Radisene goes back to the lowlands after his first brief visit, Dikosha's silence moves from resistance to sadness. She feels pain at the loss of her brother to the life of

[29] The siblings were born in close succession, and hence referred to derisively as " twins" by their neighbours.

the lowlands, so much so that she even retreats from singing the songs of the pumpkin with her peers. That is when Dikosha starts frequenting the Cave of Barwa in search of healing: "she went to the Cave of Barwa, hoping to recapture the warm moments she had spent there with her brother. And for the next four years she went there almost every day. Once a week she spent the whole night there" (41). This period of Dikosha's silence can be read as "silence as a site of coping and the reconstitution of self "(Motsemme: 910). In the cave, Dikosha takes time out from the community and has time to heal, and pull herself together. Her reconstitutive moments in the cave help her to cope with life at Ha Samane, and Radisene's absence. The next time Dikosha hears news of her unavailable brother is at Misti's graduation party which she attends as a lonely observer, not partaking in the eating or the dancing.

At the feast, Tampololo callously informs guests that Radisene had lost his job as a teacher and was a “rag who is drunk all the time” (50). Tampololo's cruel remark hurts Dikosha even more, and again she retreats to the Cave of Barwa, to try and cope with the situation. Her periodic retreats to the Cave of Barwa heal her broken spirit, and strengthen her resolve to survive. After a spell of recuperating at the cave, Dikosha ventures tentatively into the world of speech. It is significant that Dikosha's decision to start talking again “when it was necessary” coincides with her beginning a different life in the Cave of Barwa where communication is primarily through song and dance. Dikosha's temporary retreat into the life of Barwa fills her with peace and joy, and takes away the need for her to constantly register her protest against patriarchal violence through silence. Dikosha notes with joy that the society of Barwa seems to be an equitable one,

where men respect women as equals. Visiting this magical society gives her temporary reprieve from her deeply divided and unequal society. Dikosha does not bother to explain to those she lives with, how she has discovered a measure of peace and healing in the Cave of Barwa, and why she starts using (in very small doses) speech:

> And she did not consider it necessary to defend herself. So she let the people gossip. She never explained to them that she had another life with the people of the Cave of Barwa. That she ate their honey and their nourishing herbs. That when she was ill she did not need Staff Nurse Mary at the clinic, nor the traditional herbalists and diviners, but was healed by medicine men and women who got their power from the land of the dead and extracted all the sickness from her body in the form of arrows. That she had died many times in the dances of the night, and woken up again in the morning rejuvenated. (71)

Dikosha's decision to start using speech, "when it was necessary", suggests also that she had decided "go hupa kotana". So instead of waging damaging and constant verbal wars, the way her mother and Nkgono do, she simply preserves her energy, and goes about her business, only talking when absolutely necessary. Dikosha does not have to deal with the stress of pretending that all is well, in a society that is clearly not functional. Unlike the other women in the text, Dikosha never really reaches breaking point because she does not subject herself to society's humiliating treatment. Dikosha retreats into silence and solitude. Tampololo, on the other hand, is constantly enraged, and takes it out on Motsohi; Mother-of-Twins is bitter and hardly took the time to nurture her children; Mother-of-the-Daughters succumbed to societal pressure to give birth to sons only to birth ten daughters. All three women reach breaking point when Motsohi is acquitted after raping Mother-of-the-Daughters, and they castrate him. They have had enough of being victims of patriarchy all their lives, and when they decide to stand up for

themselves, their actions are uncontrolled and disastrous. Nkgono is another example. She spent her whole life looking after her abusive husband who had earlier left her to go and work in the mines. The book suggests she murdered him with his bedpan, after becoming fed up with his abusive taunting (40). Unlike Dikosha (who disengages), the other women reach breaking point because for years they spend time and energy trying to engage with, and make sense of a nonsensical situation.

Stephane Ibinga's analysis of “The Politics of Silence in Zakes Mda's *She Plays with the Darkness*” (2005) also explores how “Mda's heroine adopts a silent mode of expression to show the powerful side of female muteness which cannot be synonymous with resignation or subservience" (1). Ibinga's paper draws on work by Michelle Boulous Walker and Julia Kristeva which calls for understanding the meanings embodied in silence. Ibinga similarly identifies song and dance as Dikosha's way of communicating: "She never spoke with anyone, not even with her mother or the girls with whom she sang... Dikosha had long periods of silence, broken now and then by outbursts of song" (3). Ibinga reads Mda's powerful writing of Dikosha's rebellious silence as representing a "male feminism in the writing of the Transition" (1). Ibinga continues that: "To avoid speaking for women or on behalf of women, Mda silences himself by granting total freedom to his female character who chooses to express her resistance against social constraints facing her" (1).

Ibinga identifies the difference in how Mda characterises men and women in the novel as key to his "feminism". Dikosha is described as beautiful, and embodying the ideals of

peace and spirituality that seem lacking in the male characters. Sorry-My-Darlie and Radisene are both concerned and overwhelmed by a crass materialism (4). Ibinga states that Dikosha registers her disapproval of her brother's way of life, by ceasing verbal communication with him because "She feels in some ways betrayed by Radison, who has resorted to evil practices such as alcoholism, adultery and most of all corruption.

Dikosha's silence is powerfully meaningful and it is not a way of denying voice to a woman, but instead, "a new way of articulating her agency." (5). Dikosha's steely resolve extends to her decision not to marry. Like Popi in *The Madonna of Excelsior*, she does not consider romantic unions as part of her world (Ibinga: 3). Dikosha does not risk the possibility of being in a patriarchal romantic union. Ibinga touches on Mda's exploration of traditional dance and music form as an alternative way of speaking: "In his obsession to reconsidering and re-centring traditional society, Mda tries to revive the understanding of the value of ancient means of communication: dance and musical instruments such the sekgankula used by Shana, the mysterious musician" (Ibinga: 7). I will return to this point in the next section.

Ibinga's analysis centers mainly on Dikosha's positive attributes, as he correctly identifies Mda's tendency to identify women characters as goddess-like (as when Dikosha talks with the ancestors in the Cave of Barwa). He reads her trips to the cave as giving Dikosha "a goddess-like power to inflict punishment on the inhabitants of her village whenever they disturb her tranquillity" (8). Ibinga's analysis does not, however, extend to Dikosha's often problematic and unprovoked use of violence, and how Mda in

characterising her as contradictory explores cycles of violence. For example, Dikosha is known and feared for engaging in a destructive and violent form of communication when “she wails like a banshee” (38) after her mother refuses that she draw the colourful and intricate ditema patterns on their rondavel.

Dikosha's wailing is rumoured to have killed her grandmother, Nkgono, who dies mysteriously after hearing Dikosha's wailing. After Nkgono's death, the villagers avoid upsetting or questioning Dikosha for fear she will unleash her violent wailing. Mda's exploration of violence as begetting more violence is portrayed through the contradictory character of Dikosha, whose wails can (allegedly) kill and who as a young girl mesmerises snakes through dance - only to violently kill and eat them! The fact that Dikosha is the victim of patriarchal violence does not stop her from unleashing destruction. Her quest for healing herself and her community similarly does not stop her from being destructive. Dikosha initially sees no connection between the violence she suffers, and that which she inflicts. Her rebellion against her community centers primarily against the wrongs committed against her. Hence her motivation, though valid, is self-preservation, and limited in its self-interest. She is too self absorbed to see the broader picture, which is that systems of domination are not isolated, and if she perpetrates violence in another context, the cycle of hurt and abuse will not be broken. hooks' assertion that a politics underpinned by compassion and a concern for the well being of the world beyond oneself is necessary to eradicate forms of violence and domination, is suggested again through Mda's portrayal of Dikosha's weakness and bullying. Dikosha's yearning for justice seems to only apply to herself, and her shortsightedness is

disingenuous in the long run. Viewing violence through a lens that sees beyond self-interest is key in transcending a mentality of domination:

> ...if we are only committed to an improvement in that politic of domination that we feel leads directly to our individual exploitation or oppression, we not only remain attached to the status quo but act in complicity with it, nurturing and maintaining those very systems of domination. Until we are all able to accept the interlocking, interdependent nature of systems of domination and recognize specific ways each system is maintained, we will continue to act in ways that undermine our individual quest for freedom and collective liberation struggle. (hooks 1994: 244)

Mda's concern for ways in which the status quo is wittingly or unwittingly fueled is emphasized through his portrayal of other characters in the text who are only concerned with defending their own interests. Tampololo, Trooper Motsohi, Radisene and Mother-of-Twins are also portrayed as being trapped by violence. At one level they are victims (as when Trooper is beaten up by Tampololo) and at another they are perpetrators (Trooper is particularly vicious during the 1970 coup). Mother-of-Twins is on the one hand a community builder who gives food to the needy, however, she is also known for her sharp and cruel tongue - especially against Dikosha whom she constantly blames for getting herself conceived at a night dance, and thus making her the laughing stock of Ha Samane village. Again here, Mda's representation of motherhood breaks from stereotypes of the kind nurturing mother. Mother-of-Twins (in contrast to Mother-of-the-daughter) is far from being a gentle soul; and Tampololo is a vicious and mean mother.

A Dialogue of Song and Dance

We are told that unlike other girls in the village Dikosha refuses to do housework, and

other free labour that a patriarchal value system expects her to donate. She spends her time dancing and singing. For Dikosha, dance is initially her language of rebellion:

> The maidens dance round in circles, to the sucking rhythms of their feet making vengeful love to the holes they have made in the snow.
> They sing of lost loves and unfulfilled desires. Of husbands who have been devoured by the city of gold, never to return to their families again. Of young men who have become too big for their gumboots since graduating from looking after cattle at the cattle-posts to ferreting in the bowels of the earth for gold that will never be theirs. A maiden steps into the arena, kicking the mud – soiled snow, and laments in a voice that borrows from the men:
> *If I were ruling and were in command,*
> *I would instruct that all the mines be closed.*
> *Be closed for all these haughty boys.*
> *They bother the girls with love proposals:*
> *You'll hear them say, "Nywe. Nywe, I love you.'*
> *Come my husband!*
> (1)

Dikosha and the other teenage girls sing the songs of the pumpkin which are usually sung at harvest time, when the village has some recreational time:

> These [pumpkin] songs were sung by girls during autumn when food was abundant in the village. The songs celebrated fertility, and teenage girl sometimes sang these as a symbolic gesture to appeal to the ancestors to help them conceive...Basotho girls traveled to different villages and sung their repertoire of pumpkin songs in the hope that they would receive pumpkins. They danced in a circle or semi-circle, repeating dance moves that were synchronised by the whistle of the dance leader. (Laurie Levine *Traditional Music of South Africa* 2005: 123)

The fact that the girls of Ha Samane are now defiantly singing these recreational songs when they should be working, is symbolic of the state of the community - clearly all is not well. There is poverty and social fragmentation caused by colonialism and the parasitic South African migrant labour system. The state of the community is such that, one of the

girls takes on a man's voice and laments the existence of the mines, singing: "*If I were ruling and were in command, I would instruct that all the mines be closed".* Mda's study on theatre for development (1993) details how the Marotoli Traveling theatre made extensive use of *pina-tsa-mokopu* (songs of the pumpkin) to comment on social issues.

The song in *She Plays with the Darkness* (above) is popular and well known in Lesotho (having been recorded and widely broadcast by Radio Lesotho). Mda gives the following context for the song:

> This song is a form of social protest against the eradication of social values brought about by the migrant labour culture. Boys leave their villages to work in the South African mines, and when they return they have undergone a transformation. They are now men, for they have been hardened by their hard labour in the mines. At the same time they have acquired some wealth which, they think, makes them attractive to women. All this is part of gender politics in the villages of Lesotho, while at the same time an indictment of the migrant labour system. The world that these songs reflect is the world of the village today. (Mda 1993: 76)

Mda explains that although *lipina-tsa-mokopu* are primarily sung for entertainment (in line with their origins which were to celebrate harvest time), the songs are also very effective as a form of protest against social ills. Through these songs, young women in villages can attain a level of agency by making their views known. This tallies with Hofmeyr's findings in her study of the *dinonwane* oral art forms that the women who performed that particular form of praise poetry found it not only a way to express their creativity, the poems were also a "potentially powerful cultural resource from which status could be wrung" (Hofmeyr 1993: 35).

Interestingly, in Ha Samane, it is the mothers who interrupt the girls' songs of the pumpkin. The mothers are the ones who enforce patriarchal power because the men are absent, working in the big cities. It is the mothers of Ha Samane who try to restore patriarchal order by summoning the girls to stop singing and dancing and do household chores like cooking. Dikosha's own mother, however, has “long given up hoping that Dikosha would one day participate in preparing the family meals. She would rather be out there singing and dancing.” (2).

Dikosha's association with song and dance is immediately established through her name which means songs in seSotho, the reader is also repeatedly told that Dikosha “was conceived at a night dance” (4). Dikosha's relationship with song and dance vacillates through and between recreation, rebellion, destruction, healing and pleasure. Her quest is for self and communal healing, and she embarks on an unstable journey through various forms of dance.

Analyses of social movement through a close look at song and dance are useful in understanding the politics of resistance and negotiation embedded in Mda's text. Thulani Nyembe's study, for example, of the Sipantsula youth subculture (1993) talks about the social uses of dance. He explains that Mapantsula men and women would dance in shebeens and stokvels sometimes in a celebratory and other times in a threatening manner which made it clear to those watching that members of the Sipantsula subculture were not scared of white people, and in fact they empowered themselves economically by stealing from them.

Beth-Sarah Wright's article on dancehall culture (2003) is another example of understanding social dynamics through dance. Wright describes how the explicit Jamaican dancehall styles can be a subversive celebration and reclaiming of the women bodies, rather than merely pandering and playing to the patriarchal male gaze. She states that:

> Women in particular, despite the arguably misogynist and sexually violent lyrics, are highly visible in the dancehall; with a celebratory boldness they bare their bodies, dance the erotic dances and clearly engage in the pleasure of the dancehall. Dancehall actually seems invigorating for those who listen, enjoy and participate in it. (78)

Wright reads in the women's movements an enjoyment of their bodies, and a reclamation of the dancehall space, that disrupts notions that they are there to merely titillate onlookers. They are dancing for pleasure, and are proud of their agility and athletic skill on the dancefloor.

David Coplan's *In Township Tonight (1985),* also talks about the role of dance in interpreting and expressing social upheaval - focusing on traditional Sotho dance. Coplan explains that dance forms can help individuals and groups negotiate and explain turbulent transitions. Coplan elsewhere (*In the Time of Cannibals,* 1994) focuses on baSotho women's *seoeleolele* songs, which are derived from *lifela* (the songs of the migrants). Coplan explains that *seoelele* songs were used by women to celebrate themselves and their lives, as well as comment on social issues that affected them and their communities. Like the songs of the pumpkin sung in *She Plays with the Darkness,*

the *seoeleolele* songs express their views on the brutal South African mine system which swallows up their men. They express their wish to rule and close down their mines.

Mda writes about different kinds of song and dance of BaSotho and San as a way to explore different strategies of communication, celebration and healing, as well as an inter-textual reference to art forms that may be lost in a fast changing environment. The songs and dances perform different functions, from celebration, initiation, to pleading with the ancestors for rain and good harvests.

Throughout the novel Dikosha dances and teaches different forms of dance - from the dances that accompany the songs of the pumpkin when she is a little girl, to the healing San dances that she learns later on. Earlier in the novel it is interesting that once Dikosha loses interest in the songs of the pumpkin of her youth (after Radisene abandons her and her mother in search of fortune in the lowlands), she sinks further into silence and sadness, and withdraws from celebratory dances such as the famo that the builders enjoy whilst building (on Radisene's instructions) the mansion for Mother-of-Twins and Dikosha (74), and the sensual mokgibo dance that the women enjoy at Misti's graduation (42).

One function that the songs all share is that of recording the community's history. Through focusing on these non-national forms of history, Mda, once again, privileges the voices of ordinary people in constructing histories. The songs of the pumpkin, *lifela* songs and the healing songs that Dikosha learns in the Caves of Barwa tell personal and

communal histories from the singer's point of view. In the chapter titled “The Famo Dance”, the autobiographical aspects of the *seoeleolele* are highlighted, where women and men brag about who they are and their sexual prowess:

> A woman, also brandishing a stick, jumped into the circle and challenged the man in a mock fight. She too was singing her own praise poetry as she danced aggressively towards the man. Their sticks met in the air and they danced back again, giving each other room to prance around. Her poetry was punctuated by the soulful refrain: 'Sewelelele...!Awu....welelele!', as she made wild love to the stuffy air. She sang of her exploits when she used to run around with the Russians in Johannesburg. She boasted that she was a whore who had devoured many men, who continued to tell the story of her prowess in their graves. (58)

The woman at the *Famo* tells her personal history of migration to Johannesburg, and also the social history of the existence of maRussia migrants. The songs and dances documented in *She Plays with the Darkness* can be termed “cultural construction of history” (Coplan: xvii, 1994), a form of history and meaning making that is only recently being nationally acknowledged, through the research being done by various government departments and museums into Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS).[30] Shana's arrival in chapter eight with his sekgankula, a traditional seSotho string instrument, is another effort at recording the history of indigenous instruments and music. The sekgankula is represented as an instrument that soothes Dikosha's soul (after she teaches him beautiful songs through her dreams), and it results in the blossoming of nature as when Dikosha's cabbages start to grow lush when Shana plays his Sekgankula. Through Shana and his music, Mda also infuses a subtle critique that culture and artistic cultural expression is not gender neutral. When Shana first arrives at Ha Samane he sings

[30] See Masoga and Musyoki, *Building on the Indigenous*

misogynist songs about untrustworthy women who prey on men and are responsible for the world's problems.

Dikosha challenges Shana with her own songs about the problems that men cause in society. This is a powerful instant whereby Mda challenges culture and how it can simultaneously empower and disempower (i.e Shana playing beautiful sounding music, whose lyrics are caustic). However, Mda's oeuvre focuses more on the positive aspects of cultural expression, and shies away from rigorously exploring and challenging the more negative and oppressive aspects.

The Iziko museum in the Cape has carefully preserved forms of IKS portrayed in *She Plays with the Darkness* in the form of a multi-media exhibition of carefully preserved San rock art, accompanied by audio-visual personal testimonies by people from San communities and others in South Africa, of their relation to San art and culture. The museum carefully explains that San rock art was a way of ancient communities to document their history, and passing on information about their healing dances and songs, the dances and songs that Dikosha learns in the text:

> Painted panels in rock shelters were part of a changing landscape and would have had a presence quite different from what we experience here. A painting was never 'finished'. Successive generations of artists would add figures or erase them over many years. The composite whole reflects the passage of time, several layers of meaning and the enduring importance of ritual and symbols (Iziko Museum, Cape Town)

Sadly, in the text, because of the displacements and disruptions suffered by the San,

they are no longer able to continue documenting their history through their paintings. Instead, tourists from the lowlands defile the works of art by carelessly scrawling their names all over the artworks, forever destroying an important archive. The scribblings also destroy the transformative power embodied in the dances and songs of the San paintings. The songs and dances passed on to Dikosha.

Dikosha's interaction with San dancers is inward, spiritual and transformative. As she becomes older, she discovers and learns the healing dances of the San people. Through taking part in these dances she temporarily escapes society's systems of domination. She visits the caves of the San where thousands of years ago, they painted their dances and rituals. She goes to the caves and summons the figures on the rocks to dance with her:

> The monster-woman-dancer led the women in a frenzied singing that rose in an ear-shattering crescendo. They were sitting in a circle around the fire. Their thighs touched one another, and they clapped hands and breathed heavily. The men stamped their feet on the ground, dancing around the circle of women. The rattlebones on their legs provided a slow dignified rhythm. They danced on and on for hours without any rest. Soon their buttocks and their bellies began to boil, and some fell on the ground and died. The legs of some of the women trembled. Both men and women staggered and collapsed on the ground. While they were in a trance they pulled out arrows from Dikosha's belly and thighs with their hands. And her pain went with the arrows. The more arrows they pulled out, the more they seemed to lose consciousness. More men and women fell on the ground and died. Dikosha knew from previous experience that their spirits had left their bodies to make contact with the world of the ancestors. On the way they battled with sickness and death. They would come back in the morning armed with more songs that contained the powers of healing. They would implant those songs in their stomachs and buttocks. Their bellies and buttocks protruded precisely because they were reservoirs of the healing songs (51-52)

Through the San healing dances Dikosha heals her own tortured spirit, as well as communicates with her San ancestors seeking answers for social ills. David Cumes' autobiography on African healing describes the San's trance dance as follows: "In trance, the San healer's spirit travels up to the spirit world to discourse with the gods, the spirits, and even the Great Spirit for the good of the clan" (7). Through his work as medical doctor and spiritual healer, Cumes has researched widely the link between physical, emotional and spiritual ailments, and how trance can help to access ancestral wisdoms and answers on how to heal the living.

Ancient San healing dances continue in various contemporary forms. For example, Dikosha's dances with the San people echo San poet, dancer healer, Menoputo's work. Menoputo is over eighty years old, and lives in the northern Cape. She explained during a TV interview (SABC 1 2004) that she heals through her poetry, dance and her music. When she dances, she goes into trance and receives important messages from the ancestors about what the San people must do in order to thrive in the modern world.

Gregory Maqoma is another contemporary dancer who uses ancient San dance for healing. He explained during an interview (April 2005) that he researched the San trance dance as he felt it was relevant to him living in a world where violence continues to be pervasive. He explained how the dances represented on San rock art often looked violent with the dancers bleeding through their noses, and removing arrows from parts of the bodies. Maqoma explained that the blood and the arrows were symbolic of the pain removed during San trance healing dances.

Sadly, after many years of vandalism by visitors to the Caves of Barwa, the magic of the paintings and dancing figures on the cave wall is eventually destroyed. This stops the nightly dances that Dikosha enjoys with Barwa:

> It finally happened. The people of the cave were totally imprisoned by the scribblings and graffiti on the sacred walls. Dikosha was powerless against the most powerful people in the land, and against the tourists from across the seas, who took their cue from the high and mighty and desecrated the cave with their vain names. On the day she learnt of the final imprisonment Dikosha sat on the warm ashes on the floor and summoned her friends with all her might. But they could not come. She tried again and again, but the monster-woman-dancer and her people stayed behind the scrawls. Dikosha knew that this was the end of her healing dances of the night with the people of the cave. It was not only the death of the dance, but the death of a lifestyle as well. Her world and her life with the people of the cave had been destroyed forever. She would have to find a new way of expressing herself and a new life in the world that was far away from this place. She would not come here again. It would be too painful to reawaken all the memories of a beautiful and peaceful life that had been rudely dashed by vandals. (128)

Although her nightly dances with the San end, Dikosha tries to pass on what she has learnt in the Cave of Barwa to her community. She starts healing her fellow villagers, especially the men who are responsible for many of society's acts of violence:

> Indeed, between the dances and the playing with the darkness Dikosha had added a new activity. It began when men were inexplicably drawn to her rondavel...she invited them in and closed the door. In the darkness of her room they began to speak about their beautiful and ugly deeds, and to confess their dark secrets. She merely listened and said nothing. But when the men left they felt relieved. (178)

Dikosha is the modern embodiment of the ancient power of Barwa. Although the figures on the Cave of Barwa are gone forever because of the folly of contemporary visitors to

the caves, their healing art forms can find some way of continuing to exist. Through Dikosha, some of the secrets, songs and dances of the San will survive.

The indigenous songs which are part of the marginal discourse of the mountains and caves contrast with the dominant discourses of power which circulate in the lowlands in the form of the various songs heard on radio when the coups are announced: the 1970s coup has the Mahotella Queens defiantly singing Leabua's refusal to acknowledge the BCP's win, and the 1986 military coup is accompanied by a marshal soundtrack. Frank Leepa's Sankomota (Radisene's favourite band), occasionally vies for airspace with the powers that be, when he declares Africa's need to work hard and unite.

The place of indigenous health and knowledge in post-colonial Africa is also questioned through the character of Misti. Misti goes to Ireland to do a B.Sc in medical technology, and she returns to ”spew” (42) her new found knowledge on to the village community. However the ancestors have another plan for her when she gets called, through her dreams, to be a “lethuela diviner” (119). Misti and her mother struggle to accept her calling, and to reconcile it with her western training. However, Misti resolves to follow her calling and heal using indigenous knowledge.

She Plays with the Darkness

Towards the end of the text Dikosha starts to “play with the darkness”, where she dances for pleasure in solitude. When she resolves to hear the confessions of men and start to heal her community, Dikosha gains the freedom to explore the various pleasurable and

spiritual dances she had been avoiding throughout the novel:

> When she was not in her room playing with the darkness, she went to wherever dancing could be found. She was seen at the tlhope dances, where the drums of the mathuela diviners throbbed. She danced alongside the Zionists as they drummed themselves into a frenzy, possessed by Holy Spirits. She joined the mokgibo dancers as they responded to the rhythm of a lone drum interwoven with singing, whistling and hand clapping. She danced with the little girls, who could easily have been her grandchildren although she didn't look much older than them, in the songs of the pumpkin and the monyanyako dance. She danced the dances of the men: the fast paced ndlamu of the Matebele, and the graceful mohobelo with both its seMolapo and seMatsieng variations. She even danced the famo dance of the fuchu parties of the night, to the rhythm of the organ or accordion drums. (170)

Mda has placed Dikosha as central to healing her society, and creating a climate where economic and political renewal can be realised. When she begins to heal her community, Dikosha starts to gain a freedom that allows her to enjoy the songs and dances she had previously isolated herself from. Dikosha moves "beyond resistance to transformation" (hooks, 1994: 250) when she decides to come out of her isolation and actively engage with and serve her community. In her commitment towards creating the "beloved community", Dikosha seems to have found a balance between her rights and needs, and the needs of the community. However, the balance is short lived, and is disrupted when her brother Radisene kidnaps her to the lowlands, in an attempt to force Dikosha to help him revive his collapsed insurance business.

Ultimately, Mda leaves his novel open-ended, and doesn't resolve the question of whether Dikosha's song and dances succeed in healing her community. The reader

doesn't know what will happen to Mother-of-the-Daughters, Tampolo and Mother-of-Twins who have castrated Trooper Motsohi. And it is not quite clear what happens to Dikosha and Radisene.

Mda's open-ended narrative challenges the reader (in a Brechtian sense) to help the characters in their search for solutions by posing an open-ended question about the post-independence reality, his work embodies current anxieties around Africa's progress beyond power struggles.

CHAPTER 4: Calling the Magenta Sun – Prophesy and renaissance in *The Heart of Redness.*

Hayi uNongqawuse

Intombi kaMhlakaza

Wasibulala isizwe sethu

Yaxelela abantu yathi kubo bonke

Baya kuvuka abantu basemangcwabeni

Bazisa uvuyo kunye ubutyebi

Kanti uthetha ubuxoki

Oh! Nongqawuse!

The girl of Mhlakaza

She killed our nationalism

She told the people, she told them all

That the dead will arise from their graves

Bringing joy and bringing wealth

But she was telling a lie

(song quoted from *The Dead Will Arise* Peires 1989: 21)

Zakes Mda's third novel, *The Heart of Redness (2000)* writes women even more concisely as symbols of the African “identity in the making”. The text's primary symbol is Nongqawuse, the

Xhosa prophetess, infamous for being a leader in the 1856-57 cattle-killing movement which devastated the Eastern Cape, or the areas around and part of British Kaffraria as it was then known. The cattle-killing was the final straw in the protracted colonial project to take over Southern Africa. Nongqawuse's rallying call that amaXhosa kill all their cattle and destroy their granaries so that their dead ancestors could return to free them from colonialism, captivated a people desperate to survive an unimaginably vicious period.

Jeff Peires' carefully researched book on the subject, *The Dead Will Arise* forms the basis of Mda's revisionist text. In the dedication of *The Heart of Redness*, Mda begins by acknowledging his debt to Peires stating: "I am grateful to...Jeff Peires, whose research - wonderfully recorded in *The Dead Will Arise* and in a number of academic papers - informed the historical events in my fiction. As for the people of Qolorha, they will forgive me for reinventing their lives." *The Heart Of Redness* does indeed reinvent Qolorha, creating a host of interesting characters, whose past is very much alive in the present. Within the historic story of Qholorha's believers and unbelievers - that is those who were on opposing sides of the cattle-killing movement - Mda makes up his own Believers and

Unbelievers creating and tracing their lives from the mid 1880s to the present democratic South Africa. The focus is the legacy of two families and how they responded to Nongqawuse's call to sacrifice crops and cattle in an attempt to drive back colonial invasion.

By invoking Nongqawuse's memory, Mda places women at the centre of history and of struggles by Africans to survive attacks on their humanity and identity. The *Heart of Redness* goes further and focuses on rural women who still remain outside the mainstream of history's processes of positive change. In the text, a magical realist narrative is used to blur time lines, and raise questions around the role of women in history, society and the African Renaissance.

Poverty and Prophecy

Mda's historical novel forces us to think critically about the role of women as leaders during pivotal historical moments. Was the prophetess Nongqawuse peddling superstitions that ultimately ruined the Xhosa nation? Or was she the conscience, and guide of a people whose lives were under threat from British invaders and whose cattle were being decimated by lung sickness? The preface to Peires' text raises these questions and describes the power, mystery and far reaching historic significance of the Nongqawuse story:

> Few people who hear the story of Nongqawuse – the young girl whose fantastic promise of the resurrection lured an entire people to death by starvation – ever forget it. Tens of thousands of Xhosa died; tens of thousands more fled their

> homes; hundreds of thousands of cattle were slaughtered, the pathetic victims of a beautiful but hopeless dream. And while the Xhosa nation was lying prostrate and defenceless, Sir George Grey, a self-proclaimed benefactor of the non-European peoples of the world, trampled on this human wreckage: he exiled the starving, crushed the survivors, and seized more than half of Xhosaland for a colony of white settlement. The great Cattle-Killing movement remains an open sore in the historical consciousness of most South Africans. What was it all about? People ask. Surely the Xhosa could not have believed Nongqawuse? There must be something more behind the incident, some secret story behind the story that everyone knows. (Peires 1989)[31]

Mda's novel attempts to fill in the gaps of the Nongqawuse story, by asking more questions, and by exploring how the legacy of the cattle-killings affects us today. The fictional and non-fictional depictions in *The Heart of Redness* begin by re-creating the anxiety that the history of the cattle-killings invokes in South Africa's collective consciousness. This anxiety is embodied in Mda's cast of characters, existing both in the past and in the present; it is specifically embodied in the central character, Camagu. Camagu arrives at Qholorha, the small rural town where Nongqawuse lived, fleeing a life in crisis in Johannesburg. Camagu's flight from the city to rural Qolorha is caused partly by his inability to find a job, as he is unschooled in the art of ingratiating himself to the ruling party (or "The Aristocrats of the Revolution" (36) as he calls them). Camagu initially resolves to emigrate to the USA (where he spent many years in exile), but after a chance meeting with the beautiful NomaRussia, he decides to go in search of her in Qolorha. On arriving in the small town, he soon discovers that "NomaRussia" is a very popular name in the area, and he finds himself something of a laughing stock for travelling such a long way only to go around asking people if they know "NomaRussia". Unfazed by his failure to find the mysterious and elusive NomaRussia, Camagu becomes

[31] See Helen Bradford's (1996) "Women, Gender and Colonialism: Rethinking the History of the British Cape Colony and Its Frontier Zones, C. 1806-70" in *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 37, No. 3.: 351-370 for a feminist reading of the Nongqawuse story.

mesmerised by the place Qolorha, its history and two women - Qukezwa and Xoliswa Ximiya.

Camagu's journey from city to village gives us an overview of what is at stake in democratic South Africa. His journey reveals issues of employment, poverty, development, identity, history and heritage, and how they are all being addressed through the discourse of African Renaissance. The novel's exploration of these issues represents the current crossroads that South Africans find themselves. A crossroads whereby we need to make certain economic and political choices in order to improve the quality of life of all South Africans. The current crossroads, on some levels echoes strongly the crossroads that amaXhosa found themselves in the mid-1800s - whether or not to follow Nongqawuse's desperate call to save them. In the present, the struggle is how best to overcome the poverty caused by a capitalist system that can only support an elite. Nongqawuse is therefore a symbol of past and present conflict and turmoil; furthermore she is a symbol of women leaders at the fore of struggles for survival. As Siphokazi Koyana states, South Africa's complex position as to which developmental route it must take, lies at *The Heart of Redness* (2003: 56).

In Qolorha, Camagu learns about the historic clash between the Believers and Unbelievers, which started during the time of Nongqawuse, and continues to the text's present (the year 2000). The story of the Believers and Unbelievers (in the novel) is that the descendants of Xikixa, who was decapitated by the British during the War of Mlanjeni (1850-1853)(Peires 1989: 35), whose squabbles continue into the present. We are told

that before his untimely death, Xikixa fathered two sons - Twin and Twin-Twin. Twin marries Qukezwa and they have a son (Heitsi) and both strongly believe in the prophecies; thus beginning a long line of Believers. Their present descendants are Zim, his recently deceased wife, NoEngland, and their daughter, Qukezwa. Twin-Twin, on the other hand, marries many wives, has many children, and vehemently disagrees with and disapproves of the prophesies. In the present, Twin-Twin's relatives are Bhonco, his wife No-Petticoat, and their daughter Xoliswa Ximiya. The wars and rivalries span decades, and range from serious matters to the trivial and petty. For example, in the present the pressing issue between Believers and Unbelievers is how to urgently address poverty and unemployment in the area. The Unbelievers are happy to welcome big business to erect casinos and tall shiny hotels, in the hope that employment will be created for locals. The Believers, however, are vehemently against that sort of development saying it will ruin the area with unsightly, garish buildings and destroy indigenous plant and animal species. The Believers are also worried that the traditional tourists to the place, who come for its natural, unspoilt beauty, will stop visiting the area. However not all conflicts between Believers and Unbelievers are about serious matters. Mda also takes full advantage to show the comic and outrageous side of most of their disagreements - like in the well known saga of the dining room suits:

> It had come back to the war between the Believers and Unbelievers. They were in competition in everything. The early manifestation of this competition happened a few years ago when the Ximiyas bought a pine dining table with four chairs. The family became the talk of the community, since no one else in the village had a dining table those days. But Zim, of the family of Believers, had to burst the Ximiya bubble by buying exactly the same dining table, but with six chairs. That really irked the son of Ximiya and his supporters. (3)

Mda's trademark fusion of irreverence, humour, and serious matters runs through the novel:

> The Unbelievers are moving forward with the times. That is why they support the casino and the water-sports paradise that the developers want to build. The Unbelievers stand for civilisation. To prove this point Bhonco has now turned away from beads and has decided to take out the suits that his daughter bought him many years ago from his trunk under his bed. From now on he will only be seen in suits. He is in the process of persuading his wife also to do away with the red ochre that women smear on their bodies and with which they also dye their isikhakha skirts. When the villagers talk of the redness of unenlightenment they are referring to the red ochre. But then even the isikhakha skirt itself represents backwardness. NoPetticoat must do away with this prided isiXhosa costume. But she is a stubborn woman. Although she is a strong Unbeliever like her husband, she is sold on the traditional fashions of the amaXhosa. But Bhonco is a suit man. (79)

The stubborn Bhonco is determined to back up his stand for "civilisation" by getting the correct attire to wear when going to imbhizos to discuss pertinent community issues. The equally stubborn Zim, of course, does the opposite. Zim revels in, and exalts redness, he and the other Believers wear traditional beaded clothing, go to great lengths to distinguish themselves from the Unbelievers. At one point Zim even shaves off his eyebrows to show that he indeed is a true Believer.

Although Mda's novel is full of such comic moments, its primary exploration is of pain and loss, and whether we can move beyond the scars of history. As the overarching symbol of redness (adhering to traditional Xhosa beliefs and values), Nongqawuse's story is a constant reminder of our devastating history. From Nongqawuse, we have the opportunity to learn about the depths of despair, and to think critically about what we have to do in the present to avert the cattle-killing disaster of 1856.

The choices made by the cattle-killing movement affected the course of history in a dramatic and catastrophic way - the effects of which are still felt in South Africa today. Nongqawuse's descendants in Qolorha (a microcosm of South Africa) have to think carefully about the course that history will take, if they are not to repeat the mistakes of their forebears. Central to the abilities of present day descents of Nongqawuse to think through and positively affect history, is the need for a profound understanding of the context of various historical epochs. More importantly, Nongqawuse's descendants must understand how these historical epochs link up. This is the very pertinent point that Gqola's thesis on hidden slave narratives (2004) in South Africa makes. In showing similarities between narratives of oppression during the times of slavery, and narratives of oppression in apartheid and present day South Africa, Gqola shows how firstly history has a habit of repeating itself; and secondly, Gqola identifies how the same slave-owning, colonialist and neo-colonial culprits go to extraordinary lengths to disguise their mission which is basically to hoard the world's resources for a few powerful groups. Slavery, colonialism, imperialism, apartheid, capitalism, patriarchy, neo-colonialism - all these systems, popular at one time or another in history have, more or less the same mission - that is to figure out ways to get as much as possible for as little as possible. Mda's past and present time frames in *The Heart of Redness* addresses this point. The inhabitants of Qolorha must recognise the instruments of their oppression, in whatever guise they come. If they understand how oppressive systems have operated in the past, they can figure out ways to free themselves from those seeking to oppress them in the present. For the Qolorha of democratic South Africa, capitalism and the capitalist elite

are the current culprits of oppression. Mda exposes how oppression has functioned in the past and present to halt progress.

Peires' and Mda's narratives of Nongqawuse's legend provide a nuanced understanding of the history of the cattle-killings by setting in context that history. If we understand the context of the cattle-killings, it will seize to be a story of a ridiculously superstitious people who allowed themselves to be misled by a silly little girl (as the song quoted at the beginning of the chapter suggests). Peires and Mda vividly paint pictures of the horrors that were facing the Xhosa nation in 1856 - horrors that would have turned even the staunchest atheist, religious. Their narratives give the background of the massacres against the Xhosa and Khoi nations that had been intensifying since the arrival of the Dutch and the British in the 1600s. By the 1800s the Xhosa and Khoi were battle-hardened as they had seen relatives enslaved, dispossessed and killed during the frontier wars. Mass migration of peoples happened on an epic scale - children lost parents through battles, and through starvation caused by constant motion and the decimation of crops and cattle by various diseases. One of the main diseases which afflicted cattle belonging to the Xhosa was cattle lung sickness, which was spread off a Dutch ship in September 1853.

Nongqawuse's story bears the marks of all the trauma of the time. She was an orphan whose parents most probably died in battle or got lost during the times of flight from colonial encroachment. *The Heart of Redness* narrates the violence of the times as follows:

> It was an ugly and tedious war that lasted for three years, during which the Khoikhoi people of the Kat River Valley abandoned their traditional alliance with the British and fought on the side of the amaXhosa. Both Twin and Twin-Twin fought in the war. And so did Xikixa, who was still strong enough to carry a shield and a spear. The Great White Chief was frustrated. He was heard on many occasions talking of his intention to exterminate all amaXhosa. 'Extermination is now the only word and principle that guides us. I loved these people and considered them my children. But now I say exterminate the savage beasts!' he told his field commanders. Some of them were seen marching to war with the word 'Extermination!' emblazoned on their hats. (Mda: 19-20)

The passage refers to the War of Mlanjeni (1851-53), so called because the prophet Mlanjeni assured the Xhosa of victory against the British as he would provide them with powerful war charms that were going to turn British bullets into water. The war was the longest and most vicious of all the wars of resistance and resulted in the death of 16000 Xhosa and Khoi, and the comparably low 1000 casualties on the side of the colonials. "The Great White Chief" referred to in the passage, is Sir Harry Smith, who apparently was disappointed at not being obeyed and welcomed by amaXhosa, hence his having to resort to exterminating them.

Peires and Mda's text further explain that the climate of extreme violence and hopelessness of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries resulted in the thriving of many prophets. Hence Nongqawuse was not a lone inexplicable occurrence. The stress, fear, and confusion of the times, caused other prophets before and after Nongqawuse to make similar calls for the need for sacrifice and the use of herbs and divination to strengthen amaXhosa (Peires: 96). There was Nxele a popular prophet between 1816-1819 and Mlangeni who had a following between 1851-53, and Nonkosi and Nombanda were Nongqawuse's contemporaries - these prophets were among many others

attempting to find solutions to colonialism. By writing Nongqawuse back into history within this context, Mda makes Nongqawuse's call become less a story of misguided female leadership and more a story of collective struggle. Peires describes the inter-related and complex factors that resulted in the escalation of the cattle-killing movement as follows:

> It is important to note that the idea of cattle-killing was widespread before Nongqawuse started to speak. This shows that the central beliefs of the movement were a logical development of existing Xhosa religious concepts, namely (1) that the dead do not really die, but live on; (2) that the cattle sickness was a sign from the ancestors that they were troubled and wished to communicate with the living; (3) that if all impure and evil things disappeared, the world would be a perfect place; (4) that all living things on earth originated from the uHlanga, and that the creative power of the uHlanga was not yet spent. The success of the movement also depended on the common belief in the Christian notion of the resurrection, which had been popularised by the prophet Nxele before 1820, and in the new Xhosa/Christian concept of Sifuba-Sibanzi (the Broad-Chested One), the expected redeemer...Nongqawuse's ideas were thus not original. (Peires: 332)

The excerpt succinctly explains how a combination of indigenous Xhosa belief systems around the life beyond death of the ancestors and Christianity (particularly the resurrection) provided the desperate Xhosa nation with hope that their lives would get better, and the thousands who had died during wars would rise again. It made sense to them to kill off the cattle who were already sick and dying from lung-sickness. In their eyes, the cattle were defiling the earth, and besides they were not fit for consumption. So the idea that they should kill off their cattle is not as outrageous in the context of existing death and disease. Peires further explains that although there were many other prophets before Nongqawuse, the reason Nongqawuse's prophecies and her legend resonated is linked to her relationship to her uncle Mhlakaza, and to Mhlakaza's ability to convince

King Sarhili of the truth of the prophecies (Peires: 109). Mhlakaza was a fascinating character, with an extraordinary energy and thirst for religion, a quality which probably enabled him to preach and teach effectively the gospel of the prophecies. In *The Heart of Redness* Mhlakaza's colourful history is narrated from the point of view of Mda's fictional characters:

> It was the land of the prophets. Then the gospel people came. Mhlakaza first belonged to the gospel people. But later he was in the company of prophets.
> The twins knew all about the gospel people. They knew Mhlakaza, even when he was called Wilhelm Goliath. He carried this strange name because he was a gospel man. He lived in Grahamstown with the white people. Twin and Twin-Twin used to listen to him teach the gospel in the company of a white man called Nathaniel Merriman, the Anglican archdeacon of Grahamstown... (Mda: 54)

Mhlakaza's full circle journey from redness to Christianity and back to ancestral worship, encapsulates the politics of tradition and modernity which collided forcefully during the eighteenth and nineteenth century scrambles for territory. Having witnessed the rapid loss of power of amaXhosa and their chiefs, many like Mhlakaza saw Christianity as a ticket to a better life; and as is explained in the passage above, parts of the new religion resonated with ancestral worship. The story of Christ's resurrection must have appealed to both the doctrine of ancestral worship as well as to the loss and sadness many felt during and after the frontier wars. Many people lost loved ones during the violent colonial clashes, and anyone reinforcing the idea that the dead continue to live or will rise dramatically in the manner of Christ's resurrection would have had a sympathetic hearing. When Mhlakaza left Christianity after a disagreement with Merriman and his family about his wish to become a fully recognised preacher, he enthusiastically embraced and preached the gospel of redness. When Nongqawuse, Mhlakaza's

orphaned teenage niece, told him that she was in communication with the ancestors, and they promised the dead would arise, Nongqawuse's words must have sounded very appealing. Mhlakaza's energy and conviction managed to convince King Sarhili of the truth of Nongqawuse's prophecies. Sarhili gave the believers a very sympathetic hearing as he abhorred the colonialist who were decimating his people and who had tricked and killed his father King Hintsa. Sarhili became the most well known of believers, and he gave orders that those under his reign do as Nongqawuse and Mhlakaza advised.

Another important point that Peires makes about why Nongqawuse's prophecies were believed by someone as influential as Sarhili and had such a large following, is that in the context of war and dispossession, rumour and suggestion combined powerfully to convince "those already converted in their hearts" (Peires: 115). Those who had faith in Nongqawuse, only needed the flimsiest of "evidence" to further consolidate their belief that if they destroyed their grain and killed their cattle, they would indeed see their dead family and friends.

Peires admits that there are no eyewitness accounts available from those who believed in the prophesies to corroborate or rigorously test his thesis. And accounts gleaned from correspondence between colonialists, and from interviews conducted with unbelievers must be taken with more than a pinch of salt. Nevertheless, the account quoted in Peires of a young unbeliever provides some clues as to how suggestion could have combined with rumour to fuel belief in the prophecies:

> We ate and danced till after midnight until we were all quite tired and sleepy. When one of the Chiefs said that the hour was come, we were all to get up. We got up and as we were sitting and looking in the direction of the hill where the bushes were [we were told that] we would see the Cattle moving about in the bushes. So we sat looking for some time when the men began one and then another to say: 'Do you see them?' Others would say: 'That is them.' One could see one thing and another thing. My father scolded me and said, 'Now do you believe it...Can you not see the things on the side of that hill?" No. I can see nothing but thorn bushes.'
> (eyewitness account of unbeliever quoted in Peires: 115)

However, unlike the eyewitness, there were clearly many believers who did "see" proof of the dead waiting far off at the place where the sea meets the sky. They were waiting for all amaXhosa to kill off their cattle, only then would they walk across and come and meet their loved ones. Rumour carried news of these miracles witnessed at Mhlakaza's residence. Even if nothing had been witnessed, what was rumoured was that the dead such as king Phalo had been seen. And believers who could not travel to Qolorha to verify the rumours took them as truth (Peires: 116). Mda's text captures the above points by writing about the context as already mentioned - the wars, the lungsickness, the deaths, and mass migrations - in an attempt give a more sympathetic understanding of why people could have believed Nongqawuse. Mda also writes about the power of suggestion in fuelling already present faith in the prophecies:

> Sometimes the new people came riding on the waves. As usual only Nongqawuse and Mhlakaza could see them. Or only those who had been given permission by the prophets were able to see shadows of the new people. Or at best silhouette images at the place where the sea met the sky.
> In most cases, even the prophets themselves could not see the new people with their eyes, for they manifested themselves in the form of imilozi, the whistles that are the language of the spirits. Nongqawuse and Nombanda spoke with the new people in whistles. Then they translated their messages into the language of humans. The fact that only Nongqawuse, Nombanda and

> Mhlakaza could see or speak to the new people enhanced the prestige of the prophets. Many of those who were tempted to believe were converted by this fact. (Mda: 123)

Those who went to Gxarha river trusted in and believed in the power of Nongqawuse as a prophet. What she prophesied made sense as a practical solution to dealing with infested cattle and grain; and it was in line with indigenous and Christian belief systems.

The Heart of Redness puts forward this sympathetic reading of the cattle-killing through its recovery of the nineteenth century prophecies; and in the present through lending a sympathetic ear to the Believers through the character of Camagu. Camagu's assertion that : "... it is wrong to dismiss those who believed in Nongqawuse as foolish...Her prophecies arose out of the spiritual and material anguish of the amaXhosa nation" (Mda: 283) summarises the novel's stance on how to view the cattle-killing.

Although it is useful to read Nongqawuse's narrative through Peires and Mda, and her symbolic presence speaks volumes, we can never know the truth of what happen at Gxarha river; "the novel is as much about her as it is as much about the impossibility of writing her creatively in ways which are satisfactory" (Gqola 2002). Gqola's analysis draws attention to the limits of Nongqawuse's real power and her presence in history and in Mda's novel. Because Nongqawuse does not speak, we can never really know her history and the extent of her agency. What complicates the excavation of Nongqawuse's story in the novel and in our collective consciousness is the shame still felt about the time:

> It is like this Nongqawuse thing. Everyone seems to be ashamed of her. There is a lot of denial in this village about Nongqawuse. She is an embarrassment. Some say she never existed and that her story is lie concocted by white people to defame blacks. Others say she existed but not in this village. She must have lived somewhere else, in Umtata or even in Cape Town. Another group says that even if she did live in these parts, she was a liar and a disgrace. They don't want to hear or know anything about her. (Mda: 173)

Because of many factors - time, shame, patriarchy, racism - Nongqawuse's story remains elusive. *The Heart of Redness* allows the uncertainty of the story to remain, whilst encouraging a more nuanced reading of what may have happened, and who she may have been.

Feminist historian, Yvette Abrahams points to similar challenges in unearthing the story of Sarah Bartmann. Bartmann's history of slavery and physical abuse became prominent in South Africa only after rigorous lobbying by activists that her pickled genitalia, which was being kept in the French Museum of Man, be returned for burial at the Gamtoos river valley - a place that was likely to have been her home, before she was enslaved. The fact that historians could not figure out for sure what exactly Bartmann's name was (Abrahams: 3) or where and when she was born signals the impossibility of ever writing her back into history in ways that are satisfactory. For Abrahams, the knowledge of history outside conventional spaces of academia, is a useful way to imagine Bartmann's life:

> Because the racist nature of the archival material makes it difficult for us to tell the full story of Sarah Baartmann's life, we have to look in other places to give a better picture. Indigenous knowledge systems is a good place to look because it brings us closer to Sarah Baartmann, the person, in a way that conventional history cannot. Hold a leaf of rose-geranium (Pelargonium graveolens) to your

> nose! You are smelling what Sarah Baartmann smelt. In this way you can access her experiences without the medium of the written word. You may even be encouraged to live your life a little bit like she lived it! (12)

Abrahams' use of indigenous knowledges to imagine Bartmann's life supports Mda's imaginative use of Qolorha-by-Sea to recall the spirit of Nongqawuse, and imagine what could have compelled her and others to destroy their livelihood. We have to imagine Nongqawuse's life, her parents gone, everyone and everything around her under assault. The one thing she had at her disposal was faith. Is it surprising that for her that would be a solution? Mda, however, wants us to learn from history. If Nongqawuse and the people of Qolorha had not been so blinded by their faith, could they have reached a compromise, to decimate only the inflicted cattle? Belief in the ancestors and a higher power does not mean blind faith. Appealing to the ancestors for help also means bargaining, negotiating, compromise. If the offering that the ancestors demanded was too high (that all the cattle and crops be destroyed), could they not have conducted rituals and appealed for a less severe intervention? *The Heart of Redness* encourages openness towards different systems of belief, challenging adherence and acceptance of certain religions and beliefs, whilst regarding others with scepticism. However, the novel does also warns against the blind power of faith. Faith (of whatever kind) has to exist within an adaptable framework. Most of the people who believed in Nongqawuse rigidly adhered to the prophecies even as they lay starving - long after the need to discard of infested livestock. Mda challenges rigid and unwavering faith through the character of Qukezwa, Twin's wife. Qukezwa seems to point towards a more practical and survivalist way of believing.

After Mhlakaza's death and Nongqawuse's disappearance, Qukezwa, who up until that point had been a staunch Believer, decides to take practical action by seeking refuge amongst the treacherous amaMfengu, who survived the wars by siding with colonial forces against the Khoi and amaXhosa (293). Qukezwa goes back to believing in the God of the Khoikhoi Tsiqwa and his seven daughters the Seven Sisters. Unfortunately her faith in Tsiqwa does not save her and her family from their tragic fate. They end up being expelled from the refuge with amaMfengu after The Man Who Named Ten Rivers (George Grey, then Governor of the Cape) ordered that all those who participated in the cattle-killing movement should not be harboured or helped. Twin ends up as an inmate of the Kaffir Relief House, and Qukezwa goes wondering in search of her Khoikhoi people (298).

Mda's recovery of Xhosa and Khoikhoi history also accepts the limits of that recovery. The choices available to them, as symbolised through Nongqawuse's dilemma, were severely limited. The past is left unresolved. Koyana (2003) refers to the unresolved nature of what happened at Qolorha as 'dialogism of place'. She states that what happened in 1856 is less about the absolute 'truth' of the matter, but rather it is about what people remember, and the oral narratives that emerge to piece together that past:

> For instance, in Mda's version one can trace how the interpretation of Nongqawuse's prophecies changed with time: from ancestors supposedly emerging from the sea to save the amaXhosa people from colonial conquest to the later version of Russians coming to fight the colonists on behalf of the ancestors. The dialogism of place, therefore, also refers to the way in which Mda-as-writer 'reads' or uses the legend of Nongqawuse and Qholorha for

> purposes that differ from the historian's ambition to uncover what actually happened. Mda uses various fictional strategies (for example, structure, prophecy, myth, mysticism, and magic realism) to treat 'truth' as a relation between voices and the reality to which each refers. In this light, dialogism can be understood as referring to an interactive consciousness. (Koyana: 52)

Koyana's reading emphasizes how *The Heart of Redness* resists putting forward absolutes, and rather privileges many voices in the telling of history. It seeks a more inclusive way of telling, one that privileges dialogue over monologue. Mda's poly-vocality leaves room for different narratives and interpretations of 1856. Even in the present, the dialogue continues. How will Qolorha overcome poverty?

In the present the book does hazard some solutions. One of the solutions focuses on the potential power of Nongqawuse as a symbol in present day Qolorha. By focusing on Nongqawuse as a symbol, Mda leaves room for interpretations of what happened at Qolorha in 1856 to be considered, challenged, but more importantly, for present generations to draw some parallels and to work out solutions to current problems. In the text, Nongqawuse becomes the symbol that ultimately attracts tourist to the seaside town. She is responsible for a new economic dawn, by drawing more tourists to the area:

> 'Nongqawuse really sells the holiday camp,' Camagu tells John Dalton, who is lying in a hospital bed. When we advertise in all the important travel magazines we use her name. Qholorha is the place of miracles. It would have been even more profitable if she had been buried there.' (318)

Nongqawuse continues to be part of history, she continues to be part of the battle by ordinary people against poverty and starvation.

Womanhood and Nationhood

Mda extends his use of woman as symbol in how he characterises the novel's two female protagonists - Xoliswa Ximiya and Qukezwa. The two women represent an economic and cultural crossroads in the novel - a crisis Africans confront when having to choose whether to develop Africa using systems of knowledge which come from the west (represented by Xoliswa Ximiya and her college education) and those that come from Africa (represented by Qukezwa and her intimate knowledge of the Eastern Cape's eco-systems). Xoliswa Ximiya and Qukezwa are described physically as being polar opposites. At the beginning of *The Heart of Redness*, Xoliswa Ximiya is described as follows:

> ...Xoliswa Ximiya walks in. 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. And indeed this is the language they use when they describe them, as if they are talking about a piece of meat. She has a charmingly triste face, and brown dyed hair that she braids with extensions in Butterworth. But people never stop wondering how she is able to walk among the rocks and gorges of Qolorha-by-Sea in those high heels. (10)

Qukezwa, on the other hand is described as follows:

> She is short and plump. She wears a skimpy blue and yellow floral dress. Although she is not particularly beautiful, she is quite attractive. Almost half her face is hidden by a black woollen cap which is emblazoned with the P symbol of Pierre Cardin in green and yellow. (62)

Xoliswa's tall lean frame conforms to what the western inspired world of modelling and beauty magazines would approve of. Her personality also matches her severe and "charmingly triste face". She is quite strict, a bit boring, and over-educated in the school sense - she is a school teacher. Xoliswa Ximiya sees herself as quite "civilised" as compared to the red community she comes from. She is far from impressed by some community members who want to bring back the fashions, culture and values of old, and constantly lashes out against the wearing of the traditional isikhakha skirt:

> 'It does not matter if the president's wife herself wore isikhakha,' says Xoliswa Ximiya dismissively. 'It is part of our history of redness. It is a backward movement. All this nonsense about bringing back African traditions! we are civilised people. we have no time for beads and long pipes!
> The curse of redness! (184)

She becomes increasingly frustrated with her mother NoPetticoat, who will not give up wearing her isikhakha skirts. Xoliswa Ximiya is also dismissive of Nongqawuse and her legend; she sees Nongqawuse as representing the shame of the Xhosa people's defeat in 1856 (173).

Xoliswa Ximiya is sharply contrasted with Qukezwa who "is not burdened with beauty. She is therefore able to be free-spirited"(175). The novel is clearly in support of Qukezwa and what she represents: a more organic, open, African way of being. She knows the indigenous plants and birds by name, and often communicates with her father Zim, in the many whistles that birds use. More importantly, Qukezwa has a keen sense of history and heritage, because through the land, she is able to walk through the trees that

Nongqawuse walked through, smell the flowers that she smelt, and thus imagine Nongqawuse's life. Her excavation of her ancestor is very close to the historiographic excavation of Sarah Bartmann, that the ground-breaking work of Abrahams encourages. To smell and feel the environment that figures like Nongqawuse and Bartmann experienced, brings us a step closer to empathetically, and creatively imagining their lives. In *The Heart of Redness*, Qukezwa teaches her community (and especially Camagu), and us the readers, the value of searching the environment, the history and culture of Nongqawuse:

> "We stood here with the multitudes," she says, her voice full of nostalgia. "Visions appeared in the water. Nongqawuse herself stood here. Across the river the valley was full of ikhamanga. There were reeds too. They are no longer there. Only ikhamanga remains. And a few aloes. Aloes used to cover the whole area. Mist often covers this whole ridge right up to the lagoon where we came from. It was like that too in the days of Nongqawuse. We stood here and saw the wonders. Many things have changed. The reeds are gone. What remains now is that bush over there where Nongqawuse and Nombanda first met the Strangers. The bush. Ityolo-lika-Nongqawuse"[32] (120)

In the passage above, Qukezwa takes Camagu to Nongqawuse's valley. She teaches him about the history of the place, and the power of Nongqawuse's legend. She evokes the trauma of the violence done to both the people of Qolorha, as well as their natural environment. She shares knowledge about the ikhamanga tree, which provides nectar and seeds for birds.

[32] At the 2003 Wits *Colloquium on Popular Literature*, Sope Maithufi pointed out that Mda's inclusion of isiXhosa in the novel is rich and expressive, and functions as a kind of tour through the Xhosa language.

Qukezwa goes beyond sharing knowledge to actively intervening to reverse the damage caused by foreign vegetation on the environment. She regularly cuts the wattle and inkberry trees because they guzzle up scarce water, suffocating local plants, such as the aloe. Qukezwa is hauled before the local court presided over by elderly men, she is unrepentant and defends her actions. Even the elders must concede and "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?" (249). Qukezwa is not constrained by society and many of its underdeveloped laws. She especially will not bow down to patriarchal pressure. As Koyana states, she focuses on harmony with nature and in helping the community progress. She is not cowed by challenges. Koyana provides the following concise reading of the role that Qukezwa plays in her community and in the novel:

> Her organic, harmonious relationship with the natural and spiritual worlds does not prevent her from working for a living, and, although she has menial job as shop assistant and cleaner in Dalton's store, her sense of self is not diminished. Qukezwa is neither under the control of Mrs Dalton's authority nor under the spell of Xoliswa's supposed academic superiority. Similarly, although she loves Camagu and eventually marries him, he does not wield authority over her: she sets the terms of the relationship with Camagu as strongly as she determines when to let go of her dying father's spirit. (Koyana: 58)

The quote correctly identifies Qukezwa as empowered in the womanist sense, whereby she makes choices that are a balance between what is good for her as an individual and what is good for her community - even if she sometimes has to be at loggerheads with that community (as with the case of the chopped trees). Qukezwa is characterised as charming, opinionated and full of mischief. She goes against the stereotype that rural

women are subservient because they lack education. Qukezwa challenges both Camagu and Xoliswa Ximiya's assumptions about what knowledge is. She is well versed in how to live in harmony with nature and constantly admonishes Camagu and other educated people '"...whose heads have been damaged by white man's education"' (119). She is fiercely protective of Qolorha, and the community which benefits from its natural resources. Her main argument against not supporting the city-based capitalists who want to 'develop' the area by building a casino complex, is that it will bar locals from continuing age-old customs such as harvesting the sea for personal and commercial purposes. She also worries that if the area gets 'developed', she will no longer be allowed to come and swim freely in the sea. Qukezwa teaches Camagu this way of thinking and living. In turn, Camagu shares his city know-how of business and development.

As mentioned, Xoliswa Ximiya, unlike Qukezwa, is posited as possessing the kind of charm and knowledge that is out of place in Qolorha. She abhors anything red, and would like to get away from the tiny village that is Qolorha. She does temporarily forget about her wish to get away, however, when she hopes to marry Camagu.

It seems the label of spinster that Qolorha has slapped on her (111) does not quite fit comfortably, and she becomes eager to shed it. However, Camagu (after much confusion) chooses Qukezwa (and all that she represents - redness, pride in African history, heritage and knowledge) over Xoliswa Ximiya. Xoliswa deals with her loss by convincing herself that she is doing the correct thing by sticking to her belief in "civilisation":

> She knows that she will never get Camagu back. He has decided to forsake all forms of civilised life and to follow heathen ways. He is a lost cause. She wouldn't have been happy with him in any case. She stands for civilisation and progress, while he is bent on reinforcing shameful practices and uncultured modes of dress. They deserve each other, he and Qukezwa. They will wallow in redness together. She, daughter of Ximiya, will soon turn her back on this village. (301)

Xoliswa Ximiya then gets a job with the Department of Education in Pretoria and leaves Qolorha for good. Although the book does not endorse Xoliswa Ximiya's kind of empowerment, I argue that she also embodies an African feminist or womanist politics in that she, with the help of her father Bhonco, manages to get an education, and a profession. She even has the courage to move, hundreds of kilometres away from her family, and start a new job. Although she has some silly ideas about what is, and is not civilised, she is quite impressive in her resolve to earn her own living and to follow her heart. Xoliswa Ximiya, thus, subverts Mda's mission to dismiss her as a western clone who does not represent true empowerment. True, she is misguided in a lot of ways, but she does contribute to society, and is a role model in her community because she has demonstrated that women can attain high levels of education, and confidently enter public space.

Qukezwa, on the other hand, although a strong, brilliant character in many ways, does not seem destined to make any other living except working as a cleaner in Dalton's shop. It seems her wonderful split tone singing, her knowledge of the environment will ultimately not earn her a good living. Unlike Camagu, who teams up with MamCirha,

NoGiant and NoPetticoat to start their sikhakha selling cooperative, Qukezwa's elevation will be through motherhood.

Mda's binary use of Xoliswa Ximiya and Qukezwa as representative of the different routes that the nation can take falls back on the symbolic use of women's bodies as representative of the state of the nation (Samuelson, 2005). This binarism simplifies Mda's otherwise interesting engagement with modernity and indigenous knowledges. Qukezwa even ensures that the 'new' nation continues by giving birth to a son, Heitsi. Here again Mda uses the madonna motif when Qukezwa conceives immaculately, without (thankfully) handing her body over completely to build the nation.

Through his binary characterisation of Qukezwa and Xoliswa Ximiya, Mda questions the continuing economic slavery suffered by most South Africans, and Third World peoples in general. He looks at the various solutions put forward by government’s, business and civil society to end poverty, and asks whether they will solve the current economic malaise. He addresses the destruction that can result if there is no sustainable balance between local knowledge, business and the global market.

The villagers of Qolorha debate whether the governments planned ‘investment’ into the area will benefit the community, or will it just be a case of foreign money building huge buildings on unspoilt sites, and negating the very purpose of this ‘development’ when tourists stop visiting the area because it begins to look like the western towns they come from. Qukezwa fights for and embodies indigenous knowledges, long suppressed in

favour of a more capitalistic, western approach (one closer to Xoliswa Ximiya's line of thinking).

Africa's renaissance

One of the solutions that Mda engages is that of entrepreneurship as a way to escape poverty. He looks specifically at how historically African women (who were excluded from participating in the mainstream economy) developed strong entrepreneurial strategies as a way to survive. The women of Qolorha - MamCirha, NoGiant, and later NoPetticoat - team up with Camagu to form a co-op that supplies hotels with seafood, and they later get into the business of making African fashion. They, like Qukezwa, use indigenous knowledge to run successful entrepreneurial ventures. Their knowledge of 'redness' is better suited to their environment.

In considering the African renaissance within *The Heart of Redness* (and Mda's oeuvre's as a whole), it is important to re-visit the place of history and heritage in Mda's novels. It is in encouraging another look at history, that Mda puts forward new ways to look at and understand the past, and craft viable futures.

It is again useful to return to Green's thesis on resistant historical narratives and their insistence on crossing boundaries "without flattening difference" (30). Green's analysis of

"novel histories" is influenced by Foucault, Jameson and Derrida's scepticism in regarding history as known fact which is continuous and linear. Green's resistant form foregrounds fracture and self-reflexivity. In this guise (resistant form) Green posits that the historical novel which writes the present as history will be more open to analyses of the past, present and future, yet resist being appropriated. He argues that the resistant form is useful especially in understanding South Africa's divided and contested histories:

> 'History' is constantly and urgently mobilised by the different factions created in such a project, and if it is not to be merely subsumed into the prevailing and all too often bloody and vicious present-mindedness, we must find terms upon which it can challenge the present and force the different positions within the present to examine the specificities of their positionality. To do this, history must be accorded a force of its own and treated as valid in itself, as it were, and not simply something entirely open to the manipulation of the present. (Green: 33)

In line with Green's thesis, *The Heart of Redness* raises as many questions about the past as it attempts to answer, it resists being read and appropriated via contemporary framing. What happened at Qolorha is not resolved, and cannot be resolved from the privilege of the present. Even as the links between colonial and neo-colonial systems of oppression are made through Mda's fictional narrative, the many possible versions of the Nongqawuse story remain. The past and present exist in their difference and provoke a critique of history and the historical novel form. We are asked to think of ways to avoid the horrors of the past, and to work towards uplifting the African continent.

David Bell's (2003) analysis of the text focuses on Mda's use of history to show both the differences and similarities between past and present. Particularly the past and present clash between tradition and modernity. In the past the conflict was between colonial and

indigenous forces which were complicated by divisions between the supporters and detractors of the cattle-killing movement:

> Mda's parallel story of the proposed modern development that is to afflict the sleepy village of Qolorha-by-Sea replays the problems of the past in a contemporary context, albeit with differences. It is the story of a village facing an outside threat of fundamental importance to the future shape of the community and its environment, and is one that reveals the tensions within the community and the problems of retaining or discarding perceived traditions at a time of crisis. While the threat to the amaXhosa in the 1850s was precipitated by aggressive and sustained colonial expansion, the contemporary threat is seen to come from neo-colonialist and elitist
> elements in a supposedly democratic South Africa. (Bell: 69)

Bell makes the connection made previously by Mervis with regards to *Ways of Dying* between Mda's theatre for development, and his novels for development. By re-visiting the Nongqawuse story, and by leaving the many gaps and silences of that history, we are called on to think critically about the colonial and neo-colonial projects. We are encouraged to effect positive change in our communities, in the same way that theatre-for-development urges audiences to go back to the communities and become agents of change.

Bell makes another point that the novel's present appropriates the legend of Nongqawuse "from the discourses of shame or heroic legend into the strictly commercial and successful exploitation of her attraction to visitors". Bell's argument does have some merit, at one level the Nongqawuse legend is appropriated into the discourse of development, and functions as a way to possibly free the residents of Qolorha from economic oppression. However, the anxiety around whether Nongqawuse is a heroine,

or a reminder of shame is not resolved or rescued through the success of the business ventures as is suggested by Bell. The shame is a memory of what has passed. By collapsing the past and present (the last page), the novel offers no answers about whether this collective shame has lifted; Qukezwa is both the poverty stricken strandloper of the mid-1800s, and the successful harvester of the sea and mother of Heitsi. Bell cites the merging as an example that the text calls on the reader to rethink the past and the present. While that may be so, the text does not completely appropriate the legend of Nongqawuse "from the discourses of shame", the trauma exists to remind us of the horrors human beings can inflict on each other, and we can never wholly erase that - hence the dance of abaThwa that Bhonco and the Unbelievers perform to tap into the pain and shame of the past (209). The current Unbelievers go back in time, to see and experience the horror, so that they may better appreciate happiness, and acknowledge their shame and pain.

Gqola's paper on *The Heart of Redness* (2002) succinctly captures Mda's resistance to knowing Nongqawuse's history, and what it means to us. Gqola expands Abraham's point that like Sarah Bartmann, Nongqawuse's story is difficult to write and to imagine. Although both are powerful historic symbols, neither had the means to speak for themselves, and remain forever silenced. However, unlike Bartmann, Nongqawuse offers a much more ambiguous symbol:

> From historical records, we are haunted repeatedly by the elusive manner of her symbolism. She functions in a different way from Sara Baartmann on whose behalf we are angered, saddened and whom we want to claim as ours.

> Nongqawuse's narrative functions as one which brings discomfort: was she prophet of fraud? Innocent girl taken advantage of or collaborator? Victim or villain? She is the epitome of the irresolvable dilemma for even if we are able to make our minds up and allocate a judgement to the historical subject that she was, the fact of how she polarises opinion is inescapable. For Zakes Mda... this insecurity, this doubt, resides at the H/heart of redness. (Gqola 2002: 7)

Gqola's assertion that Bartmann and Nongqawuse for the most part had no choices, and the context they were living in silenced them, reinforces Spivak's point that "the subaltern cannot speak"[33].

Koyana's paper on the dialogism of place in *The Heart of Redness* addresses the ways in which the past, present and future of Qolorha grapple with South Africa's heritage. As mentioned, Koyana views the issues raised in the text as an ongoing dialogue about history, knowledge and the route to development:

> By concentrating on the dialogism of place as a device for connecting the past, present, and the future, this paper points to some of the ways in which Mda challenges our thinking about race, class, gender, history, the economy, the environment and, ultimately, the new African identity within the context of the 'African Renaissance'. The setting of Qholorha, once a significant landmark in the encounter between British colonialism and traditional African culture, is now a microcosm of South Africa: an ideal place for defining and implementing strategies for sustainable development at the turn of the twentieth century. (Koyana: 51)

As a symbol of our troubled past, Qolorha speaks in many voices and continues to challenge our assumptions about how the world is configured. Koyana states that Qolorha the place also represents a dialogue between tradition and modernity. Hence Qolorha, its past and present traditions are in constant flux, and hold the possibility of future freedom from social and economic malaise. It is through constant dialogue that the

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[33] Spivak 1993: 67

possibility of change becomes real. And as Bell states, this dialogic, poly-vocal way of speaking privileges an African world view, where the telling of tales is shared and inclusive:

> Mda's emphasis on a Xhosa perspective based on the views of ordinary people is reinforced by his use of African narrative techniques and language. Xhosa words and Xhosa customs saturate the text and are included as a natural part of the narrative with little or no explanatory reference. The cyclical and episodic nature of the storytelling revolving around a series of core elements that are repeated for both stories further underlines the oral nature of the text... (Bell : 69)

Bell keys into Johan Jacob's brilliantly illuminating work which identifies the unique feature of Mda's work as synchronising the various rhythms and structures of the art-forms he writes about, and partakes in. In *The Heart of Redness*, for instance, the narrative is doubled and echoed in the manner that the voice becomes its own echo in split tone singing. Similarly in *She Plays with the Darkness*, Jacobs identifies that Mda's narrative emulates the repetition and circular formations of the dance and songs of the baSotho and San that he writes about.

Like in his other two novels discussed thus far, in *The Heart of Redness*, Mda suggests that African art can be an integral part in not only healing the nation's broken spirit, but it can be central in the entrepreneurial strategies of rural communities. Koyana identifies this and the broader theme of nature, history and heritage as being part of a holistic developmental model put forward by Mda in his novel about the African renaissance which is driven not from the top, but from the people. Koyana (54) cites the example of Qolorha people not buying into Dalton's water scheme as an indicator of the model for

progress that Mda is propagating. Dalton believes in doing for the community and delivering development to them, this is the top-down approach. But his methods don't prove successful because the community refuses to pay for the water generator that Dalton has organised, even though they clearly need it. But because they were not part of the decision and solution to acquire the water generator, they have no sense of ownership, or responsibility. Camagu (Mda's alter ego in the text) believes in involving community in development process, so that they own the project. Mda writes about this mode of development in *When People Play People*, whereby the leader is the catalyst of change, and works closely with the community to ensure appropriate strategies of poverty alleviation. Koyana further states that Mda puts forward a development model that is holistic and utilises the strengths of the community. The villagers come up with the idea of opening a back-packers' lodge to attract tourists to the area:

> By managing the backpacker's hostel the villagers will be hosts, not trespassers. They will educate their visitors about their Xhosa way of life, religion crafts, and seafood cuisine, thus becoming active agents and participants in the new area of cultural tourism. (Koyana: 56)

Koyana correctly points to Mda's subversion of stereotypical notions of villagers who plunder and mess up the environment, whilst waiting for hand-outs from foreign and local donors. The villagers of Qolorha have found a way to harness indigenous knowledge to earn income. Although the novel is positive, and is infused with a spirit of hope and renewal, Mda, through Camagu questions how long the spirit of optimism will last:

> As he drives back home he sees wattle trees along the road. Qukezwa taught him that these are enemy trees. All along the way he cannot see any of the indigenous trees that grow in abundance at Qolorha. Just the wattle and other imported trees. 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 ofcourse 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. (Mda: 319)

Camagu is worried that the greed and materialism that besiege the town is encroaching on Qolorha. How long will the casino barons and their supports keep away from the natural, and non-commercialized seaside of Qolorha? How long will villagers be allowed to enjoy what has been put under God's skies without a price tag, such as the free waters of the sea, the warmth of the sun, the shade of the trees? All of that could go in an instant if the property moguls have their way - skyscrapers will block the sun, uproot the trees, and bar access to the sea.

CHAPTER 5: Mothers, Madonnas and Musicians: Transforming Space and Time

> *She is holding the sun entwined in her arms. It is blazing red. With streaks of yellow. She is all impasto black and blue and yellow. The sun glows through her body, giving it patches of fluorescent red. She sits like a Buddha embracing the sun. She is wide awake, for night has passed. The whites of her eyes are milky white and the pupils are black like the night. Everything around her is fiery red. The sky is red. The ground is red. Rivers of white run on the red ground. Broad strokes. She is dark and sinister. And beautiful. Under her impasto sun, plants are wilting.* (Zakes Mda *The Madonna of Excelsior 2002)*

The woman depicted in the Father Frans Claerhout painting, *Catcher of the Sun*, the painting described at the beginning of chapter six in *The Madonna of Excelsior*, has the impossible task of protecting the earth from the scorching sun. She is an earth-mother, goddess figure who is vigilant, watching that the earth is not set ablaze and completely destroyed. Her attempts fail because “under her impasto sun, plants are wilting”. Niki, who is mother to Viliki and Popi in the novel, finds herself in an equally impossible position. Like the goddess in Claerhout's painting, she has to do the impossible, to protect her children from poverty and from physical violence in a country run by a violent apartheid government. She has to work almost all the time to nurture two families, her own, and the one where she earns low wages as a domestic worker - an impossible workload which she fails to do adequately. Niki's story gets further complicated when through Zakes Mda's creative narrative, she gets embroiled in the events of the early seventies Excelsior miscegenation case where five white men denied having fathered the children of fourteen black women with whom they were charged with contravening the Immorality Act, the laws which declared sexual relations between black and white people illegal. As a fictional embodiment of one of these women, Niki and the other Excelsior mothers, are turned into madonnas, as the fathers of their children deny paternity.

As prominent members of the then ruling National Party, the champions of separate development, the men did not dare own up to being the fathers of the children. So like the goddess in Claerhout's painting, who alone bears the responsibility of protecting the earth, the women of Excelsior were left to shoulder the immense burdens of raising their

children alone, amidst the discrimination and trauma of South Africa in the seventies.

Mothers in the Struggle

As outlined in the introductory chapter, motherhood for black women has largely been defined through resistance and triumph over adverse social and material conditions. The trope of the strong African mother, who like the continent, has stood firm and defiant over centuries of degradation, has been reproduced and circulated socially, politically and textually as testimony to the strength of the women, as well as a means of holding together the hope of Africa's re-birth. Through the mothers in *The Madonna of Excelsior* Mda explores the points at which motherhood buckles under the symbology of strength, revealing the processes whereby strength and weakness are relative and sometimes co-exist. Although Niki's journey is framed by the Excelsior case, what the narrative goes in search of is her journey as the mother of Viliki, Popi and Tjaart.

Like Mda's novels, Sindiwe's Magona's acclaimed novels *To My Children's Children* (1990) and *Mother to Mother* (1998), and more recently Njabulo Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (2003) represent textual mothers who do not live up to the task of easily triumphing over adversity. For Magona, Mda and Ndebele, motherhood embodies anxieties brought on by transition, and tradition. Their narratives employ history to uncover the imperatives of life for South African women under multiple yokes. In the Preface of *To My Children's Children*, Magona writes:

> When I am old, wrinkled, and grey, what shall I tell you, my great-granddaughter? What memories will stay with me of days of yesteryear? Of my

> childhood, what shall I remember? What of my young womanhood, my wifehood, and motherhood? Work has been a big part of my life. Of that, what memories will linger, what nightmares haunt me forever? How will you know who you are if I do not or cannot tell you the story of your past?

Magona writes the story of the first twenty-three years of her life, when history, culture and biology colluded to force her into a life of servitude. Like Niki in *The Madonna Of Excelsior*, Magona takes on back-breaking domestic work, to survive:

> I worked as a domestic servant for four years, during which time I was part of four households. First, a British family. The husband was in the navy and had been posted to Youngsfield, Cape Town. Then there was the elderly Jewish couple who lived in the prestigious suburb of Oranjezicht. This was the most fastidious family and the medem here the stingiest and the most suspicious human being I have ever had the misfortune to encounter. She is the epitome of the white South African often depicted in township lore: one who looks at Africans in the knowing manner that warns she is not fooled by any outward semblance of respectability; is gifted with ability to smell a thief under any guise. (118)

What makes the young Sindiwe's situation even more poignant is the fact that she is trained as a teacher but cannot find a teaching job and resorts to domestic work. At the time, black women did not have available to them a wide choice of professional jobs outside of a few teaching and nursing posts; many took on domestic work, not out of choice, but out of necessity. At 23, Magona already has three children whom she struggles to look after as a single mother. This is after her husband Luthando deserts her and goes to work in Johannesburg. Magona struggles to look after three children, without the help of her husband, and also look after the households of the white people she works for. She is painfully aware that in many senses her children are without a mother - she does not have time to look after them. In Mda's play *Banned*, Cynthia the social-worker articulates the motherless state of many black children she encountered through

her work. Cynthia reflects that she herself can relate to her clients, and empathise with their distress because she herself grew up without the love and attention of her mother:

> On the subject of mothers, we can do without them, don't you think? I mean, they are quite dispensable. Let's face this squarely, without bringing any unnecessary emotions into it. Mothers can be done away with, and I am talking from experience. I never had one. Of course somebody did give birth to me, but I never got to know her. She went to bring up other folks' children in the white suburbs of Johannesburg, whilst I grew up motherless in the townships. Nothing unusual. I spent all my childhood living with different people who where called aunts, grandmothers and what-have-you. And I managed without a mother, like a thousand others...(52)

Cynthia's ironic assertion that mothers are 'dispensable' points to the collusion between capitalism and racism in rendering black children motherless. As a social-worker, she is faced with the job of fixing the results of the societal dysfunction which results from the structural violence borne of systems of domination, such as the capitalist migrant labour system, which forces mothers and fathers to be away from their children. Sindiwe's character in *For My Children's Children* shows how forced migration (as in the case of the migrant labour system) can potentially defeat people. And like Nnu Ego in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood,* Magona contemplates suicide to escape the burdens of having too many children in an environment that is far from nurturing:

> As I stood there looking down onto the tracks my short adulthood flitted by rapidly in my mind's eye. Stupid. Hasty. Profoundly fertile. I had rushed into a marriage my parents disapproved of at age nineteen. Four years later, I was within weeks of having my third child. My husband had left. I had no job. I had no money. I had no food. I had no rent. I had no hope. How long I stood there dully contemplating
> jumping at the sight of an approaching train, I don't know (Magona: 170)

Fortunately, Magona somehow manages to walk to a church and pray for strength to be

able to somehow stay alive and keep her children alive. Unlike Niki in Mda's novel, the young Magona, after many years of stops and starts, ultimately does transcend her bleak material conditions and is today a celebrated writer and academic. *To My Children's Children* testifies to her tenacity and "triumphant endurance, in the face of hardships relentlessly reinforced by the apartheid system". (back cover)

Mother to Mother another of Magona's novels is based on real life. The story explores a much more desperate and futile experience of motherhood. It explores the murder in 1993 of American exchange student Amy Biehl. The book is written in the voice of Mandisa Ntloko, mother to Mxolisi, one of the young men who was charged and convicted for the murder. Mandisa is powerless to protect her son and Amy from a violent end. Her words try to comfort Amy's mother, and to explain her remorse at having failed her children whom she had to leave for long periods whilst she worked as a domestic:

> It's been a long, hard road, my son has traveled. Now, your daughter has paid for the sins of the fathers and mothers who did not do their share of seeing that my son had a life worth living. Why is it that the government now pays for his food, his clothes, the roof over his head? Where was the government the day my son stole my neighbour's hen; wrung its neck and cooked it – feathers and all, because there was no food in the house and I was away, minding the children of the white family I worked for?
> ...God, you know my heart. I am not saying my child should not be punished for his sin. But I am a mother, with a mother's heart. The cup you have given me is too bitter to swallow. The shame. The hurt of the other mother. The young woman whose tender life was cut so cruelly short. God, please forgive my son. Forgive him this terrible, terrible sin. (3-4)

Mother to Mother explores the depths of despair when it seems there is nothing a mother can do to save her children or even herself. Mandisa grows up in an environment where

as a girl and young woman she is not valued, except for the manual labour she can provide, the same manual labour she ends up providing for privileged and spoilt white families. Her socialisation into becoming nothing more than a pair of hands results in her resenting herself and those around her. She feels especially resentful after the birth of her son Mxolisi, whom she conceives as a teenager with another teenager. The pregnancy brings to an abrupt end her schooling: "Mxolisi turned one year. A part of me hated him. Not him...but what he was...had been...the effect he seemed to have on my life. Always negative, always cheating me of something I desperately wanted. I shrunk; because he was" (142). The situation gets worse when Mxolisi's father, China “just upped and walked" (143) out of her life never to be seen again for more than two decades. Mandisa's life-script follows a similar trajectory to that of Magona's: they are born to poor uneducated parents, who place more domestic burdens on them as young girls, they fall pregnant as teenagers because of inadequate knowledge about family planning, marry men who work for minimum wage and are stressed by fatherhood and husbandhood and ultimately leave them to work far away in the city as migrants. Mandisa's resentment of motherhood grows after a tragedy befalls Mxolisi at the age of four. He unwittingly causes the death of his friends, who are much older (teenagers) and are involved in the anti-apartheid struggle, when he reveals their hiding place to police. His four-year-old mind thought he was taking part in a game of hide-and-seek. When he witnesses the shooting and killing of the teenagers by the police, Mxolisi stops talking for two years. Mxolisi's life, like his mother's before him, and her mother's before her, is a series of tragedies - and the ultimate tragedy, is the murder of Amy.

The novel tries to open a space for healing for the two mothers, who in different ways have lost their children. Mandisa, in telling her story, reaches out to the other mother in the hope that the world will transform into a place that does not sacrifice its children. However, there is also a sense that although there is hope for the future - for the two mothers it is too late. They can never fully recover from the catastrophes that have befallen them. Mandisa sadly admits that she is not coping with the situation she is in, it is “...too bitter to swallow.”, and she wonders how Amy's mother will survive the murder of her child.

The Cry of Winnie Mandela, Njabulo Ndebele's latest novel, is another novel based on a life story that looks at the role of motherhood. Ndebele uses the life of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela to interrogate what it meant to be the "mother-of-the-nation" during the anti-apartheid struggle. Ndebele has received praise for his creative re-writing of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's life (Samuelson 2005). The narrative reflects on society's expectation that Madikizela-Mandela wait patiently and silently for the return from prison of their leader, her husband Nelson Mandela, and to continue her nurturing role as "mother-of-the-nation". Ndebele sets out to question society's double standard when it comes to marriage, fidelity and loyalty. Society expects “a woman must eternally be faithful to her husband” (2), whilst having far from stringent moral codes for men. He uses the legend of Penelope in Homer's Odyssey as a departure point, Penelope is “the ultimate symbol of a wife 'so loyal and so true'” (2) as she waited nineteen years for a husband who had gone wandering. The legend knits together four fictional waiting women, whose husbands have for one reason or another deserted them, their stories

frame the reflections and re-writing of Madikizela-Mandela's life as a symbol of the waiting mother and wife (39, 61, 62). Mannete Mofolo's husband leaves her and five children in Lesotho to seek work in Johannesburg; Delisiwe Dulcie S'khosana waited for her husband who was studying abroad; Mamello Molete waited for her husband to return from exile only to lose him to another woman; and Marara Joyce Baloyi waited whilst her husband philandered, later killing himself with alcohol. The women are brought together to form a waiting women's support group, "*ibandla labafazi abalindile* "(41). The text imagines that Madikizela-Mandela joins the *ibandla* as a fifth member. The *ibandla* addresses Madikizela-Mandela about her entry into the struggle as a young social worker concerned for the welfare of black children, then as Nelson Mandela's wife, later becoming a powerful political figure in her own right.

Ndebele's characterisation of waiting women, who have to constantly negotiate what society expects of them as mothers and wives, is textured and pertinent. However, Meg Samuelson's critique that the novel reconstitutes women in the very act of waiting (within a private domestic space) it seeks to question, is useful (2005).

Samuelson analyses how the novel interrogates its own ambivalence around the figure of Madikizela-Mandela as a woman who failed to wait; the narrative vacillates "between freeing women from the home and returning women to the home in order to reconstitute it" (8). This point comes across when Mannete questions Madikizela-Mandela for not taking care to welcome her husband appropriately upon his return:

> When your Nelson came back into the world map of your dots, you were not there to show him how to read the map. He waited for you in the bedroom every night, he says, but you never entered the bedroom while he was awake. How could you give up your moment like that? Not facing his questions? You gave away the opportunity to show him your world and for him to decide to live with it or not. (84)

The passage above suggests that the onus was on Madikizela-Mandela to welcome and again wait for her husband to decide whether he wanted to live in her world or not. The burden is unfairly placed on her to unproblematically resume both her roles as wife, and "mother-of-the nation" without missing a step. Ndebele's novel begins an important discourse about the burden of waiting - the burden suffered through time by girlfriends, wives and mothers. However, the discourse is ultimately subsumed within a narrative refrain about the failure of Madikizela-Mandela to live beyond ”the language of theatrical gesture” and “pure drama” (43), and enter a more private intimate space wherein her personal life could have been negotiated. Madikizela-Mandela is represented as an unstable and dangerous mother figure ultimately not contained within a domestic setting, wherein the other four women have spent their time talking, thinking and waiting.

Madonnas of Mahlatswetsa

In *The Madonna of Excelsior* Mda's portrayal of motherhood continues to play on strengths as well as weakness, on the real and the symbolic. Stereotypes around the nurturing roles of mothers are challenged through an analysis of the real material conditions that mothers exist in. At the same time Mda's recurring use of the Madonna symbol challenges naturalized notions of motherhood.

In the text, politics intrudes on the ability and extent of women's roles as mothers. We

see how politics plays a role in Niki, Mmampe and Maria's lives. Niki, like Mandisa Ntloko and the young Sindiwe Magona, has limited educational and work opportunities as she is at the bottom of the state's priority list. She then resorts to working as a domestic worker as well as does the cleaning and serving at the butchery owned by her employers. At the beginning of the novel we learn that by the age of twenty, Niki is already married to Pule, who has to leave for the gold mines, the day after their wedding. Nine months after the wedding, Niki gives birth to a son Viliki. Niki tries to look after both her own son and Tjaart, the son of her employers, Cornelia and Stephanus Cronje. However the stress to her family life is evident in Pule's outburst when he accuses her of taking better care of the Cronje's than her own family (33), and of having affairs in his absence.

Niki's situation worsens when she suffers a humiliating incident when Cornelia falsely accuses her of stealing meat from the butchery and demands that she strip naked in full view of customers and other workers. Cornelia tries to laugh away the incident when she realises her mistake; but Niki decides to take revenge by agreeing to Stephanus' relentless demands that she have sex with him. In a context where she has no power, Niki decides to use her body as a weapon:

> She looked into his eyes...She did not see Stephanus Cronje, owner of Excelsior Slaghuis. She did not see a boss or a lover. She saw Madam Cornelia's husband. And he was inside her. She was gobbling up Madam Cornelia's husband, with the emphasis on Madam... she had him entirely in her power. Chewing him to pieces. (50)

Although Niki feels a sense of power over Cornelia and Stephanus Corne, it is fleeting. It is immediately clear that the person who has control over what happens in Niki's life is

Cornelia and her husband Stephanus: "Then there was the final long scream...It was all over....He was in control again. He had the power" (50). They are the ones who pay her salary, and they are members of a party which makes the laws of the land. In light of the limited resources available to her, Niki is advised by her friends Maria and Mmampe to enter into a sexual relationship with Stephanus as at least it will have material benefits. They explain to her that they themselves are part of a regular sex ring, and make good money out of it. Niki accepts her friends' advice as an easy way to make money and to continue her “revenge” against Cornelia. After a while she leaves her job at the butchery and lives off the money and groceries sent by Stephanus.

Niki's decision to continue the liaison with Stephanus results in the birth of her daughter, Popi. Popi's birth later becomes proof that Niki and Stephanus had been contravening the Immorality Act. When the officials get wind of the births of mixed race children in Mahlatswetsa - Niki, her friends Maria and Mmampe, and eleven other women from Mahlatswetsa Location are arrested and put in prison with their children for breaking the law. They are charged under the Immorality Act, but the case is dismissed after a short while because of the media frenzy it causes and the embarrassment it causes to the National Party. The government's sudden backtracking is not that successful, as the eyes of the world are already on Mahlatswetsa and it is too late to try and cover up the obvious cracks in apartheid discourse. The case becomes a huge scandal and threatens to plunge South Africa into chaos because of the involvement of prominent National Party members:

> Rumours of war followed the discharge of the women. We heard of white people who were fighting amongst themselves in Cape Town. Hurling words of anger at one another in their Parliament. Scuttling around in damage control efforts at the Union Buildings in Pretoria. All because of the black women of little Excelsior, so far away. We bought newspapers every day. Die Volksblad. The Friend. We ravished every page that had anything to do with immorality and miscegenation. Each issue circulated from one homestead to the next. Until it was tattered. Until smokers used the pieces to roll their zols of tobacco or dagga. The sins of our mothers had caused wonderful upheavals in the land. (100)

In the novel, Mda goes on to quote from real newspaper articles of the time, demonstrating the uproar caused by the Excelsior case. The articles are obsessed with details of mixed race love affairs and mixed race children[34]. There is nothing questioning the fact that many of the domestic workers involved in the Immorality Act case were coerced into the relationships, and that given another set of circumstances they may have made different choices. But the articles lump the women's cases of rape and sexual harassment together with stories about lovers caught in the web, of immorality laws, and the emphasis being the fear of miscegenation. Mda ironically refrains from joining the chorus that the real reasons behind the Excelsior uproar are “the sins of our mothers”. The novel begins with the line, “All these things flow from the sins of our mothers” (1). It also ends: "From the sins of our mothers all these things flow" (268). So it is the mothers who are blamed for being raped and sexually exploited.

After the court case, the women of Mahlatswetsa are steeped further into poverty as their husbands desert them, and the madams refuse to hire them. Niki's co-accused,

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[34] See Coetzee, J.M. 1988 *White Writing* for an analysis of Sarah Gertrude Millin’s novels as depictions of the colonial and apartheid attitudes towards miscegenation as a tragedy of contagion. Coetzee’s analysis identifies Millin’s melodramatic characterization of the “tragic mulatto”, whose mixed ancestry is viewed as a “flaw” and “degeneration”. Mda parodies the idea of the “tragic mulatto”, through authorial commentary on the community’s outrage at the birth of Popi and other mixed-race children in Mahlatswetsa. He reserves his most biting ironic and humorous comments, however, for the apartheid ideology which ended up with egg all over, when its ministers were exposed in the Excelsior miscegenation case for breaking their own Immorality Laws!

Stephanus, commits suicide (as did one of the real accused). It is only Maria who gets a lot of money from her first-born son, Sekatle, who becomes a government spy. Niki, Viliki, and Popi resort to sitting and begging at the gates of white people who hold extravagant garden parties. Niki retreats from the life of the township, and focuses on trying to scrape together food for Viliki and Popi. She retreats into solitude and half-hearted motherhood:

> It was a year of passage for Niki.... To a world of hermitry. It had started soon after the excelsior 19 case and gradually became the almost total solitude that we saw this year. When we came to see her, she hid herself behind the door and instructed her children to say she was not home...Her only companions were her children, who had their own lives to live. At least Viliki had a life outside the confines of the home. Popi spent all her time between home and school. Between home and church on Sundays. (119)

The immediate effect of the sex case seems to be to totally eradicate any measure of social influence Niki might have had as a wife to Pule and mother to Viliki. By entering motherhood outside the bounds of her marriage, race, and the law, Niki's transgressions are too grave for her to simply continue life in communion with her neighbours and family. Niki's feelings of shame and embarrassment cause her to withdraw from society. The birth of Popi, and the scandal that the miscegenation case causes, results in friends and family shunning Niki and her children for some years (124). However as Popi and Viliki become older, and involved in the activities of the community and the church, people become more accepting of them. An example of this acceptance is Popi's graduation into the Young Women's Union of the Methodist Church. The celebration of Popi's passage into the Young Women's Union is attended not only by church members, but Niki's relatives from Thaba Nchu make the long trip to Excelsior to celebrate with the family;

and even Niki partly welcomes the intrusion on her solitude that is caused by her children's activities in the community.

However, in the main, Niki spends her journey into motherhood interacting with her two children. Her efforts at mothering them are half-hearted, and she hardly communicates properly with them resorting to shouting out instructions at them:

> She [Popi] was never bothered by Niki's shouting at her, because that's how Niki was. Even at five she had accepted that her mother communicated with her and
> Viliki by shouting at them. Even when she was happy, she shouted and talked to them in stern tones. To the extent that the children were finding it increasingly difficult to tell when she was just talking to them normally or even happily. (109)

After the court case, Niki seems to give up on life, and on her children. She ceases communication, and can only express herself through aggression. Her inability to communicate effectively with her children is an indicator of the fear and powerlessness she feels. Niki's powerlessness and despair is also expressed through her constant dazed refrain, “they are trying to take away my children”.

Niki's spiral into depression begins to turn when she starts to model for the Catholic priest Father Frans Claerhout. Claerhout is a real life priest who started painting the lives of his black parishioners in the Free State. He was particularly fond of painting the black madonna and child, which was quite a political statement at the time. Claerhout was going against apartheid discourse by validating through art the lives of black people, whom the National Party tried to paint as sub-human. Claerhout also dared to paint the most important woman in Catholic mythology, the madonna, as black. In the Catholic

faith (and Christianity in general) Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, conceived immaculately. The Virgin Mary, or the madonna, is one of very few women who have an active role in Christianity. She is respected and worshipped for having given birth to the Son of God, Jesus Christ. The immaculate conception of her infant is understood as a mark that she was "pure among women" and thus chosen to deliver Jesus. Mary's virgin status is closely linked to her depiction as a white woman (representing purity, virginity). This ties in with the general notion within Christianity that God and Christian divinity in general are probably white. In her chapter on pop icon Madonna, bell hooks has noted how the singer has played with the notion of the purity in her appropriation of Catholicism and the figure of The Virgin Mary. bell hooks explains the obsession with a white "pure" Madonna as follows:

> Racism and sexism combine to make it impossible for white folks, and even some black folks, to imagine a black Madonna, since such figures are representations of purity and innocence. Within racist and sexist iconography the black female is stereotypically portrayed as experienced and impure, hence, she can never embody that Birth-of-a-Nation fragile womanhood that is the essence of a Madonna figure. Within white supremacists culture, a female must be white to occupy the space of sacred femininity... (hooks 1994: 19)

hooks' description of black women being the antithesis of "sacred femininity" captures how the madonnas of Mahlatswetsa were viewed by their community, the state and themselves. The women accept that as black women, they deserve no better treatment than what they receive from their employers and the state. They are the corporeal and shameful figures that are the opposite of virtue and purity. They are a source of shame for the nation. Claerhout, on the other hand (in real life and in Mda's novel), deliberately bypasses obsessions with colour, and shame. His works of art capture the magic of

ordinary people and how they relate to each other. And if a black madonna and child in the form of Niki and Popi grace his studio, then that is who he will paint. Niki and Popi become models for some of Claerhout's beautiful paintings. Mda expertly and beautifully fuses the worlds between his novel and Claerhout's paintings by beginning each chapter with a description of the cleric's paintings. Mda's style is not only aesthetically pleasing it is also an intertextual affirmation of Claerhout's art, and its subversive impetus. In the Oxford University Press, 2002, version of the novel, each chapter has a copy of some of the paintings being described; this gives the reader an idea of the richness, colour and beauty of Claerhout's paintings. And for an artist as talented as Claerhout to spend hours documenting black lives was an act negating the philosophy that races were unequal. Claerhout's depictions of the black madonna and child are described in chapters three, ten, thirteen, seventeen, twenty one, twenty four and thirty. Chapter three describes a number of Claerhout's sensuous madonna and child paintings. One of them is titled "Silence", and described as follows:

> Brown madonnas with big breasts. A naked madonna lying on a bed of white flowers. Her eyes are closed and her lips are twisted. Her voluptuous thighs are wide open, ready to receive drops of rain. A black pubic forest hides her nakedness. Her breasts are full and her nipples are hard. Under her arm she carries a baby wrapped in white lace. (11)

The painting depicts both the agony and the ecstasy of motherhood. The madonna looks healthy, voluptuous, content and happy. Her baby seems safe under her arm. Yet at the same time "her lips are twisted" as though she is anxious about something. Is she worried about how her black baby will survive apartheid South Africa? Is she worried about what the baby will eat? Her body is compared to a field awaiting "drops of rain" so

that she may blossom and be able to feed her child. The painting expresses the complexities and challenges of motherhood under apartheid. Similarly the painting titled "The sick child", described in chapter ten, depicts five madonnas, one is carrying the sick child. The painting and chapter expresses the agony of motherhood, whereby a sick child can become a huge catastrophe. For the people of Mahlatswetsa, healthcare is not easily accessible, it is questionable whether there are any doctors near where the women live to tend to the sick child. In their sorrow and misery, the women support and care for each other. Motherhood is shared and supportive. The madonnas and child described are symbolic of the women of Mahlatswetsa, and women in many townships of South Africa during apartheid, who gave birth to children, whose fathers left to work far away, leaving mothers to struggle on their own. Or as was the case with Niki and Popi, the white father denied the existence of his black relatives. In chapter seventeen Mda describes one of Claerhout's black madonna and child paintings, as though it is Niki and Popi:

> The blue madonna is different from the other madonnas. No cosmos blooms surround her. She is not sitting in a brown field of wheat. No sunflowers flourish in her shadow. Yet she exudes tenderness like all the others. She is drenched in a blue light. Blue and white strokes of icy innocence. Her breasts are not hanging out. She is not naked, but wears a blue robe. A modest Madonna. A Madonna with blue flowing locks that reach her breasts…She holds a naked baby in her hands. The well-fed baby wears only white booties. She holds the baby in front of her breasts like an offering. (107)

The madonna and child described above are actually painted as Popi (as an adult), carrying Popi as a child – a metaphoric representation of the fact that with Niki having retreated into solitude, Popi essentially is left to mother herself. Unlike the sensuous,

protective and resourceful madonna described in “Silence”, Popi is painted as blue, cold, distant – she is not warm to the task of mothering. The naked baby in her arms (herself) is held up “like an offering” – Popi the child is sacrificed because of the circumstances of her birth. She has little chance of being mothered properly, and like many children in South Africa she becomes a casualty of a harsh inhumane environment which deprives children of nurturing.

However, all is not completely hopeless for Niki and Popi. By posing as the madonna and child, for some time, Niki and Popi, earn an income, and are saved from having to beg. Claerhout's paintings are not only a source of income for the family but they also begin the long journey towards healing. When they sit in Claerhout's studio, seeing themselves reflected in ways that are powerful and beautiful, Niki and Popi begin to appreciate a different picture of themselves to the one reflected by racism and sexism. The women's humiliating positions as the “madonnas” of Excelsior, deserted by their sexual partners, and victimised by the miscegenation court case, is represented side by side with Claerhout’s reverence and appreciation of their lives and beauty. When Niki poses for Claerhout, she sees herself reflected as sensuous and beautiful, and not the debased sexual object who exchanges her body for money.

Representations of black women, in positive and affirming ways by artists who had received critical recognition such as Claerhout were not the norm in pre-1994 South Africa. Another acclaimed artist who stands out in how he painted black women positively when it was not the norm to do so is Gerard Sekoto. Sekoto painted using oil

on canvass, rich portraits of the women he saw around him in Sophiatown and Pretoria East. Recently, there has been a proliferation of women visual artists who have shown black women's bodies in interesting ways which subvert patriarchy and racism. Bongi Bengu's earthy, multi-media portraits of black women are one example. Ingrid Masondo and Zanele Muholi are black and white documentary photographers who subvert stereotypes around the representation of black women's bodies. Desire Lewis' appreciation of Ingrid Masondo and Zanele's Muholi's photography makes this point:

> Black women's bodies in art and photography followed prescribed routes in reinforcing the evolutionary categorisation of beings, with black women featuring as those least developed in opposition to white men. In the 20th-century context of a burgeoning print technology, popular culture and a modern sex industry, visual pornography exoticised black women to perpetuate the colonial emphasis on their hyper-developed sexuality, and their status as sex objects for others' gratification and use. Through images that work to re-inscribe black women's agency. Muholi and Masondo directly and obliquely refer to and subvert this archive (Lewis *Agenda 63* 2005:13)

Lewis gives critical insights into Masondo's representations of motherhood (particularly the pregnant female form), as a state of beauty which is a slight move away from celebrating motherhood, through the depiction of mother and child. Masondo celebrates the pregnant female form, which is often viewed as distorted and unattractive. Lewis draws attention to Muholi's progressive questioning of how the female form is presented in popular media to entrench certain ideas about what it means to be a woman, and to be "feminine". Lewis also critiques how Masondo's work explores and explodes notions that women should either conform to "authentic" African womanhood to the ideal of a western-centric femininity (light skin, straight hair). Lewis describes Masondo's engagement with this tension between modernity and tradition that black women have

found themselves as follows:

> Apart from her emphasis on the private and interior reality of black women's bodies, an important way in which Masondo explodes dominant ideas about black women's sexuality is through her unexpected engagement with 'tradition' and 'modernity' as polarised fictions through which black women's bodies are imagined. As a fiction of evolutionary progress and western 'sophistication', as well as a description of the globalising impact of dominant cultural commodities and styles, 'modernity' is a contentious trope for black women. Often coerced into accepting discourses of tradition and authenticity, black women are frequently figured (especially in male-centred nationalism) as those who must represent an original African essence untouched by westernisation. (Lewis *Agenda 63* 2005: 20)

As Lewis points out, Masondo captures images of women who play ideas of what constitutes modern and traditional women. One of Masondo's images is a black and white picture of a woman wearing a g-string (that popular garment of patriarchal fantasies), and lying at a beach. However, as Lewis points out, the woman is not in a pose that avails itself to a consuming gaze. She is lying face down and her face and shoulders are covered with an African print cloth, and she seems to be removing a grain of sand from the g-string. Her articles of clothing combine the "modern" (g-string) and "traditional" (African cloth), and she is unconcerned about who is looking at her. She is enjoying her time at the beach, quite comfortable and happy in her body, regardless of who may, or may not be watching. Masondo and Muholi disrupt assumed notions of "femininity", and stereotypes of how women dress and present themselves in public and in popular media. Muholi and Masondo's art reclaim representation of black women's bodies, and paint portraits that are positive and affirming of black women's beauty and agency. The way in which *The Madonna of Excelsior* functions as an art-form which seeks to question the uses and representations of black women's bodies, can thus be

compared to the ways in which Muholi and Masondo have claim back the lens of patriarchal framing and consumption.

The Madonna of Excelsior explores issues around how black women's bodies have been represented in media in racist and patriarchal ways by interrogating the processes through which black women have been positioned as other and inferior. Mda goes further and looks at how black women themselves have internalised notions about their supposed inferiority, and perpetuated them[35]. Throughout the novel we see how Niki and Popi act out the psychological violence theorised in Fanon's colonised self (1967). Niki internalises racial myths about ugliness when she becomes obsessed with lightening her skin and straightening her hair (81). And again when she looks at a painting of a white madonna and a black child she comments that it is not possible (140), betraying sentiments similar to gossip about herself giving birth to a “white child”. Mda shows up the absurdity Niki's acts of self-mutilation by juxtaposing Popi's parallel desire for self-mutilation. Like her mother, Niki, Popi feels shame and contempt for the way she looks. She wishes that her freckles join up, and darken her fair complexion. She dislikes her silky hair, and wishes it could be more curly so that she can straighten it:

> She was fourteen years old. And she hated the mirror. It exposed her to herself for what she really was. A boesman girl. A hotnot girl. Morwa towe! You bushman you! Or when the good neighbours wanted to be polite, a coloured girl. She had broken quite a few mirrors in her time. A mirror was an intrusive invention. An invention that pried into the pain of her face. Yet she looked at her

[35] Nakedi Ribane's Beauty: A Black Perspective (2006) gives an interesting account of the history and politics of modeling in South Africa, where until 1994 there was no black “ Miss South Africa”. Ribane talks about black women's use of skin lightening creams to achieve beauty that is as close to a western look as possible. A November 27, 2005 *Sunday Times* article (“ Women buppies using harmful skin lighteners” p. 8 by Futhi Ntshingila) details how middle class black women continue to use skin lightening creams as they perceive a “ whiter look” as a ticket to promotions and better job prospects.

> freckled face in the morning, at midday and at night. Every day. She prayed that her freckles would join up, so that she could look like other black children of Mahlatswetsa Location. (113-114)

Popi takes on the voices of those who look on her as "a boesman" (143), she internalises their offensive opinions, and believes she is unattractive. Popi cannot turn to her mother for affirmation and protection, because Niki suffers the same inferiority complex.

Niki's psychological split and inferiority complex renders her incapable of guiding Popi through her difficult adolescent years and negativity. She does not know how to deal with her daughter's hatred for her own body. Niki simply remains within the solitude she uses as a barrier from the world. Instead, it is Popi who sometimes takes on the mothering role, like when Niki gets bitten by Johannes Smith's dogs, Popi tends to her wounds (122).

Healing and Reconciliation

As in Mda's previous, novels the possibility of healing and self-acceptance come through engagement with art. In *The Madonna of Excelsior,* it is Father Claerhout's paintings as well as the songs that Popi sings in church and at funerals, and the music of the Seller of Songs that hold the key to healing and transformation. The Seller of Songs is Maria's daughter, who like Popi, is mixed race. She makes her living by going from door to door, and playing the flute for some money. The Seller of Songs shows Popi the possibility of self-love through her obvious joy and love for music. At first Popi cannot stand the sight of the Seller of Songs because she reminds Popi of herself. However when she sees the respect and love between her and her brother Viliki, she eventually relents. The Seller of

Songs exists in a world of music which protects her from the malicious gossip about her status as other. She unselfconsciously immerses herself in the life of the community, sharing her gift of music with them.

The role that art plays in Mda's oeuvre can be understood as "...the invisible work of the imagination" (Motsemme, 2004: 925) referred to earlier in reference to the uses of art and silence in *She Plays with Darkness*. Motsemme states that "......the invisible work of the imagination can thus be viewed as an act of women's agency which embodies a potentiality to transform social action" (925). This invisible work is a survival tactic whereby people under extreme social stress, with little material resources can work with their imaginations to create a number of solutions. Some of this "work of the imagination" involves simply sitting, as Niki does, and giving one's mind and emotions a break from social interaction or exertion. Or it can be more active, as when Popi and the Seller of Songs create music. Father Claerhout's paintings also fall into the category of imaginative work. This work inspires its creators, as well as those around them, helping the community to heal from pain and possibly leading them to act and effect social change. Claerhouts paintings help Niki and Popi see themselves in a different light, the paintings facilitate the process whereby mother and daughter begin to appreciate themselves as human. Similarly the music of the Seller of Songs and Popi's singing at funerals help to integrate them into the community, and helps to change the negative perceptions that the community has of them.

Nature is another source of healing that recurs in Mda's novels. He frequently explores

the creative and destructive forces of nature such as the bees in the *The Madonna of Excelsior*. Niki is able to sit among poisonous bees, share their honey, and have peace.

It seems that Niki's period of disintegration into isolation and silence, although traumatic at the time it happened, can be understood as a "reflective silence" which is part of the process of reconstituting the self (Motsemme: 924). Niki experiences a sense of calm and serenity from sitting with bees. Her interaction with bees can also be understood as communing with her ancestors, as bees in the seSotho and Nguni indigenous belief systems, are understood to be representative of the ancestors. The bees are representative of ancestral protection over Niki and her children.

The Madonna of Excelsior also explores the role of reconciliation between the races as an integral part of South Africa's healing process. Mda's novel addresses difficult issues around reconciliation and acceptance with sensitivity and courage. Beneath the tragedy of a failed attempt to keep people apart, is the conviction that creativity, hope and forgiveness will heal communities shattered by racial hatred. The novel reveals that the journey is far from simple or easy, yet it is possible. In *The Madonna of Excelsior* Mda's reconciliatory strategy is to finally excavate, in some detail, a period of apartheid history. As mentioned in *Ways of Dying*, and *The Heart of Redness*, Mda avoided addressing directly the apartheid era. In *The Heart of Redness*, he refers to National Party rule as "the Middle Generations" (157), a time of extreme pain that is not only difficult to articulate, but is so shameful, there seems to be a national desire to deny it ever happened:

> The suffering of the Middle Generations are only whispered. It is because of the insistence: *Forget the past. Don't only forgive it. Forget it as well. The past did not happen. You only dreamt it. It is a figment of your rich collective imagination. It did not happen. Banish your memory. It is a sin to have a memory. There is virtue in amnesia. The past. It did not happen. It did not happen. It did not happen. (The Heart of Redness:* 157*)*

The Madonna of Excelsior counters the call to "Forget the past" of "the Middle Generation", by excavating a largely forgotten case. Before reading Mda's novel, I, for one, was not aware of the case or even the existence of a place called Excelsior. Mda's novel has brought to collective public awareness and memory, the absurd, tragic, and often humorous story of Excelsior. The novel hones in specifically on the Immorality Act Laws as an example of the general absurdity of racism and oppression. The pain and pathos of apartheid is documented, as a way to force a reckoning with the truth of what happened. It is an attempt to foster healing and reconciliation through confronting the truth. By going back to some of the apartheid atrocities, Mda hopes to use the processes of writing, and reading to heal our collective wounds. A record of the past, also functions as a warning for us not to repeat the past. When it is recorded in black and white, in all its cruelty, silliness, and pettiness perhaps it will discourage current persistent, more subtle and insidious forms of racism and control, whereby formally advantaged white South Africans use money to continue lives of exclusive privilege.

Rogier Courau's paper (2005) on the politics of reconciliation in *The Madonna of Excelsior*, gives a slightly different reading on what Mda sets out to do, and what he achieves. Courau critiques the novel for its portrayal of the Afrikaner community of Excelsior, suggesting that Mda paints the community of the seventies in an unfairly

negative light, making the sins of a few National Party leaders to be the sins of the whole community. Courau states his concerns as follows:

> What I wish to emphasize by this assertion is the danger of a simplistic, negative reading, for readers unacquainted with South African culture may hold fast to interpretations that are profoundly misleading in forming a view of the Afrikaner as necessarily extremist and conservative. However, part of the novel's project is to narrate the process of understanding, of possible congruence, between such disparate groups as the former slave and his/her former master. It is in this respect that Mda is extremely creative, for historically marginalised black South African discourses and identities remain the predominant subject of intellectual focus and concern. This constitutes a kind of cultural hegemony that is the rationale of Mda's novel and of this essay to destabilize. (104 - 105)

Courau critiques Mda's silence on progressive voices within the Afrikaner community in the past, stating that he focuses on portraying conservative right-wing Afrikaner nationalism. Courau argues that this silence in Mda's narrative poses problems in the text's resolution of reconciliation between the Sotho and the Afrikaner communities of Excelsior. Courau's otherwise insightful article misses the point of the narrative here, which is to re-create the rape and coercion of the black women of Mahlatswetsa from Niki and Popi's point of view. And their reality was that their lives were overwhelmed, and overpowered by the might of the white community that was part of their world. Further, the majority of the white community in Excelsior and in South Africa generally, voted the National party into power, election after election entrenching the oppressive laws that were the bane of Niki and Popi's lives, and millions of black South Africans like them. For Mda, to seek out the few and far between voices of Afrikaner progressives may not be entirely appropriate, given the extent and magnitude of the conservative right wing

presence in Excelsior. Courau states that his paper will reveal how Mda changes Afrikaner history, so as to represent that past (and the culprits in that drama) as being more conservative and right-wing than they were:

> For Mda, the caveat about representing a cultural Other is significant when one considers his own depiction of forms of Afrikaner identity, for, as I will demonstrate later in the essay, Mda purposefully envisages the substance of Afrikaner cultural memory and identity as malleable; it can be altered even at the expense of credibility of fact to suit a writer's own aesthetic-political purposes.(106)

However, the one instance that is identified whereby Mda may have changed Afrikaner history to suit his purposes does not carry enough weight to prove that indeed Mda has painted the past as worse than it was. The instance Courau refers to is when it is narrated that J.G. Strijdom, then prime minister of the republic of South Africa, laid the first stone in Reverend Francois Bornman's church. Now whether it was indeed *the* J.G. Strijdom or not who laid the first stone is neither here on there; the point that is being made is that Afrikaner nationalism (especially from top government officials) demanded a presence in every sphere of Afrikaner life. It made its presence felt in religion, culture, schools, and in the very buildings that housed these institutions. There was an attempt by the National Party to ensure that everything reflected the dominant ideology of white supremacy and "separate development". In my view, the alterations and additions made by Mda to the Excelsior case, does not change fundamentally what happened - which is that Excelsior was a conservative town dominated by conservative Afrikaners who believed in the supremacy of the white race.

Courau correctly points out that Mda's narrative about the past privileges the point of view of the previously disadvantaged black women of Excelsior, a point of view suppressed and deemed unimportant in the past. As Courau's analysis points out: "...the novel provides a metaphor for the complexity of South African history through thirty years; a chronicle of the social effects of the Immorality Act, and a satiric inversion of the apartheid master narrative" (104). Hence Mda's challenge to the "apartheid master narrative" stays true to the experience of that narrative from the point of view of the most marginalised participants of the apartheid script. Courau's analysis also correctly states, that overall Mda's portrayal of Afrikaner efforts to reconcile post 1994 is largely positive: "The Madonna of Excelsior, in the narration of the post-apartheid present, does much to recuperate the image of the Afrikaner in popular discourse, and Mda clearly admires the commitment of the Afrikaner to South Africa."

Through characters like Viliki and Adam de Vries, and Popi and Tjaart, we go through the difficult and unresolved process of reconciliation between the two communities (Courau: 113). The unresolved and awkward nature of the novel's ending continues Mda's sense of unease about where the country is going. Like in all his novels so far, Mda puts forward a solution (black and white must reconcile), and simultaneously withdraws and questions his own tentative solutions. This is deliberate, and not "an incomplete and rushed gesture that provides little sense of closure and readerly satisfaction" (114) as is argued by Courau.

CONCLUSION

My study has focused on Mda as a post-colonial, post-apartheid novelist, whose thematic and stylistic concerns interrogate the nationalist politics of post-independence and anti-apartheid narratives. I argue that Mda's narrative voice privileges and centralises marginality. He centers specifically the marginality of African women, working class and rural peoples. He is concerned that the pan-African dream of unity and equality (expressed in South Africa through the nationalist-inspired discourse of African

Renaissance spearheaded by president Thabo Mbeki) cannot be achieved if the voices of women and the poor are continuously side-lined and silenced. Mda's post-apartheid novels address the lack of economic freedom which continues to trap marginalised groups. In critiquing post-independence, post-apartheid official power structures, Mda enters into dialogue with African nationalism (a philosophy on which most post-independence African states were formulated), and questions whether its push for unity at all costs does not sacrifice rigorous efforts to address gaps and fissures within the nation state. Mda argues that the poor (many of whom are women, and especially single mothers or madonnas) are the ones who fall through the cracks of the neo-colonial, post-apartheid nationalist state. His thematic concerns confront inequities caused by class, gender and global imbalances. He writes that unless inequality is urgently addressed, it will not be possible to eradicate poverty, and achieve an African renaissance.

Mda’s inclusion of gender as an integral part of his novels' politics and poetics, sets him apart from the mainly masculinist African literature tradition whose focus has been mainly race and class oppression. Mda’s work can be read as an example of the gender dialogue that Stratton's study (1994) identifies. Stratton's feminist reading of African novels by men and women shows that the nineties saw the opening up of a space within the masculinist African literature canon for the politics of gender (12). Stratton's study demonstrates how the continuing debate within African literature is moving more and more towards addressing class and gender issues, rather than focusing mainly on race, as has previously been the case. Her argument is that African women writers have been on the forefront of the gender debate, through establishing a female tradition parallel to

the masculinist African literature tradition which burgeoned during the first wave of Africa's decolonisation. Stratton traces how the thematic and stylistic mechanisms of writers like Mariama Ba, Buchi Emecheta and Bessie Head highlighted the ways in which women are oppressed and ignored by the politics of nationalism. I have argued that Mda's work has aspects of the female tradition, particularly his emphasis on strong female characters and support between women. I have also identified Mda's emphasis on the interiority of women's lives (or to use Ndebele's term, "the ordinary"), that has resulted in his portrayal of women being nuanced, interesting and open. Stratton's study has also identified a shift within African male writing at the close of the twentieth century, as moving towards a dialogue centred around gender equity. Canonical writers such as Ngugi and Nurrudin Farah have started contributing in progressive ways towards the gender debate through their portrayal of women as complex.

I argue that Mda is on the vanguard of this shift towards a more inclusive literature that privileges both male and female voices. However, in chapter one, I also draw attention to the existence of male writing in South Africa that has progressive gender politics - the writing of Mphahlele, Modikwe Dikobe, Njabulo Ndebele and Can Themba. What Mda shares with these South African male writers is a concern with the processes through which women's identities are constituted.

Although Mda shares much with past and present anti-colonial and anti-apartheid mainly nationalist writers, his writing stretches boundaries even further as it draws attention to many previously subsumed issues such as: gender, ethnicity, age, region, globalisation

and more recently, health (because of the HIV/AIDS pandemic).

In reading Mda's writing of African women, and their place in contributing towards an African renaissance, I have looked at the ways in which Mda has critiqued the discourse of African nationalism as expressed firstly through the canonical literature of decolonising Africa, secondly as expressed through mainly black anti-apartheid literature, and thirdly through the current dominant official nationalist discourse of African Renaissance. And as mentioned in the introduction, Mda's unique history of political exile puts him in a strong position to critique both post-independence and post-apartheid Africa.

I have put forward that Mda's commitment to an African renaissance (with a small "r") has placed emphasis on those marginal peoples who find themselves still poor and largely voiceless. Mda's argument is that marginalised peoples have found ingenious and creative ways to effect their African renaissance away from officialdom and government. He writes this renaissance as being spearheaded by women, poor people and rural people - the marginal groups who over the years have uplifted themselves through cooperation with each other, indigenous art forms, entrepreneurship and a sense of humour. All of these elements are part of a love ethic embodied primarily in the philosophy of ubuntu - the humanity that binds us all together and is necessary for our survival. The politics of love, generosity and ubuntu underpin the anti-domination politics that Mda puts forward as a way to achieving true freedom and success.

Mda's focus on the under-privileged in colonial, post-independence and post-apartheid Africa is a continuation of the themes explored in his plays. Mervis makes this point with regards to *Ways of Dying*, saying that the themes and developmental theories developed through Mda's plays are extended to create a kind of "Fiction for Development". I have expanded Mervis' thesis to view the rest of Mda's novels through the lens of "Fiction for Development", whereby the central characters (Toloki, Dikosha, Camagu) act as catalysts for community action and change, and are supported by members within the community, (that is "opinion leaders" such as Noria and Qukezwa) to effect positive change.

Mda's push for change has necessitated experiments with both form and content in his novels. At the level of content he has excavated stories from the rural areas (a shift from many urban centred African literature narratives), and has developed a unique form of telling which borrows liberally from indigenous ways of storytelling such as the magical folktales and the lyricism and repetition of traditional oral praise poetry. Mda's mode of telling has been labelled magical realism. However Mda states that when he began his experiments with form he was not aware of magical realism, and was merely making use of indigenous magical folktales. He articulates the way that traditional storytelling influenced his narrative voice as follows:

> As children we listened to stories told to us in the evenings by our grandmothers. We were expected to tell our own stories, most of which were well established, having been passed from generation to generation and having been learnt in such storytelling sessions. In time some of us learnt to digress from the well-known story to invent our own, which nevertheless followed

> established modes and were just as magical. Magic! That was one quality of these stories that left a lasting impression in my mind. The supernatural existed in the same context as objective reality. And all the participants in the storytelling performance – be they the storytellers themselves or the audiences - took this phenomenon for granted. No one ever questioned, in a famous story like Tselane and Dimo for instance, how it was possible for Dimo, a terrible ogre, to swallow an axe. (Mda 2005: 65-66)

Mda later discovers that the source of both magical realism and the indigenous magic infused in his writing are the same:

> From the time I started writing years ago I drew from these magical traditions. When the critics referred to my work as 'magic realism' and credited the influence of South American writers for its existence, I marveled at the fact that the South Americans had influenced me without my having ever read their works. Later I embarked on a mission to acquaint myself with their work and learnt that indeed we drew our magical inspiration from that same source: the oral traditions that continue to bloom in these regions of the world. I learnt that Gabriel Garcia Marquez has credited his grandmother as the source of his magic, and has also mentioned that the grandmother got the magic from the stories that were told by African slaves. I also noted that both the South Americans and I took the beliefs that actually exist in the real world of our setting and treated them as objective reality in our fiction. And such beliefs – in the West you would call them superstitions – abound in all the cultures of South Africa and they continue to enrich my literature. (Mda 2005: 66-67)

Mda's use of magical realism is a departure from the social realism of some traditions of post-independence and anti-apartheid literatures. The magical realist mode has allowed Mda to not only explore a more open-ended African way of storytelling, but it has allowed his narrative to take place at multiple levels (real, magical, dream), and has allowed him to narrate through multiple voices. Mda's privileging of multiple and diverse ways of speaking is in line with his politics which aim to destabilise dominant official discourses, such as those of government and big business. As this study has shown, Mda has used both content and form to center and privilege marginal voices.

In centering marginality, Mda's work portrays change as reflected in displaced gender, ethnic and class identities. He sees as a key to change, African women whom he represents as strong creative spirits who lead the African renaissance of the majority of ordinary, working class and rural peoples. A question raised in my study, which is a possible area of further research, is the role of women in traditionally male spaces of politics. Mda does not explore this critical issue in much detail. Popi does, however, temporarily enter the space of local government in *The Madonna of Excelsior.* However, she is frustrated and sabotaged in this space. To be fair, Mda does not characterise men as successful within the sphere of politics either. His strategy is to make traditionally powerful spaces such as government, the cities, and big business, marginal and somewhat irrelevant to the success and lives of most people. Maybe the question to ask is whether this is effective, given the fact that government commands a significant amount of resources which if properly utilised can alleviate poverty and suffering.

Mda portrays women as symbols of both renaissance (Noria and Qukezwa) and destruction (Tampololo, and Dikosha*),* and often these characteristics are within the same character. Through his realistic and symbolic portrayal of women, Mda's novels write characters who are colourful and memorable. This study has read Mda's writing of African women through a predominantly African feminist lens which challenges the extent to which women are portrayed as having agency and influence over their own lives and those of their communities. In this respect, Mda's novels constitute the idea of woman as central to a discourse of African renaissance which seeks to improve the lives of African

peoples. Mda writes women as active, creative, and integral to community development. Their ethos is one of love, and ubuntu.

Mda's first novel, *Ways of Dying* turns upside down the idea that women should be "good". Noria is extremely talented and beautiful, but is pompous and proud, earning the derisive nick-name the "stuck up bitch" (29). Her mother, That Mountain Woman, is equally disdainful of society's rules and regulations and insists on pampering her daughter and encouraging her bad behaviour. Toloki's mother is also not concerned with maintaining a "good" reputation with fellow villagers - she has a fiery temper which she unleashes on her self-indulgent husband, Jwara. These boundary-pushing women live their lives passionately and courageously, and aren't too worried about living up to society's expectations that they be gentle, serving, well-behaved mothers. Mda's belief in the constructed nature of male and female identities frees him to imagine female characters who are interesting, and who move out of the spaces that tradition and culture put women in.

Mda's second novel, *She Plays with the Darkness*, expands the theme of women who are not confined by society's somewhat questionable standards of behaviour for women. The central character, Dikosha, is a dancer who uses silence and art to resist, take revenge on, question, survive and heal her community. In the novel, different forms of violence are explored, specifically patriarchal and matriarchal forms of violence. Dikosha is both a victim of, and a perpetrator of violence. The novel shows how violence escalates, and can continue to grow, unless an ethic of healing is paramount. Again,

women are central as custodians of healing art, and they are the main builders of the society - left behind in Lesotho's mountain villages by men who have gone to Johannesburg to dig for gold.

In *The Heart of Redness* the legacy of colonialism is explored, and the past (in its difference) is excavated to illuminate the path to renaissance. Through the legend of Nongqawuse, Mda shows parallels between the transition that happened in the 1800s, and the one South Africans are going through presently. The book looks at questions of choice, and how they affect history. Although *The Heart of Redness* looks at the role of women in history, and questions their absence in many narratives, the novel portrays women symbolically in a way that is limited, and in some ways stereotypical. Womanhood is used to advance ideas about nationhood. Xoliswa Ximiya represents western ideas which are not necessarily appropriate for Africa's development, and her foil, Qukezwa (in the past and present) represents African renaissance.

The Madonna of Excelsior is the first novel by Mda to address apartheid head-on. The Excelsior scandal of the seventies, which revealed the sexual shenanigans and crimes of high ranking National Party leaders is re-visited. The story uses history to laugh at apartheid hypocrisy. The National Party espoused racial separateness by day, and by night had sexual liaisons with their black maids. And if the maids did not consent, the encounters were forced. Mda's fictional madonnas reveal how history, and motherhood colluded to restrict black women's lives. The choices available to Niki and Popi are limited. However, there is a measure of peace and serenity that the women achieve

through their decisions to heal and forgive the sins of the past. The Afrikaner and Sotho communities of Excelsior are shown to be on an honest, uneven and painful road towards reconciliation.

Mda's latest novel, *The Whale Caller* is set only in post-apartheid South Africa, and continues Mda's focus on marginal characters and voices. It is the story of two lovers, the Whale Caller and Saluni, whose poverty relegates them to society's periphery. However, the similarities with Mda's earlier historical novels does not go much beyond the focus on poor people and his use of magical realism. In *The Whale Caller*, Mda explores the psychology of destructive love relationships in the bizarre and tragic love-triangle which involves a whale! A theme he touches on in *Ways of Dying* (the violence between Napo and Noria), and in *She Plays with the Darkness* (Tampololo and Trooper Motsohi, and later Tampololo and Radisene). The novel takes a new direction, that does not interrogate race, nor gender, but looks at a life without materialism, a life focussed on the destructive and constructive force of nature and love. The love between Saluni and the Whale Caller is destroyed by her heavy drinking and jealousy. And the Whale Caller's obsession with Sharisha the whale leads to her tragic end. The tone in this novel is dark and pessimistic, quite different from the earlier novels.

The four novels which are the subject of this study: *Ways of Dying, She Plays with the Darkness, The Heart of Redness,* and *The Madonna of Excelsior* re-visit South Africa's past and write women as central in holding together and building their communities. Mda portrays women as madonnas, mothers, and artists in ways that reveal that despite

historical and political limitations, women exercised choices, and continue to contribute towards positive change in their communities.

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