INTRODUCTION

Zakes Mda

Zakes Mda was born Zanemvula Kizito Gatyeni in 1948 in the Eastern Cape. He spent his childhood in Soweto, and then moved to Lesotho to join his father in exile. One of South Africa's foremost writers, he has produced plays, novels, poems, and academic articles in addition to being a musician and graphic artist. Mda is now Professor of Creative Writing at Ohio University, but he continues to make frequent trips to his native South Africa to launch his novels and to work in community initiatives such as the beekeeping project on the Pink Mountain described in his recent memoir, *Sometimes there is a Void*. This autobiographical work exhibits some of Mda's most striking characteristics: his sense of place, which enables him to create his characters, and his conviction that his writing cannot be separated from his commitment to building community.

His work in both theatre and fiction has been compared to that of leading African writers, including Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Andre Brink, Njabulo Ndebele, J.M. Coetzee, Ivan Vladislavic, Antjie Krog and Etienne van Heerden.[1]

Mda's plays, which include *Dark Voices Ring* (1979), *The Hill* (1980), *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland* (1980), *Collected Plays* (1980 and 1990), *And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses* (1993), *Dankie Auntie* (1997), *Let us Play* (1998) and *Fools, Bells and the Habit of Eating: Three Satires* (2002) have been published by Ravan Press, Wits University Press, *Matatu: Journal for African Culture and Society* and Vivlia Press. His poetry is widely published, starting with a collection titled *Dance of the Ghost*, published in 1977 and culminating with the printing of *Slaughtered Gods* and *Uninspired Graffiti* in a 1996 issue of the literary magazine, *Staffrider*.

Mda's work has in recent years attracted worldwide critical attention. This is attested by the number of international scholarly journals that have carried articles on his fiction, such as *Kunapipi*, *Diacritics* and *Critical Quarterly*. South African journals that have published articles on Mda include *The English Academy Review*, *Current Writing* and *English in Africa*. In 2009 David Bell and J.U. Jacobs brought out the first collection of critical essays on Zakes Mda. The 19 South African and international authors contributing to this collection,

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1   See the Introduction to *Zakes Mda: Ways of Writing* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009) by Bell, David and Jacobs, J.U., 1.

titled *Ways of Writing: Critical Articles on Zakes Mda*, discuss Mda's plays and his novels. The editors have included lists of Mda's fiction, drama, poetry, scholarly works and published articles, and appended a critical bibliography of the most important articles on his work. Many of the essays in *Ways of Writing* are referenced in *Dance of Life*, which is the first single-author monograph on the fiction of Zakes Mda to be published to date.[2]

It is with Mda's novels that this book is chiefly concerned. Beginning in 1995, and ongoing in 2011, they mirror the establishment of post-apartheid South Africa, which began with the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 and the election of the country's first ANC government in 1994. What makes a monograph on Zakes Mda particularly timely is the author's engagement in the cultural, historical and social complexities of the 'new' South Africa. Mda has had many years of experience in writing for theatre, and of using performance techniques to educate people for democracy. But his self-invention as a novelist experimenting with narrative techniques begins with South Africa's transition to democracy. He investigates the roles of history, community and memory in reforging a new national identity. His novels thus contribute to the many debates around nation-building, memory and reconciliation since 1994, and the way these influence the construction of narrative. In 'Memory, metaphor and the triumph of narrative', Njabulo Ndebele records 'the movement of our society from repression to expression' (Ndebele: 1998, 20) embodied in the hearings and writings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: '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' (*Ibid*, 20).

No less than the stories produced by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Mda's narratives dramatise the co-existence of competing versions of history. *Ways of Dying* dramatises creative autonomy versus disempowerment. *The Heart of Redness* juxtaposes colonial bigotry against Xhosa customs and traditions. In *The Madonna of Excelsior* official apartheid history contradicts non-racist, non-gendered artistic expression. *Cion* offers storytelling and quilt-making as alternatives to capitalist commodification.

The role of narrative in coming to terms with the past is emphasised by David Bell: '[I]n the reassessment of the past, the voicing of silences, the need is not to record, to witness and to represent, but to storify' (Bell: 2003, 63). Bell talks

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2   In a research project undertaken in 2009, the following figures for students working on Mda texts in South African universities were compiled: University of Cape Town, 500; University of the Witwatersrand, 450; University of Fort Hare, 110; University of Pretoria, 580; Walter Sisulu University, 400. Figures were not available for readers of Mda texts in postcolonial courses around the world, but are assumed to be much higher than those for South Africa.

about Paolo Freire's distinction between *dialogic* and *anti-dialogic* societies. It is Mda's rejection of the anti-dialogic society, whatever its political or racial constitution, that accounts for his 'even-handed' fictional treatment of black, white and coloured protagonists from diverse backgrounds. This depiction is both compassionate and humorous. Essential to Mda's capacity to speak to the needs of the 'new' South Africa is the tool of satire he frequently uses in his fiction. Ralph Goodman observes: '[Mda] sets up a dialectic which does not allow for absolute categories of oppression or collusion' (Goodman: 2004, 63). This refusal to be ideologically proscriptive is born of Mda's empathy, his identification with both the perpetrators and the victims of apartheid. This is why his fiction is so important in South Africa today.

Why 'Dance of Life' ?

This book is about Zakes Mda's fiction and explores the performative dimension of his novels in particular. His protagonists are involved in writing, speaking, acting, singing, playing instruments, creating sculptures and dancing. Mda's fiction also involves both author and reader in performative responses. This book's title, *Dance of Life*, dramatises this performative dimension: Mda creates narrative designs that his characters perform and his readers construe. It also links with the epigraphs that preface this book. The 'dance' metaphor alludes to J.M. Coetzee's notion, explored in *Elizabeth Costello*, of the interconnection between humans and non-humans as celebrated in the metaphor of the dance. The hymn of the second epigraph links the moon, stars and sun to the inhabitants of earth in a cosmic dance, while in Yeats' *Among School Children* the chestnut tree's roots, trunk and flowers together represent a somatic unity in which dancer and dance become indistinguishable.

   The 'dance' metaphor is useful to the understanding of Zakes Mda's fiction, because it involves author, characters and readers in a kind of performance. This is reflected in the book's representation of visual images. The front cover shows Lesley Charnock's striking painting of dancers, while the painting of intertwined figures on the back cover and on Plate XVI is by Mda himself. The Frans Claerhout paintings on which Mda builds *The Madonna of Excelsior* are reproduced so that readers can see how Mda's story-world in this novel dialogues with that of Claerhout. Mda says that all his artwork explores the 'dance' motif, either realistically or in abstract terms.[3] Crucial to the performative dimension into which Mda inducts his readers is the visual

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3   Grateful thanks to Teresa and Albio Gonzales in Barcelona, who own the painting by Zakes Mda displayed on the back cover and on Plate XVI, and who gave me permission to reproduce it.

repertoire orchestrated in all his novels. Mda's strong painterly imagination teaches his readers how to see anew by creating changed spaces in memory and culture, which redress the negativity of the colonial experience. Mda uses authorial and figural points of view, perspective and focalisation to induct the reader into an altered understanding of socio-historical realities. *Ways of Dying* transforms the horror of death and the pain of mourning into artistic commemoration. *The Heart of Redness* translates the chiaroscuro of Conrad's novella into the vibrant colours of an Africa rich in culture and tradition. *The Madonna of Excelsior* turns the context of repressive legislation into an occasion for artistic expression, while *Cion* interweaves the sufferings of slaves in the American deep South with the liberating art of their descendants. Mda's saturation in the visual enables the construction of a dynamic postcolonial subjectivity.

This emphasis on the visual in Mda's writing is never merely aesthetic. It is above all a way of rewriting history. Even as he exults in the new narrative freedoms that South African writers are able to celebrate after 1994, Mda insists on social and historical accuracy. His characters are represented in the specificity of their cultural moment and their geographical positioning in his stories of both pre-and post-apartheid South Africa.

Towards an ethics of performance

Mda's new fictional practice is continuous with his previous experience of writing and directing plays. Critics have commented on the Brechtian focus of Mda's plays, which weight the ethical over the psychological and the social over the individual.[4] Mda has himself insisted that his work with the Maratholi Travelling Theatre was aimed at producing critical awareness and self-education amongst communities participating in development activities: 'Consciousness is raised from inside, by group analysis of social reality and power relations' (Mda: 1990, 355). Mda's theatre provides a voice for the voiceless and redresses the circularity in which 'the most marginalised sections of society, trapped in a "culture of silence" … remain passive consumers of the ideas and values of more powerful classes' (Mervis: 1998, 39).[5] Underlying Mda's thematic and narrative preoccupations as sketched

4   Carolyn Duggan 'outlines the ways in which Mda's plays mirror the social and political contexts of apartheid and the struggles of ordinary people to retain some freedom and humanity under an oppressive regime'. See Duggan's article, 'Betrayal and the search for empowerment in the early plays'. In Bell & Jacobs (eds) (2009) *Ways of Writing: Critical Essays on Zakes Mda*.

5   See Margaret Mervis, 1998 'Fiction for development: Mda's *Ways of Dying*'. *Current Writing* 10 (1).

in the previous paragraph — his powerful presentation of the visual and his emphasis on performance — is a hybrid world-view. Through a combination of magic realism, orature, intertextuality and deployment of the conventions of disparate genres, Mda undermines the dualistic thinking characteristic of our Western heritage, whether between the past and the present, the human and the non-human, the living and the dead, the rural and the urban, the realistic and the imaginary, or the local and the global.

In his new autobiography, *Sometimes there is a Void*, Mda describes living in Johannesburg as a 12-year-old who was soon to be banished by his anxious parents from the seductions of city life to a small country town. His father was serving articles under George Matanzima in the Transkei; his mother was working as a registered nurse and midwife at the Dobsonville Clinic. Instead of concentrating on his schoolwork, Mda entertained himself with music and drawing:

> *While [my mother] was at work in the clinic which was just across the street from our four-roomed home, or cycling in the township delivering babies, I was playing truant from school and hanging out at shop verandahs where I played the pennywhistle with other delinquent youths … On the occasions when I did go to school I spent most of the class time drawing pictures. My talent was recognized when the teacher asked me to illustrate the poetry we were studying with appropriate pictures and I drew the Zulu warrior, uPhoshozwayo, as an illustration for a poem in his praise. With crayons I brought his traditional dress of leopard skins and a shield to life. Then I signed the picture at the bottom right, 'by Zakes the Artist'.* (Mda: 2011, 5–6.)

Mda also writes of how, revisiting Lesotho in later years, he re-encountered the vinyl records that were his father's legacy to him:

> *Frank Sinatra, Marion Anderson, the Beatles, King Kong (the South African musical), Ella Fitzgerald, Satchmo, Handel's Messiah, Dark City Sisters, Jim Reeves, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and thirty or so [other vinyl records] that [my father] used to collect when he was a member of a record club from 1963 to 1966* (Mda: 2011, 14).

Art and music were, therefore, central activities for Mda from his early childhood. They spill over effortlessly into his writing life, as is recognised in this citation for winning, in 1997, the Olive Schreiner Prize:

> *The prize is presented for excellence in prose, poetry, and drama … in 1997 it was presented for prose to Zakes Mda for his first novel* Ways of Dying. *Sharply conscious that Mda last year won the prize for drama, the adjudicators nevertheless deemed this novel their first choice, in a close-run race, for literary merit. They felt it served to bring together African and occidental structures, forming the foundations for a new 'music' in South African writing.*

J.U. Jacobs points out that not only are cultural and artistic performances *described* in Mda novels, they are *'enacted* by the narrative' (Bell & Jacobs: 2009,

356, author's emphasis). In the chapters that follow, I will try to demonstrate these enactments by showing how Mda designs narrative forms that illustrate his thematic preoccupations — just as an artist chooses the colours, forms and textures of his brush-strokes.

From play-writing to novel-writing

In his aptly titled article, 'A theatre for democracy', David Bell writes about Mda as theatre practitioner in the years 1979 to 1989, when he worked with the Maratholi Travelling Theatre in Lesotho. Bell points out that the Latin-American writers Paolo Freire and Augusto Boal, whose work encouraged participatory democratic practices, inspired Mda to create plays '*with* the people, not *for* the people'. (Bell: 2009, 18). Intended, like the work of his Latin-American counterparts, to involve the rural poor and urban slum dwellers, and drawing on 'popular indigenous modes of performance' (*Ibid*, 22), Mda's theatre for development underwent a three-phase process 'from a theatre of protest via a theatre of resistance to a theatre of reconciliation' (*Ibid*, 21.) Mda's theatre work, Bell argues, is driven by 'a belief that theatre can help people change their lives through a process of conscientisation, naming, reflecting and acting, that leads to critical awareness and self-reliance' (*Ibid*, 34). Therefore, an obvious starting-point for anybody writing about Mda's fiction is its relation to his earlier writing for theatre, where he worked closely with communities in order to educate largely non-literate audiences. Like his plays, Mda's novels are about 'ordinary people doing ordinary things'.[6]

When Mda and I met to talk in November 2009, I commented that Mda has always insisted on the relationship between art and politics. I quoted the interview in which he stated: '[T]he role I hope my work plays is that of social commentator … I want [my art] to rally people to action' (Bell & Jacobs: 2009, 3). I asked how his work in the different areas of theatre, fiction and cinema writing connected in relation to this *desideratum* of social commentary. He replied:

> *In answer to your question about the 'trajectory' of my writing first for theatre, then novels, and most recently scriptwriting for film, this was never a planned 'trajectory'. My MA was in writing for film and television, so I've been doing this, combining different kinds of writing, for many years. On the issue of social commentary and*

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6   Margaret Mervis links Mda's theatre with his fiction. She speaks of his project of giving 'a voice to the voiceless' and shows how this is extended to *Ways of Dying*. She comments that '*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' (Mervis: 1998, 55).

rallying people to political action … I was talking about my plays, about educating people for democracy, not about my novel-writing now. Now I am a storyteller. In the past, we didn't have the luxury of writing one work over many months. The plays I wrote had to be produced under pressure, for an immediate political purpose. Fiction-writing is much more leisurely.

Asked how his fiction creates participatory processes analogous to those that his plays demand, Mda replied: 'I want to tell a story, like my grandmother told it when I was a child.' Questioned about how his most recent novel, *Black Diamond*, positions its reader as performer, Mda replied: 'How does it position the reader as performer? Well, that's up to you critics to decide. I tell a story that is driven by the needs of its characters in their situations and contexts, in the places where they live. I'm not conscious of "positioning" the reader.'

Perhaps what this exchange illustrates is that my preoccupations as critic, and Mda's preoccupations as storyteller, don't always overlap, a fact that allows us both greater freedom to explore divergent areas. But the relationship between Mda's earlier theatre writing and his current novel-writing is of course a crucial question.[7] A link here is his use of proverbs and of an extensive African resource base in both his novels and his plays. These cross-cultural allusions 'capture the reconciliatory spirit of a South Africa striving to heal the wounds of the past' (Warnes: 2009, 89).

If theatre-writing involves a bodily present spectator interacting with the performers, fiction-writing presupposes an absent reader. Yet even in the activity of reading, a performative dimension comes into play, as Derek Attridge explains:

Among all the inventions that can be so characterised, works of art are distinctive in the demand they make for a performance, a performance in which the authored singularity, alterity and inventiveness of the work as an exploitation of the multiple powers of language are experienced and affirmed in the present, in a creative, responsible reading (Attridge: 2004, 136).

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7   Shane Graham describes how the play *The Bells of Amersfoort* (2002) foregrounds issues of space-time to dramatise trauma and memory. This play '[forges] new modes of constructing and interacting with social space' (Graham: 2009b, 70), a project which is extended into Mda's novels. Linking the temporal and spatial coordinates of his plays with his novels, Rogier Courau and Sally-Ann Murray discuss *Ways of Dying* as a novel in which 'two states of transition, one temporal and the other spatial, come together in a plot of extreme violence and morbidity' (Courau & Murray: 2009, 95). Their argument complements Graham's analysis of dramatic space-time as connecting with fictional space-time to represent trauma.

In the same way that theatre requires a performance based on the collaborations of a director, actors and an audience, so too does the act of reading require a collaborative performance between the text's author and its readers.

Written texts and oral storytelling

Mda's knowledge and use of a wide range of intertexts derives from a Western tradition. This is more fully discussed in the section on hybridity as a postcolonial strategy in Chapter Three, titled 'The cross-border reader'. It is also foregrounded in Chapter Four, which deals with Mda's flexible deployment of intertextuality.

If Mda's writing dialogues extensively with other writers' texts, it is also steeped in African oral storytelling features. In interview with me Mda said that he wanted to tell stories as his grandmother told them when he was a child. Childhood memories of communal storytelling, long before the beginning of formal education, are frequently crucial to the development of African writers. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o recalls how in his native Kenya children's voices participate in and extend storytelling:

> *I can vividly recall those evenings … around the fireside. It was mostly the grown-ups telling the children but everybody was interested and involved. We children would re-rell the stories the following day to other children who worked in the fields picking the pyrethrum flowers, tea-leaves or coffee beans of our European landlords* (Ngugi: 437).

Ngugi continues:

> *There were good and bad story-tellers. A good one could tell the same story over and over again, and it would always be fresh to us, the listeners. He or she could tell a story told by someone else and make it more alive and dramatic. The differences really were in the use of words and images and the inflexion of voices to effect different tones* (Ibid, 473).

The power of stories to involve their listeners thus turned on the storyteller's use of language:

> *Language was not a mere string of words. It had a suggestive power well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning. Our appreciation of the suggestive magical power of language was reinforced by the games we played with words through riddles, proverbs, transpositions of syllables, or through nonsensical but musically arranged words* (Ibid, 437-438).

The spoken word, no less than the written word, thus shapes Mda's development as a creator of fiction. Far from communicating a timeless world, it intersects with the social and cultural realities that he invokes in his novels. Frantz Fanon draws readers' attention to the potential subversiveness of the spoken word: '[T]he oral tradition — stories, epics and songs of the people, which

formerly were filed away as set pieces' began to change as Algeria prepared for independence:

> *The storytellers who used to relate inert episodes now bring them alive and introduce into them modifications which are increasingly fundamental. There is a tendency to bring conflicts up to date and to modernise the kinds of struggle which the stories evoke, together with the names of heroes … Colonialism made no mistake when from 1955 on it proceeded to arrest these storytellers systematically* (Fanon: 1993, 48).

Writing about contemporary postcolonial fiction, Elleke Boehmer points out how writers

> *justify their choice of language by emphasising how the various conflicts and anomalies of the postcolonial condition are vibrantly displayed within the hybridised medium itself … the point on which they agree is the need to dismantle the authority once commanded by English. If a colonial language embodies a colonial vision, then the aim must be to dislodge that vision … It is a process which can also be termed cultural boomeranging or switchback, where the once-colonised take the artefacts of the former master and make them their own* (Boehmer: 1995, 210).

This 'cultural boomeranging or switchback' is achieved in Mda's novels both by his ability to reconfigure other writers' texts and by his deployment of the linguistic resources of the spoken word. No less than literate thinking, the oral tradition feeds into the development of national consciousness, on which nation-building in a newly democratic South Africa depends.[8]

Social realism or magic realism?

Mda's settings are historically and geographically accurate, whether in the cityscapes of apartheid-designed 'locations' or in the indigenous flora and fauna of such places as Nongqawuse's Valley in *The Heart of Redness*. Yet his accurately

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8   Douglas Killam and Ruth Rowe sketch the evolution of oral history in South Africa, and relate it to the country's current political situation:

In addition to folkloric and prose narratives, oral poetry has been an important feature of South African society since the development of the first human communities in the subcontinent, from the lyric songs of the Khoikhoi and Bushmen, expressing complex mythological and social understandings, to the praise poems (*izibongo, lithoko*) of African societies, which serve to negotiate relations of power between ruler and ruled… The study of oral poetry in South Africa has received impetus recently from the far-reaching political changes in the country, which have emphasised the need for the creation of inclusive cultural histories, the broadening of the scope and methodology of literary studies to include 'popular' non-canonical forms, and developments in oral theory and critical practice. Areas which have received particular attention recently include orality and history, oral forms and conceptions of gender, oral poetry and political power, and the adaptation of performance genres to contexts of modernity (Killam & Rowe: 2000, 201–202).

historicised and acutely observed realism sometimes alternates with what has been described as 'magic realism'. This genre is associated with the supernatural and with Latin-American writing, particularly that of Gabriel Márquez. Mda, however, explicitly rejects the notion that his use of magic realism is influenced by such writers as Márquez. Rather, he insists that magic realism is an *African* storytelling tradition: 'I wrote in this manner from an early age because I am a product of a magical culture. In my culture the magical is not disconcerting. It is taken for granted. No one tries to find a natural explanation for the unreal. The unreal happens as part of reality' (Mda, in Naidoo: 1997, 281).

Yet magic realism is a mode little used by South African writers. Why is this? In his Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech, J.M. Coetzee asks what prevents the South African writer from following the example of Don Quixote and entering 'the realm of faery'. Coetzee replies:

> *What prevents him is what prevents Don Quixote himself. The power of the world his body lives in to impose itself on him and ultimately on his imagination, which, whether he likes it or not, has its residue in his body. The crudity of life in South Africa, the naked force of its appeals, not only on the physical level but at the moral level too, its callousness and its brutalities, its hungers and its rages, its greed and its lies, make it as irresistible as it is unlovable* (Coetzee: 1992, 98–99).

Mda's story-worlds include plenty of the 'power, crudity, naked force … callousness, brutalities, hungers, rages, greed and lies' described by Coetzee. We need only think of *Ways of Dying*, in which children of five are killed by 'necklacing' because they are accused of being informers, or *The Madonna of Excelsior*, where women like Popi and Niki are thrown into prison by a government blind to their humanity and impervious to their civil rights. Yet Mda casts these characters into story-worlds that are potentially transformed by what Warnes calls 'the redeeming qualities of the aesthetic' communicated 'not through magic means, but through ordinary acts of imagination' (Warnes: 2009, 82). He remarks that *The Madonna of Excelsior* juxtaposes its characters and situations with those of the symbolist/expressionist world of the painter Frans Claerhout because '[Claerhout] represents a force that numinously rejoins the religious, the aesthetic and the possibilities of healing the wounds of the past' (*Ibid*, 83). What Mda's 'magic realism' achieves, therefore, is 'an affectivity and a dignity denied for generations by the impositions of colonialism and apartheid' (*Ibid*, 83–84). Mda's magic realism is thus connected much less with the supernatural than with the transformative potentials of the human imagination.

A striking number of critics[9] see magic realism as characteristic of a *transitional* or *transformatory* category of writing. Brenda Cooper describes the

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9   Barker cites Mervis, Van Wyk, Bell, Cooper, Durrant, Steinmeyer, Jacobs, Mazibuko, Courau and Barnard.

genre in African literature as 'thriving on transition, on the process of change, borders and ambiguity'. She remarks: 'such zones occur where burgeoning capitalist development mingles with older pre-capitalist modes in postcolonial societies, and where there is syncretising of cultures' (Cooper: 1998, 15). For Derek Barker, Mda employs magic realism 'wherever the subject matter deals with extreme and inexplicable inhumanity or ontological rifts' (Barker: 2008, 17). The critical debate around the function of magic realism in African writing, and particularly in Mda's fiction, is thus lively and extensive. My own sense is that Mda's magic realism has to be understood as an *extension of*, rather than a *contradiction of*, his social realism. I am here in agreement with Marita Wenzel, who remarks that 'the presence of magical realism in Mda's fiction underlines and illustrates the essential duality of existence by suggesting other possible interpretations of reality' (Wenzel: 2009, 131).

Vision/focalisation

Mda's explorations of the I/eye relationship challenge his readers to reconstitute individual and collective identity through the changed spaces in perception, memory and understanding which pervade his fiction. His deployment of the visual as an authorial strategy may be referred to as 'focalisation'. It is defined by Mieke Bal as 'the relationship between the "vision", the agent that sees, and that which is seen' (Bal: 1997, 146). The author's design of focalisation affects both fictional characters, whose processes of vision are described in the narrative, and the readers of the narrative, who '[watch] with the character's eyes and will … be inclined to accept the vision presented by that character' (*Ibid*, 146). Every one of Mda's novels — except perhaps *Black Diamond* — makes telling use of vision and focalisation. By changing the way we *see*, Mda aims to change the way we *think* about the world.

His first post-apartheid novel, *Ways of Dying*, dramatises the reappropriation of urban space by the former victims of apartheid. In focalising the urban space inhabited by Toloki the Professional Mourner, Mda makes us see the astonishing complexity and diversity of life in what middle-class readers would otherwise see only as an impoverished and culturally marginalised space. Mda's project here is complemented by Jacob Dlamini, who in *Native Nostalgia* (2009) writes about his memories of growing up in the township of Katlehong. These memories fundamentally deconstruct the ignorance of apartheid and of colonial discourses that discriminate against township-dwellers:

> *Townships tend to be seen as zones of deprivation that can only ever be defined in a negative sense, in terms of what they do not possess. In the telling of most histories, townships are poor places, full of poor people, who often make poor choices in life* (Dlamini: 2009, 105).

But Dlamini shows that there is nothing inevitable or innocent about seeing townships in these terms, since our perceptions are culturally mediated. He points out:

> *In the case of a township and the way we see it, what is apparent to a viewer (that what she has in front of her is row upon row of unimaginative houses on dusty streets) may be as much a function of what her brain has been taught to 'see' as what she sees in front of her* (*Ibid*, 121).

If in *Ways of Dying* Mda uses focalisation to challenge dominant ways of seeing typical of apartheid ideology, his use of focalisation in each of his subsequent novels is equally subversive, surprising us into new ways of understanding what we had previously taken for granted. In each of the chapters that follows, I shall attempt to demonstrate how Mda uses the visual to destabilise the reader's preconceived notions.

Place/setting/landscape

> *[There is] an elaborate frame through which our adult eyes survey the landscape. Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock* (Schama: 1996, 10).

Mda's story-worlds are both rooted in specific carefully observed places and suffused with the memories of those who have inhabited those places: 'I have written elsewhere that I usually see a place and immediately decide that it is so beautiful or so ugly that it deserves a novel. The next question is: what character would live in a place like this and what memories are contained in this landscape? I see the trees and the rocks and the grass and the hills and the rivers as storing places of memory' (Mda: 2009a, 3). In his use of setting, therefore, Mda mutually imbricates memory, history, landscape and culture. His attitude to landscapes has little in common with Western perspectives that perceive geographical settings as mere expressions of human mastery. Rather, settings and landscapes in his storytelling derive from African oral genres, which refuse to separate people from land. Writing of the characteristics of oral praise poetry, Liz Gunner comments: '[T]he land frequently becomes the person, and becomes part of the body's text; the social and the historical self is perceived through the land' (Gunner: 1996, 120). Like the praise singers', Mda's settings '[collapse] linear time and [allow] the past to sit within the ambit of the present' (*Ibid*, 123). They also '[break] down the categories of land, body and being' (*Ibid*, 127).

Where Western mental categories separate, indigenous peoples' conceptions of geography join: 'History, science, spirituality and aesthetics are all tied together by these peoples' oral, or recently written, bodies of local knowledge … In contrast to the observation of specialised professional

scientists, indigenous knowledge is local, intensive, long-term, and based on intimate, shared experience that is dynamic, complex and recursive' (Allison: 1999, 273). Landscape therefore functions as an integral part of an indigenous group's sense of identity. For Aboriginal Australians as well as for Native Americans, social identity cannot be separated from the ancestors whose past life created the topographical features inherited by their descendants. These links with the past are strongly present too in Mda's story-worlds. They deconstruct many of the binaries on which Western history is built. Memory takes the place of the topographic documentation created by Western maps. As Barbara Bender remarks:

> *Past and present elide. The topographical details — dune, hill, lake, shoreline — are the site of memory. Where … spatial maps reflect a Western sense of personal autonomy, these are the memories of ancestral wanderings that are also contemporary songlines, ancestral exits and entrances that are also contemporary sacred places … In Aboriginal society, [the] divide between nature and culture, something 'out there' as opposed to something socially and culturally constructed, is, quite literally, inconceivable* (Bender: 1999, 41).

This nature/culture binary is inconceivable also in the world-views of Mda's characters. Their relationship to the lands they inhabit is shot through with the African concept of *ubuntu*,[10] an inter-relatedness that both unites different people and places them in dynamic relationship to their environment.

I have been arguing that the sense of place so central to Mda's fiction is both the product of accurate observation of topographical details on the author's part and the repository of remembered experience of those who inhabit these places. It has therefore both a real and an imagined dimension. Into this rich and evolving sense of place feed both the strategies of focalisation already touched on and the discursive blending reflected in a given novel's narrative structure, which will be made up of authorial, narratorial and figural elements. As the authors of the earlier quotations argue, nature and culture, divided by Western thought, fuse in African storytelling. In Mda's novels place is dynamic and transformative.

In this brief introduction, I have attempted to sketch the contexts of Mda's novel-writing, in relation both to the political and social worlds of post-apartheid South Africa in which they are set, and in relation to some of the narratological features of his writing. I have repeatedly emphasised the importance of the performative in the author's interactions with his characters and his readers. This performative dimension will be more fully explored in each of the subsequent chapters.

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10   The concept of *ubuntu* or African humanism is discussed in Chapter One.