



The collective voice in *The Madonna of Excelsior*: narrating transformative possibilities

N.S. Zulu
Department of African Languages
University of Stellenbosch
STELLENBOSCH
E-mail: nsz@sun.ac.za

Abstract

The collective voice in *The Madonna of Excelsior*: narrating transformative possibilities

The collective voice in the novel, "The Madonna of Excelsior" (2002), reveals that crossing of borders is a process characterised by cultural contact that reduces cultural polarisation and makes social transformation possible. This article examines the transformative potential of the novel. The first part of the novel indicates that the transformation of polarised South African society is inevitable, desirable and possible in order to normalise life. This transformation does, however, involve transgression and contestation of the old order. To present the possibility of transformation, the collective voice in the novel makes the Immorality Act the object of its satire, revealing the failure of apartheid nationalism and its master narrative. The alternative offered in the second part of the novel is a transforming macrocosm – a South African society that grapples with crossing apartheid's borders.

Opsomming

Die kollektiewe stem in *The Madonna of Excelsior*: die beskrywing van transformatiewe moontlikhede

Die kollektiewe stem in die roman, "The Madonna of Excelsior" (2002), toon dat die oorsteek van grense 'n proses is wat gekenmerk word deur kulturele kontak wat kulturele polarisering laat afneem en maatskaplike transformasie moontlik maak. Hierdie artikel ondersoek die transformatiewe potensiaal van dié roman. Die eerste deel van die roman toon dat die transformasie

van die gepolariseerde Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing onvermydelik, gewens en moontlik is ten einde die lewe te normaliseer. Hierdie transformasie behels egter die oorskryding en bestryding van die ou orde. Om transformasie moontlik te maak, maak die kollektiewe stem in die roman die Ontugwet die voorwerp van sy satire en onthul die mislukking van apartheid-nasionalisme en sy meestersverhaal. Die alternatief wat in die tweede deel van die roman aangebied word, is 'n transformerende makrokosmos – 'n Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing wat worstel om die grense van apartheid oor te steek.

1. Introduction

This essay explores the narrative voice in *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002), focusing on what the collective voice of the narrator says about the crossing of essentialist boundaries and identities to foster transformation. Narrative voice can be defined as the voice of "the narrator" or "the speaker of a text" (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983:87). Copley (2001:104) simply calls it "the voice of the poet or narrator". According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1999), voice is "an opinion or attitude, or means or agency by which it is expressed". Voice in narration, according to Abbot (2002:64), "is a question of who it is we 'hear' doing the narrating". For the purpose of this essay, the "collective voice" of the narrator we hear in the novel can be identified as the narrative voice that speaks for a group of individuals, and a voice that belongs to all those who were affected by the Immorality Act and other apartheid laws that enforced racial division.

2. The collective voice in *The Madonna of Excelsior*

A first reading of Zakes Mda's novel, *The Madonna of Excelsior*, gives one the deceptive impression that its collective voice is monolithic and inward-looking insofar as it speaks for and on behalf of the whole black African community in South Africa, and specifically the community of Mahlatswetsa in the township near Excelsior. In addition, it also seems to be speaking against the white community of Excelsior during the heyday of apartheid and after its downfall, using binary oppositions in which both the oppressed and the oppressing subjects are put into neat categories.

2.1 A complex and multiple collective voice

A closer reading of the novel, however, reveals that its collective voice is an outward-looking omniscient voice that is complex and multiple, self-critical and self-mocking, ironic and satirical. It is also a

voice that subverts notions of racial and political homogeneity during and after the demise of apartheid. The voice offers corrective but de-totalising post-apartheid alternatives that break down past social and ideological categories, and foster nation building. The collective voice is therefore transformative in nature.

The omniscient “we” narrator is involved in the events which are narrated. This narrating voice is similar in some ways to the collective voice that the reader hears in Mda’s earlier novel, *Ways of dying* (1995a). However, the nature of the collective voice in *Ways of dying* (1995a:8) is far less complex:

... we live our lives together as one. 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 fit. We would not be needing to justify the collective voice that tells this story if you had not wondered how we become so omniscient ...

As can be seen, the collective voice in *Ways of dying* actually represents “village gossip” as constituted in the words “they say” (Mda, 1995a:8).

In *The Madonna of Excelsior* the collective voice presents the experiences of all those who were affected in one way or another by the social conflict in the polarised zones during the heyday of apartheid. Consequently, the collective voice seems to demand the reader’s involvement in the process of challenging his/her assumptions, as well as those of the novel and the author. Goodman (2004:67) correctly argues that by using the collective voice in *The Madonna of Excelsior*,

Mda challenges communal generalisations [as] he is simultaneously challenging the validity of his own narrative, by including himself in the ‘we’ whose views he is interrogating, and by presenting a counter-discourse which insists on ontological slippages rather than certainties.

The narrator has had first-hand experience of the essentialist cultural representations that polarised South African society as a consequence of legalised racial segregation. This racial segregation prevailed and thrived because of what Khunyeli (1994:4) calls “Hertzog Native and Land bills” – pillars of apartheid laws that were

amended from time to time to become more stringent in their control of racial identities:

Essentialism is the assumption that groups, categories or classes of objects have one or several defining features exclusive to all members of the category... In the analysis of culture it is a (generally implicit) assumption that individuals share an essential cultural identity (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1998:77).

2.1.1 Parodying the essentialism of apartheid

The collective voice in Mda's novel parodies the essentialism of apartheid. In the novel, this parodying manifests itself in fixed and stereotypical representations of social reality. For example, Adam de Vries' party in *Excelsior* is a typical Afrikaner event: there are "boys who [are] playing with a rugby ball, practising throws that might see them being picked for Haak Vrystaat, or even the Springbok, in later years" (p. 6);¹ the atmosphere is dominated by "boeremusiek of the concertina" (p. 7) with "liedjies" (p. 7) and "volkspele" (p. 7). Some of the Afrikaner women are caricatured as "voluminous" (p. 7). All the members at the party are Calvinist Christians of the "local Dutch Reformed Church" (p. 7). They believe in the message inscribed in the marble panel at the church door – in honour of J.G. Strydom, the prime minister of South Africa from 1954 to 1958:

As a Calvinist people we Afrikaners have, in accordance with our faith in the Word of God, developed a policy condemning all equality and mongrelisation between White and Black. God's Word teaches us, after all, that He willed into being separate nations, colours and languages (p. 29-30).

Because of this religious belief in separateness, black people live in the "black township of Mahlatswetsa" (p. 2) near *Excelsior* and white Afrikaners live in the town itself. Although not explicitly said in the novel, the reader knows that there is a distance between the lives of black and white people. The poor blacks in the novel supply cheap labour to "very prosperous" (p. 7) Afrikaners, who ensure, through the enforcement of segregation and the denunciation of equality, that black domestic servants like Niki wait outside the gates of the white masters' churches to look after their children. What is ironic about the Calvinist Christianity of the Dutch Reformed Church in

1 Page numbers between brackets refer to *The Madonna of Excelsior* (Mda, 2002).

Excelsior is that the white people, on rejoining their servants outside the gate of their church, ask if they had enjoyed the service as if the servants too had been inside the church. Adam de Vries, for instance, asks Niki, “Did you enjoy the service?” and she responds, “It was good, my baas” (p. 31). Similarly, Stephanus Cronje asks, “It was a beautiful service, wasn’t it?” Niki agrees, “It was very beautiful” and Madam Cornelia continues, “We are grateful you agreed to look after Tjaart even though it’s a Sunday” (p. 32).

2.1.2 Boundaries constructed by apartheid

The situation in *Excelsior* illustrates how apartheid constructed boundaries between township and town, white and black, in trying to maintain the assumptions of the self as “civilised” and the other as “primitive”. Ashcroft (2001:165) points out that “profound in the development of modernity was the construction of a boundary between civilised self and primitive other”. The strict apartheid laws were designed to regulate and organise cultural activities according to fixed boundaries and identities. The Population Registration Act categorised people into ethnic and racial groups; the Mixed Amenities Act enforced separate public facilities; the Group Areas Act legislated where blacks and whites were to live and established barren homelands, inhospitable townships and towns with empty spaces inbetween. Furthermore the Immorality Act prohibited marriages between black and white people that would essentially disturb the pureness of the white race.

In his way, the collective voice in Mda’s novel mocks apartheid essentialisms and the racist maintenance of the boundaries between black and white on the grounds that they divide the uncivilised from the civilised. Parodying the Immorality Act, the novel singles out a group of conservative but sexually depraved Afrikaner men in *Excelsior*, among others Johannes Smit and the Reverend Francois Bornman. Johannes Smit is representative of the hypocrisy of apartheid’s policy of condemning “mongrelisation between White and Black” enshrined in the Immorality Act. He is scoffed at in the novel as a perverted “squat hairy gorilla” (p. 15) with “hairy buttocks” (p. 17), a “hirsute man with a beer belly” (p. 15). Johannes Smit also symbolises the Afrikaner male’s view of immorality as a pastime: raping black women by white men is regarded as leisure, amusement or hobby. Johannes Smit, for instance, waylays black girls in the open veld on their “cow-dung expedition” (p. 14) and rapes them, as he has raped Niki (p. 14-19). To Johannes Smit and his Afrikaner friends, such rape is “great sport”, some “game”.

2.1.3 Satire of Afrikaner masculinity

In this context, the collective voice of the novel at the same time satirises Afrikaner masculinity that sees black girls as “quarry” to be caught and raped. As a regular player of this “harrowing game”, Johannes Smit’s lust for black women is public knowledge, despite him being the provincial leader of the “ultra-right-wing Herstigste Nasionale Party” (p. 88) that criticised the National Party as being soft on blacks.

The reader learns that in some instances “quarry” became permanent sexual partners, often swapped during group sex amid heavy drinking in the barns (p. 52-56). The fact that a woman is taken as “quarry”, that is, as an object of the hunt, debases her as prey, an “animal-like, degenerate and stupid figure” (Lockett, 1988:21). As Driver (1988:15) points out, since the frontier times, black women have “often provid[ed] young white men with their sex education and even function[ed] as ‘second wives’”.

Furthermore, as an organiser of sex orgies with black women that take place at his barn, Johannes Smit represents the double standards of the Immorality Act. He is an elder of a church that condemns immorality and mongrelisation, yet the community of Mahlatswetsa Location recognises him as the man who seduces girls with “bank notes” (p. 15) to get other black girls for his “pastime”. The hypocrisy of the pillars of racial segregation is thus exposed. According to Goodman (2004:63),

[t]he Immorality Act indicated how much whites projected their own felt inferiority onto black people and how crucial it was to the state to maintain the binary system it had established, attempting to naturalise it by labelling any breach of the system as abhorrent. The vigour (and ingenuity) with which these risibly permeable boundaries were policed was clear signs of the anxiety generated by any threat of the schizoid world which the apartheid regime inhabited.

2.1.4 Targeting the double standards of apartheid

The collective voice exposes the ironies of apartheid xenophobia and targets the double standards of all those who enforced it. Klein-Jan Lombard represents apartheid officials who arrest and prosecute contraveners of the Immorality Act, yet he and his father, Groot-Jan Lombard, are players of this game. As a police officer and prosecutor, the magistrate asks him to recuse himself from prosecuting his father. The character Tjaart Cronje represents the

officials who overzealously lead the war against miscegenation, having been brainwashed by the patriarchs of the Great Trek. Cronje leads the war against blacks, who are seen as terrorists and communists. The reader, however, suspects that he probably lost his virginity sleeping with a black woman. His “horsey-horsey” games with his black nanny, Niki, are anything but innocent. Niki eventually stops carrying him on her back because whenever he was on her back he “induced an erection and worked himself up with unseemly rhythmic movements” (p. 9). In addition, the narrator reveals that, young as he was, Tjaart knew about the common practice of sleeping with black women because when his mother strip-searches Niki, his lust for her becomes obvious.

Niki’s triangular pubes loomed large in Tjaart Cronje’s imagination. Threatening the pleasures of the future ... He knew already that it was the tradition of Afrikaner boys of the Free State platteland to go through devirgination rites by capturing and consuming the forbidden quarry that lurked beneath their nannies’ pink overall (p. 42).

2.1.5 Parodying Afrikaners prosecuting fellow Afrikaners

The collective voice also parodies Afrikaners’ “cannibalistic zeal” in prosecuting fellow Afrikaners for the pastime of immorality:

It was the Golden Age of Immorality in the Free State. Immorality was a pastime. It had always been popular even before laws were enacted in Parliament to curb it. It became a pastime the very day explorers’ ships weighed anchor at the Cape Peninsula centuries ago, and saw the yellow body part of the Khoikhoi women. But what we were seeing during the Golden Age was like a plague. In various platteland towns Afrikaner magistrates were sitting at the benches, listening to salacious details, and concealing painful erections under their black magisterial gowns. Afrikaners prosecuting fellow Afrikaners with cannibalistic zeal. Afrikaners sending fellow Afrikaners to serve terms of imprisonment. All because of black body parts (p. 93-94).

2.1.6 Exposing the hypocrisy of the D.R. Church and its theology

The collective voice in the novel also derides the hypocrisy of the Dutch Reformed Church and its Calvinist theology, as represented by Reverend Francois Bornman, the pastoral figure of the Dutch Reformed Church. Reverend Francois Bornman’s preaching supports the laws against miscegenation: “We knew of him as a man of God who preached obedience to His laws. Laws against

adultery and miscegenation" (p. 75). Yet, at the same time, he indulged in the male Afrikaner's "great sport"; lust is thus criticised in the novel as "harrowing games" (p. 15), "partners-swapping orgies", "escapades" (p. 78) and "wicked pleasures" (p. 78). The Reverend Francois Bornman is part of the Excelsior 19 case that represents the rotten core of lustful Afrikaner males, who go as far as to establish rules for sex partner-swapping games. When these rules fail, they accuse one another of "obviously becoming unsportsmanly" (p. 53), behaving like "selfish boy[s]" (p. 54) wanting to have "the sole ownership" (p. 53) of their partners.

The irony is that when these Afrikaner men are caught in their "immoral pastime", they hire the services of one who has been guilty of the same crime to defend them. Adam de Vries, who knows very well that they are guilty as charged, denies any wrongdoing. According to him, "[t]hese men are innocent. They have been framed by the blacks" (p. 75). Subsequently, the court case is seen as a "black conspiracy" (p. 75). Assuming the reader's familiarity with the miscegenation story of the Excelsior 19, the all-knowing narrator ridicules the one-sidedness of the trial: "All these things flow from the sins of our mothers" (p. 1). The collective voice also parodies apartheid's essentialising identities and categories as symbolised by the hypocrisy of the Excelsior Afrikaners.

The greatest irony is of course that in court Adam de Vries argues that the Reverend Francois Bornman and his friends are "innocent" men who have been "framed by the blacks" (p. 75), despite Bornman's confession of guilt to him and other elders of the Dutch Reformed Church (p. 88):

The devil had sent black women to tempt him and to move him away from the path of righteousness. The devil had always used the black female to tempt the Afrikaner. It was a battle that was raging within individual Afrikaner men. A battle between lust and loathing. A battle that the Afrikaner must win. The devil made the Afrikaner to covertly covet the black woman while publicly detesting her (p. 87).

The reader knows that even the perverted Johannes Smit is said to be a "good person who had been led astray by the devil in the guise of black women" (p. 88). Love between black women and Afrikaner men is said to be rife:

The elders of the church were right. The devil was on the loose in the Free State platteland. Grabbing upstanding volk by their genitalia and dragging them along a path strewn with the body

parts of black women. Parts that had an existence independent of the women attached to them. Parts that were capable of sending even the most devout citizen into bouts of frenzied lust (p. 89).

2.1.7 The failure of the Immorality Act highlighted

Such “innocent” exaggerations have subversive intentions. To highlight the failure of the Immorality Act to regulate sexual activity between races, the novel confirms that, despite the publicity of the Excelsior 19 case, “miscegenation had continued unabated after the Excelsior 19 case” (p. 115). The reader learns that Viliki’s lover, the Seller of Songs and Maria’s daughter (p. 196), is younger than Popi. She was “born several years post-Excelsior 19” (p. 196) and is said to be the “spitting image of Reverend Francois Bornman” (p. 196). The blame, however, falls on Maria, the black woman, who had continued with her escapades with white men. She is represented as the temptress who continued to spread “her body parts before the path of the dominee” (p. 196).

The irony is that the dominee is said to have given in to the “devil [that] had always used the black female to tempt the Afrikaner [male]” (p. 87). Driver (1988:15), for instance, argues that black women in the colonial and apartheid eras, like “prostitutes who were seen as a safety valve for public morality [...] acted as vehicles or decoys for the kind of male lust that was not deemed suitable for their white counterparts”. According to Lockett (1988:29) the alluring black woman is portrayed as a

... sexual temptress, often attractive ... she becomes a destroyer figure, for by consorting with her the white man faces the danger of prosecution under the Immorality Act and, as a convicted criminal, his life and that of his family is destroyed ... It is the black woman, and equally the law itself, which function as instruments of destruction.

The collective voice parodies the religious notion that Afrikaner men contravened the Immorality Act because black women tempted them to do so. The “sins of our mothers” is a motif in the novel from the very first sentence – “All these things flow from the sins of our mothers” (p. 1) – to the last sentence – “From the sins of our mothers all these things flow” (p. 268). Evidently, the novel confronts Afrikaner theology and criticises the way it sees the “black woman”.

2.1.8 Parodying hegemonic feminism

The collective voice also parodies hegemonic feminism as being perpetuated by cultures of apartheid. Hegemonic feminism under and after apartheid was based on the premise that there are rich white women who own the means of social production and thus wield enormous socio-economic power to oppress black women and other people who do not own the means of social production. The novel demonstrates that hegemonic feminism in apartheid South Africa was historically linked to class and race. The humiliation and subjugation of black women by white women, as embodied by Niki, decries apartheid's hegemonic feminism that was ignorant of the oppression of black and poor women by their white and rich counterparts. For instance, at her butchery, Madam Cronje weighs black women in the morning and in the evening when they leave because she believes them to be thieves. She does not see anything wrong with stripping Niki naked in front of black and white men, children, and Niki's female fellow workers (p. 40-42). Throughout her humiliation, Niki is silent, yet that silence seems to valorise the alternative: treatment with dignity and decency. Her plight is, in fact, the voice that cries out against the oppression of one woman by another:

[A]nger was slowly simmering in Niki. A storm was brewing. Quietly. Calmly. Behind her serene demeanour she hid dark motives of vengeance. Woman to woman. We wondered why she did not resign from Excelsior Slaghuis after being humiliated like that. But she knew something we did not know. She was biding her time ... she was nursing an ungodly grudge (p. 42).

Her "ungodly grudge" eventually leads her to sleep with Madam Cronje's husband, Stephanus Cronje. As we saw earlier, after seeing Niki naked, Stephanus Cronje was "seized by the fiend of lust" (p. 41). Whilst Stephanus Cronje plans to make her "padkos – my provision for the road" (p. 49), thinking that she is "ready and willing" (p. 50), Niki is in fact exacting revenge. She sees him not as her boss or her lover, but as "Madam Cornelia's husband. And he was inside her. She was gobbling up Madam Cornelia's husband, with the emphasis on *Madam*. And she had him entirely in her power. Chewing him to pieces" (p. 50). In this manner the collective voice gives her agency as an individual who can intentionally resist subjugation.

Niki's "place" under apartheid and African patriarchy is that of a mute; the black woman suffering double oppression as the subaltern

female who occupies the lowest social position, and who is denied the capacity and possibility of moving to the highest social strata. The emphasis on the black African woman as a mute, sad, pathetic and passive victim of colonial and male domination, who “speaks” through her silences, is problematic in the sense that she is perpetually cast as the absolute other. Thus, with Gayatri Spivak (1988:238), the reader asks, “Can the subaltern speak?” She can, and must speak. Her silence cannot forever just be presumed to *speak volumes*. According to Ibinga (2005:2), “silence can be adopted by people in a repressive political and/or patriarchal system to shun reprisal”. However, the presentation of the black woman as suffering double oppression highlights the white woman’s collusion and complicity with patriarchy and apartheid, whilst promoting liberating practices and ideals. By rejecting the representational system of the form of feminism that embraces the oppression of one woman by the other, the novel seems to be advocating a postcolonial feminism, which examines the questions of patriarchal subjugation in terms of detotalising, diversifying and denaturalising assumptions within social, political and historical contexts. Such a form of postcolonial feminism “addresses how gender colludes with race, national origin, and class in women’s oppression and how women participate in and resist their own oppression and the oppression of other women” (Richards, 2000:viii).

2.2 Liberating choices and possibilities

2.2.1 Hybridisation of cultures on a personal level

In the second part of the novel, the collective voice speaks of liberating choices and possibilities. The novel provides a transformative space, which is introduced by the liberation of political prisoners and the unbanning of political organisations (Chapter 21). The signs of transformation in the Excelsior camp are realised when Adam de Vries revises his past generalisations that “all black people were bad” (p. 150) and concludes that, like the moderate Sekatle, “the majority of black people were good people”, but a few of them, like Viliki, were communists and terrorists (p. 150) and therefore bad. Yet, after a longer interaction with Viliki, he notes that Viliki “used to be a dedicated community builder” (p. 251). This recognition and subsequent friendship symbolise the hybridisation of cultures on a personal level by showing that black and white people can be friends. When asked why Adam de Vries is his friend, Viliki responds that De Vries “is a nice guy” (p. 222). Adam de Vries feels comfortable about being an African and boasts that, “[I]ong before

anyone else called themselves African, my people called themselves Afrikaners. Africans" (p. 252).

2.2.2 Transformation of the political landscape

On behalf of the Mahlatswetsa Township, Viliki leads transformation. As a freedom fighter and "communist", Viliki shocks his sister Popi when he sends her to bank his money at the Afrikaner bank, Volkskas. It is also evident that the money is from an Afrikaner sponsor. She finds the connections between the Afrikaner bank and the Movement unthinkable. He tells Popi that the political landscape is transforming.

We [the Movement] are reaching a settlement with the Afrikaners. Next year we have a general election. April next year. We shall be liberated and we shall be one people with the Afrikaners. That is what the Movement stands for. One South African nation (p. 153).

Moreover, Volkskas itself is transforming. In the bank, Popi realises that there are no longer two lines, "a slow long queue for blacks and a quick short one for whites. One queue, now, for all the colours of the rainbow" (p. 153).

2.2.3 A common contact zone for working together

The collective voice sees Adam de Vries's nation-building scheme, the Excelsior Development Trust, as an attempt to close the economic gap between white and black people. Its main aim is for "Afrikaner farmers to support emerging black farmers" (p. 254), but its secondary aim is self-serving – "there were some benefits in getting into partnership with black farmers. Some affirmative action contracts and tenders would surely come his way, in the name of his protégés" (p. 254). Nevertheless, the trust provides a common contact zone for working together as people. Despite some scepticism from black and white people, it receives support from both sides and it is evidently creating a powerful transformative space. It becomes a space that enables blacks and whites to work together on nation-building projects. In this sense, the collective voice promotes hybridisation in the transforming South Africa by offering transcultural modes of representation, which are reciprocal transferences of culture.

Such transmissions of culture operate in contact zones, or the in-between spaces (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1998:130) sometimes called liminality. The in-between spaces are "social spaces where

disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of dominance and subordination – like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermath as they are lived across the globe” (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1998:233).

2.2.4 Greater individual freedom

Further, the collective voice sets free some of those who were operating within the confines of the Movement, as is the case with Viliki and his sister Popi. Viliki becomes free to be self-critical now that he is no longer a member of the Movement and its counsellor. He lashes out at the black man’s culture of entitlement after he has attained his freedom. He is deeply worried about the dirt that he sees in black people’s gardens and yards, including his own. Post-apartheid black people, he observes, seem to expect government to clean their yards whilst they sit down and wait. They also do not work, but expect government to feed them. “Is that what freedom means to us?” (p. 253), he asks. Referring to his perennial war with Sekatle, he lambastes Sekatle’s corruption. He is also disgusted by the fact that the masses see past sellouts as today’s liberators, the “new Mandela[s]” (p. 189), whilst the true liberators are branded as sellouts, for instance that “[t]he Mayor is a sellout” (p. 194). Yet Viliki’s freedom from the collective psyche of the people of Mahlatswetsa and their power struggles, from the acrimonious debates of the chamber and from the totalising politics of the Movement, symbolises greater individual freedom. Having attained such freedom, he moves from place to place with his wife, the Seller of Songs. They are said to have the

freedom to immerse themselves in each other to their hearts’ content. The two of them alone under the big sky. Away from the petty world of Excelsior, and particularly Mahlatswetsa Location. Away from the politics and the power struggles. He was free at last and didn’t have any obligations to anyone. He had never thought it would be possible to enjoy so much freedom, without any cares in the world (p. 246).

Like Viliki, Popi “took it as a blessing that she was no longer a member of the Movement” (p. 212) and she “felt free” (p. 213). Her freedom and confidence affect the way the Mahlatswetsa community looks at her as a “boesman”, a “hotnot”, a “bastard” or a “coloured”. She is admired by it, as the collective voice tells: “Apparently she never knew how we used to gossip about her beauty” (p. 266).

2.2.5 A new notion of the "coloured"

Popi's quest for liberation is triggered by an obsession with two paintings that seem to capture something about her history as a coloured. She has only a vague idea about the events of the Excelsior 19 case. People are always whispering in her presence, which makes her feel that they know more about her than she does herself. She had never enquired about her history from her mother, who in turn had never told her because she felt guilty. Popi, suspecting that the priest knows this history and had captured it in his paintings of the naked madonnas, visits the Trinity in Thaba Nchu to uncover her history.

The visit to Thaba Nchu is said to have drained her of "all negative feelings" (p. 238), "she felt she had been healed of a deadly ailment she could not really describe" (p. 238) and her anger was "replaced by a great feeling of exhilaration. There was no room for anger and bitterness in her anymore ... Anger had dissipated and left a void" (p. 238). For instance, Popi becomes "very busy admiring herself in the mirror" (p. 266), but her mother feels she is overdoing it:

'It is a beautiful thing to love yourself, Popi,' said Niki.

'But don't you think you are overdoing it now? Preening yourself in front of the mirror all day long?'

'I am making up for lost time, Niki,' giggled Popi (p. 266).

The collective voice evidently fosters a new notion of the "coloured" as embodied by Popi. Her positive character change celebrates being coloured as part of the rainbow nation:

From the outrage of rape (that's what we called it in our post-apartheid euphoria), our mothers gave birth to beautiful human beings. As *beautiful* as the Seller of Songs, who could *create beautiful things*. As *beautiful as Popi*, who could not create, but who knew how to *love beautiful creations* (p. 234; my italics – NSZ).

2.2.6 Liberation from perpetual anger

Similarly, the collective voice liberates Niki from her perpetual anger. She is changed by seeing Popi accepting that she is a coloured person.

'Oh, Popi!' cried Niki. 'I am so happy that at last you are so free of shame about being coloured that you can even make a joke about it.'

'My shame went away with my anger, Niki,' said Popi quietly.

'You are free, Popi, and you have made me free too. For a long time, I felt that I had failed you ... that I had made you coloured! Every time they mocked and insulted you, it ate my heart and increased my guilt' (p. 260).

3. Comments by the authorial voice

In addition, the collective voice in the novel offers possibilities of change in packages of wisdom in which we sometimes hear the voice of Mda as writer and social critic intruding into the narrative to persuade the reader of his views. Thus, the reader is influenced by both Mda's narration and attitudes towards the social issues of post-apartheid South Africa. Mda apparently sees literature as having a transformative and reconciliatory potential in the post-apartheid order, as he asserts in the article, "Theater and reconciliation in South Africa" that

arts have a role to play in transformation ... Whether we like it or not, the artists will always respond to the prevailing political and social conditions because they select their material from society. Politics is part of their intimate daily experience, and for better or for worse, politics feature in their work (Mda, 1995b:38).

Breaking in upon the narrative voices of the story, the voice of Mda (2002:143) teaches a society that is coming to grips with crossing apartheid's boundaries that those who do not want to go beyond past boundaries will be caught up in self-pity, anger and self-destruction, because

vengeance had a habit of bouncing against the wall, like a ricocheting bullet, and hitting the originator. Look what had happened to Niki when she filled her loins with vengeance! It was because of that vengeance that Popi was now a prisoner of the perpetual doek on her head, of blue eyes and of hairy legs.

3.1 Racist anger still perpetuates

The destructive nature of anger and vengeance is epitomised by Madam Cronje, Tjaart Cronje and Johannes Smit. Tjaart Cronje and Johannes Smit lament that they had been sold out by their elders (p. 224-225). Madam Cronje is angry that her husband was "taken" by Niki:

Poor Stephanus. She silently cursed the woman who had led him to his demise. She wondered what had happened to Niki. The traitor who had seduced her husband. She blamed her *for everything* (p. 150; my italics – NSZ).

She hates Popi “for being a smoother, delicate and more beautiful version of Tjaart” (p. 150). She calls her a “bastard” and “Niki’s coloured brat” (p. 150). Because of her antagonism towards Niki, Viliki and Popi specifically, she hates black people in general as if they too took away her husband. Her resentment infects her son Tjaart; she teaches him to hate black people as if they took away his father. The old Tjaart becomes a “right-winger” (p. 199) and joins the conservative Afrikaner group that despises black people, and therefore he represents such views in the novel. In the municipal chamber, Tjaart Cronje rails about the “failure of the ‘affirmative action people’ to govern the town in a civilised manner” (p. 187), whilst he ironically emphasises that “I do not hate black people” (p. 188).

This mode of character representation shows that Tjaart lives with racial anger that is carefully nurtured and inculcated by his lonely and frustrated mother, and coached by the Voortrekker patriarchs. His racial hatred motivates him to open fire on a group of black demonstrators who are on their way to town. To him, a bullet is the only language they will understand: “One could not reason with these people. There was one language they understood. Tjaart opened fire” (p. 157). According to Gobodo-Madikizela in *A human being died that night: A story of forgiveness* (2003) the behaviour to kill the “other” without conscience can be understood in terms of the “Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations” which explains “how individuals, through self-identification with the groups to which they belong, are drawn into violent behaviour against people defined as the ‘other’. The construction of ‘otherness’ is an essential step on the path towards the destruction of victims” (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003:154, note 1).

The collective voice explains that Tjaart’s racist anger (p. 157-159) reveals his bitter personality, influenced and corrupted by the ideology of apartheid. He is an individual who carries out, as part of his job, orders that continually involve defending his population group, thus labelling blacks as communists. However, when the time ends to do so, he is more angry and bitter because he has been coached, encouraged and praised by the patriarch, and encouraged in terms of remuneration, promotion and power, to unleash legalised violence on blacks. In the process, evil grips and destroys his

conscience; no wonder that he refuses to accept the reality of the different new order.

3.2 Growing willingness to accept the reality of a new order

Jacomina who has watched Tjaart gradually being destroyed by his anger and resentment eventually advises him to change: "Maybe it is better for all of us to be part of this new South Africa" (p. 254). This is the collective voice of Afrikaner people who want to change and so advise Afrikaners that the new South Africa has become a liminal contact zone for cultural contestations and transgressions that foster positive social change. It has become a transformative space for all to come to terms with the realities of a new and free society. The contact zone provides the breaking down of negative past cultural identities.

4. The urge to come to terms with a new era

The collective voice in *The Madonna of Excelsior* seems to advise, in a somewhat didactic way, Afrikaner people who resist post-apartheid change that they isolate themselves at their peril, and that it is useless to harbour eternal racial hatred. The collective voice seems to be saying that those who still prefer to stay in the old South Africa, wallowing in their anger and lamenting their betrayal by their fellow white brothers and leaders, the way Tjaart Cronje and Johannes Smit do, should instead embrace the challenges of the new democracy. Further, the collective voice questions why the Afrikaner people who were privileged by apartheid, like Tjaart Cronje and Johannes Smit, should be so angry, as compared to black people who suffered under that same system:

Viliki wondered why people like Tjaart Cronje and Johannes Smit were so angry. Were people like Viliki, Popi and Niki not the ones who should be angry? Were they not entitled even to a shred of anger? Why should the Afrikaner hoard all the anger? (p. 225).

Perhaps the answer is that they have not yet come to terms with the loss of their social, political and economic power, despite having defended it for a long time at all costs and with all their might. Yet, there are those who, like Reverend Bornman, realise that political change is inevitable: "We all regret the past and yet are fearful of the future" (p. 257).

It is the voice of Adam de Vries that articulates the ultimate wisdom to those who resist change:

'It is people like you, Gys, who take away all hope from these young people,' said Adam de Vries. 'You plant in their minds the false notion that Afrikaners are now the oppressed people' (p. 258).

Having being persuaded to embrace change by Adam de Vries, Johannes Smit represents the diehards who realise that wallowing in racial antagonism is destructive. Johannes Smit joins Adam de Vries's development trust, and "declare[s] a truce" (p. 261) with his old enemy, Niki. Tjaart is left with his mother in the context of their old South Africa and feels the ultimate betrayal.

Tjaart Cronje did not make a secret of his anger. His people had been sold out by their leaders, he lamented. Tjaart becomes almost insane and sick because he "fought wars on behalf of Adam de Vries, whose generation never died at the border nor faced petrol bombs in the townships. Now he has made an about-turn, taking many good Afrikaners with him" (p. 255). Yet Tjaart, too, eventually, sees that reconciliation, at least with Popi, his half sister, is necessary, confirming Niki's prediction that "[o]ne day Tjaart will understand that he must love you" (p. 199).

To initiate the process of coming to terms with having a coloured sister, Tjaart sends Johannes Smit to call Popi because "he wants to make peace" with her (p. 260). He acknowledges, for the first time, that Stephanus Cronje was their father, and he acknowledges her beauty: "You are a beautiful woman, Popi. Very beautiful" (p. 263). Here, the coloured person, despised by whites as a product of miscegenation, represented by Popi's struggle in the first half of the novel, is finally liberated from the burden of white anger. Being a product of miscegenation becomes generally acceptable within the transforming South Africa.

However, Niki and Popi realise that Tjaart is still angry and continues to feel the need to retaliate as the narrator tells: "The whirling fan on the ceiling was fighting a losing battle. It stirred hot air that was descending with a vengeance over Tjaart Cronje" (p. 256). And so is his mother. The ageing matriarch, Cornelia Cronje, joined him in his lament. She was immersed in an anger of her own. And in loneliness. It could still be because of his mother's infectious anger that Tjaart eventually fails to say "sorry" to Popi, though his primary intention was obviously to make peace with her:

'I wonder what is eating him,' Popi whispered to Niki.

'Anger,' Niki whispered back. 'It is as I told you, Popi. Anger does eat the owner.' (p. 264).

Perhaps this is the ultimate wisdom that the collective voice of the novel gives those like Tjaart who fail to embrace the challenges of the new South Africa. These two lines sum up their fate: "It is terrible to see him like this" (p. 56), and "It is sad to see him like this" (p. 256).

List of references

- ABBOT, H.P. 2002. Narrative. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ASHCROFT, B. 2001. Postcolonial transformation. London: Routledge.
- ASHCROFT, B., GARETH, G. & TIFFIN, H. 1998. Key concepts in post-colonial studies. London: Routledge.
- COBLEY, P. 2001. Narrative. London: Routledge.
- DRIVER, D. 1988. "Woman" as sign in the South African colonial enterprise. *Journal of Literary Studies*, 4(1):3-20.
- GOBODO-MADIKIZELA, P. 2003. A human being died that night: a story of forgiveness. Claremont: David Philip.
- GOODMAN, R. 2004. De-scribing the centre: satiric and postcolonial strategies in *The Madonna of Excelsior*. *Journal of Literary Studies*, 20(1/2):62-70.
- IBINGA, S.S. 2005. The politics of silence in Zakes Mda's *She plays with darkness*. Paper presented at the Nordic Africa Institute Conference on: Writing African Women: Poetics of Politics of African Gender Research. Bellville: University of Western Cape. 19-22 January.
- KHUNYELI, T.B. 1994. The portrayal of history by African writers in "Bantu World", 1932-1936. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal. (M.A. thesis.)
- LOCKETT, C. 1988. The black woman in South African English literature. *Journal of Literary Studies*, 4(1):21-37.
- MDA, ZAKES. 1995a. Ways of dying. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- MDA, ZAKES. 1995b. Theater and reconciliation in South Africa. *Theater*, 25(3):38-45.
- MDA, ZAKES. 2002. *The Madonna of Excelsior*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- RICHARDS, C.S. 2000. On the winds and waves of imagination: transnational feminism and literature. New York: Garland.
- RIMMON-KENAN, S. 1983. Narrative fiction: contemporary poetics. London: Methuen.
- SPIVAK, G.C. 1988. Can the subaltern speak? (*In* Nelson, Cary & Grossberg, Lawrence, eds. *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*. London: Macmillan. p. 271-313.)

Key concepts:

collective voice
 essentialist boundaries and identities; crossing of
 Mda, Zakes
 narrative voice
 transformative possibilities

Kernbegrippe:

essensialistiese grense en identiteite; die oorsteek van
kollektiewe stem

Mda, Zakes

transformatiewe moontlikhede

vertellerstem