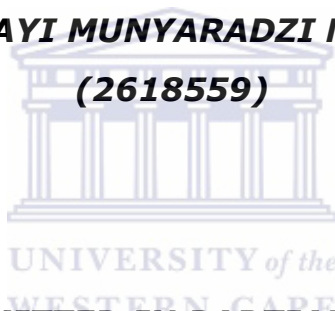


**IMAGINING THE REAL - MAGICAL REALISM AS
A POSTCOLONIAL STRATEGY FOR NARRATION
OF THE SELF IN ZAKES MDA'S *WAYS OF DYING*
AND *THE MADONNA OF EXCELSIOR*.**

By

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(2618559)



**A MINI-THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
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Grotesque

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Abstract

Imagining the real - magical realism as a post-colonial strategy for narration of the self in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* and *The Madonna of Excelsior*.

Kudzayi Munyaradzi Ngara – MA mini-thesis, Department of English, University of Western Cape.

In this MA mini-thesis I examine the role of magical realism as a postcolonial trope in *Ways of Dying* and *The Madonna of Excelsior*. I begin by stating that the author uses magical realism as an alternative strategy for self-narration in the face of the dominant ideologies of colonialism (apartheid) and nationalism. In Chapter One I examine the absurd taxonomies of colour that were legislated under apartheid in South Africa and, using ideas of postcolonial deconstruction, locate Toloki and Niki as characters existing in incongruous circumstances.

In the second chapter I cast Toloki as an observant flâneur who not only travels through Mda's imagined city, but also suggest that the city travels imaginatively through Toloki. An element of Toloki's character is that of "survival entrepreneur", and I show the strategies he adopts to fashion his own reality as opposed to accepting a place within a predetermined objective reality.

Chapter Three is about the examination of sex as physical act and the gendered roles of women. Mda inverts the symbolic purity of the Madonna and the socially determined roles of women as subservient and chaste as a strategy for representation of the self in the context of

postcolonial, magical realist writing. I suggest in the fourth chapter that social moments like funerals, festivals and political rallies function as manifestations of the grotesque, and to conclude the thesis I consider the place and possibilities of Mda's writing in the canon of Southern African literature in light of the rich heritage of elements that are magical on the sub-continent of Africa.



DECLARATION

I declare that **Imagining the real - magical realism as a post-colonial strategy for narration of the self in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* and *The Madonna of Excelsior*** is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

Kudzayi Munyaradzi Ngara

3 December 2007

Signed:.....



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DISCLAIMER

This thesis: **Imagining the real - magical realism as a post-colonial strategy for narration of the self in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* and *The Madonna of Excelsior*** is the work of the author, Kudzayi Munyaradzi Ngara, and the opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at herein, are those of the author and not necessarily to be attributed to the DST.



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Introduction: To be magical realist (or not).

The topic of magical realism in relation to African literature is intriguing in the context of the African subcontinent. Amongst the better known African practitioners of the genre are writers such as the Nigerian-born Ben Okri, who has written such texts as the critically acclaimed *The Famished Road* (2003) and *In Arcadia* (2002). In Southern Africa, the Mozambican writer Mia Couto has regularly employed elements of the trope in his writing, although there is some debate among critics such as Long-Innes (1998) and Rothwell (2004) as to whether Couto's writing should actually be defined as magical realist. In the decades coinciding with the nationalist struggles for independence in the various African countries, a greater proportion of literary works and criticism has laid emphasis on social realism and the poetics thereof, often to the detriment of a deeper understanding of the ways in which a poetics of the imagination might be shaped by African cultural contributions. During apartheid in South Africa two dominant discourses emerged in classical opposition. The colonial discourse of apartheid was ranged in opposition to the voice of national protest, with the result that the literary production of the day largely mirrored these two antagonistic world views. In his analysis of the relationship between the Orient and the Occident, Edward Said (1978:2) surmises that:

European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.

One possible reading of this statement is that colonial philosophy sought to define itself and its attributes by demeaning the philosophy

of the oppressed peoples as, at best, an inferior copy of itself. In reaction, the ideology of nationalism and protest literature often used the very same terms of occidental philosophy. By appropriating the language of the dominant discourse, nationalism and literature are often inhibited from moving beyond the discursive terminology of colonialism and can become themselves a different form of oppression, as opposed to being liberating.

Against this background, voices like those of Mda emerge in the period immediately following the negotiated dissolution of apartheid, seeking to engage with social reality in ways that were not only more inclusive, but comprehensive. In this light, I propose in this thesis that Mda's use of elements of magical realism is a conscious effort on his part to define an alternative strategy for the narration of the self. Mda's project and methods are made especially more important in circumstances where the dominant ideologies, apartheid and nationalism, have resulted in the negation of the individual's right to a voice and to dream. David Attwell in *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History* (2005) and Gerald Gaylard in *After colonialism: African postmodernism and magical realism* (2005) have in these two fairly recent and in-depth studies both sought to engage with what may be termed an emerging trend in the field of literature in Southern Africa. By definition, magic realism is a space where both novelist and critic are invited to explore paradigms of the imagination that are at variance with the long-held orthodoxy of social realist engagement, and to promote culturally specific dynamics of the creative imagination. Noteworthy is the fact that the two eminent scholars cited above seem to share the ambivalence of Zakes Mda, two of whose novels – *Ways of Dying* (1995) and *The Madonna of Excelsior*

(2002) - will be the basis of this study, in connection with the use of the term "magical realism" in general and its application to the writing of Zakes Mda in particular. The two critics do not make definitive descriptions of Mda's work as magical realist but do write at length about elements in it - such as the uncanny, the grotesque, the carnival, laughter and others - which are considered common to the trope. Attwell (2005:177) sees in Mda's work an "experimentalism in which a process of epistemological recovery and revision is fully under way", whereas Gaylard (2005:34) stresses what he perceives to be the escapist nature of magical realism.

Critical to any discussion of Zakes Mda's novels *Ways of Dying* and *The Madonna of Excelsior* as magical realist, or containing elements thereof, is an unpacking of the term itself. The original impulse for my project has arisen from the seeming dichotomy between the constituent parts of the term "magical realism" which, as separate linguistic entities in everyday language, suggest a semantic disparateness that is intriguing and worthy of investigation. As with all tools of critical analysis one needs to go to the genesis and foundations of a term in order to acquire full appreciation of it. A way of achieving this is the investigation and exposition of the term "magical realism" from its roots in realism to its current contemporary recognition and use as a literary trope.

Freud (1986:179) has suggested that the main force behind the cultural development of man has been "real external exigency, which has held him from the easy satisfaction of his natural needs and exposed him to immense dangers." The struggle with reality is inconclusive, in Freud's eyes, and one may deduce it to be that which

man constantly agitates to have control over, but is never quite able to achieve. In a way, this could be the basis of all religion as it epitomises man's incessant quest to assert control over his universe. If, as Freud (179) adds, "civilisation is [...] built entirely on the renunciation of instinct", could this therefore be extended to mean that civilisation is the renunciation of "genuine" reality? Freud's formulation is relevant when juxtaposed with the prominence that western thinking accords to rationality and logic; in effect he undermines the concerns of Enlightenment. Put differently, western philosophy's accentuation of the purely rational is shown to be unsustainable because of the possibility of multiple discernments of reality. In the light of my project's concerns, one would need to evaluate the validity of a postulation that magical realism is more "realistic" than the supposed realism of other genres and narrative styles. Gaylard (2005:33) goes as far as to state that "the purely rational has come to be seen as a limited technique for understanding reality." Social realism, based on the empirical rationality of the enlightenment, is in this way seen to be an inadequate medium for conveying the idiosyncratic challenges of the postcolonial age. With this in mind, my theorising will be partly based on Brenda Cooper's formulation, in her study of magical realism in West Africa, that:

Magical realism strives [...] 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. (Cooper 1998:1)

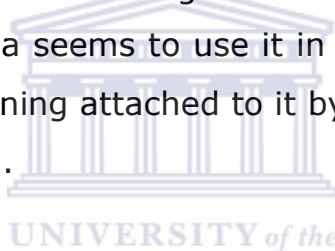
The import of Cooper's words above is that it is in the zones of interaction between dialectically opposed spaces, for instance the pre-colonial and the post-industrial, that the most dynamic and organic

facets of culture reside. I suggest that culture is rejuvenated in this liminal space because it is a zone of cross-fertilisation.

On a slightly different note Jung (1972:117), using as his point of departure conceptions of mental abnormality or lack thereof, finds that what may be perceived to be mental abnormality may in fact be a kind of mental health which is not conceivable to the average understanding. The key difference between Freud and Jung here is that the latter takes the argument further in the direction of the positive role of myth. Jung extends his analysis to Joyce's *Ulysses* and Cubism, and his analogy of the grotesque and schizophrenic may be important for my present purpose in as far as there is fluidity in the bounds of what is real and what is magical. Toloki, for instance, is usually dismissed by most characters he comes into contact with as being mentally unhinged because of his "strange" demeanour, dress and diet. People are confronted with a persona that is beyond their perceptions of what is conventional and therefore easily dismiss him as mad but to Toloki his own behaviour is normal and does not require any rationalisation, hinting at the mythical aspect of his character. Toloki has artistic talent, even if he lacks social and intellectual accomplishments. There is a mark of the shaman, *sangoma* or spirit medium in Toloki in the sense of having some physical or mental (or in this case intellectual) disability or weakness.

In magical realism a constant crossing of borders occurs in the liminal zones between the real and the magical as characters seek modes of expression adequate to their circumstances. Abrams' (1980:4) paradigm of critical theory can be deployed to conduct textual analysis of Mda's novels because of his thesis that good critical theory achieves

its own kind of validity, the criterion being not the scientific verifiability of its propositions, but rather the scope, precision and coherence of the insights which it gives about the properties of a single work of art. In the light of the insistence by Abrams on the centrality of metaphor, whether alive or moribund, to all discourse, the study of metaphor will form an integral part of the evaluation of Mda's methods in general but more specifically his use of magical realism. The metaphor shapes and interacts with meaning in many different ways that not only can change the insights we gain into the works we study, but also into the way we understand the workings of metaphor itself. For instance, one may look at a particular category of metaphor such as the symbol or the symbolic and its role in the religious imagination. The Madonna is one such symbol and Mda seems to use it in such a way that subverts the more traditional meaning attached to it by readings that are purely Eurocentric and Christian.



Along similar lines Munz (1973:xi), in differentiating between sign and symbol, finds that "the sign means the thing it signifies and the thing signified is the meaning of the sign" whereas "the symbol has a more specific meaning than the thing it symbolises". This distinction is pertinent to any discussion of Roman Catholic iconography and symbolism as they relate to the work of Mda, because the "sign *derives* meaning from the thing it stands for" and "the symbol *bestows* meaning on the thing it symbolises". One therefore needs to investigate the dynamics of the relationships between the symbols which Mda appropriates and the meanings derived from them. This perspective finds extension and perhaps ironical illumination in the theory of Richard Kearney (1988:4), who remarks on the possibility of the death of the image as a result of the paradigmatic shift that has

accompanied the growth of what is now called postmodern philosophy and literature. Kearney's paradox is that the image has turned on itself. In Toloki and Niki respectively, the symbols of the mourner and the Madonna are both inverted as the methods of representation.

Zamora and Farris(1995) have identified two key words, "propinquity" and "hyperbole", in their examination of the tenets of magical realism. The first is viewed as a central structuring principle of magical realist narration while excess is divined as a hallmark of the mode of writing (Zamora and Faris 1995:1). In the first term is encapsulated the dichotomous relationship that seems to exist between the magical and the real, as has already been alluded to. Further, the two find that:

An essential difference[...]between realism and magical realism involves the intentionality implicit in the conventions of the two methods[...]realism intends its version of the world as a singular vision, as an objective(hence universal) representation of natural and social realities[...]realism functions ideologically and hegemonically. Magical Realism also functions ideologically but[...]less hegemonically for its program is not centralizing but eccentric: it creates space for interactions of diversity.

(Zamora and Farris 1995:3)

And also that:

The propensity of magical realist texts to admit a plurality of worlds means that they often situate themselves in liminal territory between or among those worlds – in phenomenal and spiritual regions where transformation, metamorphosis, dissolution are common, where magic is a branch of naturalism, or pragmatism.

(Zamora and Farris 1995:6)

The functional appropriateness of magical realism in relation to a discussion of the postcolonial moment and as a trope with intrinsic

qualities of plurality, both in terms of perspective and interpretation, is brought to the fore here. Zamora and Farris underscore magical realism as being an apt tool for engaging with ideological time and space that does not fall within the neat categories defined, narrowly so, one may add, by paradigms of the Enlightenment which are themselves quite unnatural and arbitrary. The ideas of race¹, which are explored to varying extent in the two texts by Mda that form the basis of this study, form one such theme around which magical realism can be deployed as an analytical tool, as well as one of engagement and interaction. This is because racial paradigms are never quite as clearly defined as we imagine them to be. The oppressor and the oppressed are both often incapacitated by the same ideological straightjacket.

Mary Ellen Hartje in 'Magical realism: Humour across cultures' puts forward the hypothesis that:

the idea of magical realism, which by its nature connotes a breaking down of barriers of time and space, should not be defined or limited by natural borders or cultural confines .

(Hartje 2002:105)

Such a reading may, in an ironic way, explain Mda's own reluctance to be limited by such a classification or taxonomy as magical realist in the first instance, finding as he does such categorisation to be limiting in a way which is paradoxical to the spirit of magical realist art.² In a similar vein Gaylard (2005:36) suggests that:

¹ Here and in the rest of the thesis I use "race" as a socially determined construction rather than as a fact of biological difference.

² In interviews, for example with Elly Williams (2005) and Julie Wark (2007), Mda has expressed a pronounced reluctance to blandly categorise the "unusual" facets of life portrayed in his work as "magic", insisting that their everyday occurrence in the world of his experience renders such a label ill-fitting.

Postcolonialism's emphasis upon the relationship between self and other[...]sought, as had postmodernism, to dethrone centralisation and establish or reveal dynamic dialectical and non-hierarchical relationships.

Mda's writing in *Ways of Dying* and *The Madonna of Excelsior* can be viewed as a manifestation of this ethic as both texts represent divergence away from the totalising effects of the metanarrative of a nationalism engendered within the anti-apartheid struggle. Niki and Toloki are in their different ways axiomatic of the quest by individuals to negotiate with their space and circumstance, thereby establishing themselves as subjects. Subjectivity is taken here to mean writing the "self", about the self or of the self. This also echoes Cooper's thinking, as earlier alluded to, where she suggests that the project of magical realism is the contestation of polarities and existing in "a third space."

Echoing Homi Bhabha's ideas in *Nation and Narration* (1990) and *The Location of Culture* (1994), Beverly (1999:99) also remarks that there is a third space in which one also finds hybridity, translation, supplementarity, interdisciplinarity, the borderline, the cutting edge and loss of meaning. Read differently, this area of intersection between cultures or cultural spaces is the area of hybridity, an area where multiple heritages and consciousnesses are not only enabled, but are also enacted. Bhabha's original thesis is that the "Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, [...]constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (Bhabha 1994:37).

The third space as a site of plural possibilities is an apt source of the magical impulse. In an interview with Julie Wark, Zakes Mda expresses the source of the magic in his stories thus:

it is part, in fact, of the whole logic of our storytelling, where you find that some actions have no justification[...]I'm not talking about moral justification but psychological justification.
(http://www.zakesmda.com/pages/Interview_Wark.html
accessed 29 May 2007)

In other interviews with Venu Naidoo(1997) and Elly Williams(2005) Mda repeats the same views, emphasizing the fact that for him magic is an intrinsic part of everyday life or reality and is not something that has to be necessarily contrived because it emanates "from the magical oral traditions of the various peoples of South Africa." This perception about the source of magic echoes the views of Gabriel García Márquez, one of the leading lights in Latin American magical realist writing. Marquez is paraphrased by Elly Williams as having remarked on the fact that most of the magic in his work emanated from or was influenced by stories he received from African slaves through the agency of his grandmother as well as the stories of the Native American Indians in his native Columbia (Williams 2005:72). To this is added the legacy of the rites and rituals of Spanish Catholicism brought by the conquistadores. What one may conclude from this description is that hybridity is at the centre of the concerns and practice of magical realist art. Another way of reading the tableau defined above by García Márquez is to think of magic realism in its South American origins as being rooted in or linked to the rich iconography of Catholic orthodoxy, as well as indigenous (Native American Indian) and African diasporic belief systems.

The question of what kind of imaginative patterns drive magical realism in Africa is very pertinent, given the different historical contexts for the development of popular belief-systems, both indigenous and imported, that we find in Africa, and in particular in Southern Africa. In the light of the eminence of hybridity in magical realism, it is important to investigate the extent of the influence of a multi-cultural heritage on the subject and style of postcolonial literature, as a generalised entity, but more specifically on the writing of Mda who is engaging with the reality of post-apartheid South Africa. Further, it is necessary to understand how socialist realist literature has begun to transform into literature that includes magic realism. This thesis will investigate the influence of such hybridised belief systems in the definition of an African poetics of the imagination, with particular reference to the work of the South African novelist Zakes Mda. Central to this engagement will be an articulation of Mda's artistic and philosophical position, relative to the pre-colonial subject espoused by nationalist discourses such as negritude, discourses which seem to simultaneously acclaim and reject the idea of an atavistic African identity.

In his analysis of magical realism in general already cited, Gaylard (2005:33) concludes that "the purely rational has come to be seen as a limited technique for understanding reality", to which he adds:

The increased popularity of non-realisms is partly due to escapism from the disorienting forces of globalisation and disaggregation, partly an attempt to grasp and understand these forces and find modes of expression and representation adequate to it.

(Gaylard 2005:34)

In Mda's writing, magical realism represents a logical further step in the literary evolutionary chain. It is a step away from the "universal" or essentialising nature of protest literature during the apartheid years, marking a novel style of representation, especially of the post-apartheid reality. This mode of expression is in this way seen to be forward looking as it seeks to explore, not necessarily define, alternative means by which individuals and society engage with their respective objective worlds or reality.



Chapter One: Borne out of apartheid - The absurd social realities of a colour-coded state.

In *Ways of Dying* white South Africa is barely visible but the negative outcomes of apartheid's attempts at social engineering are apparent in the lives of the central characters of the narrative, Toloki and Noria, as well as in the squatter camp they eventually decide to call home. Although the white man, as a symbolic representation of the oppressor, is hardly a physical presence in the story, the white world in the novel manifests itself as a psycho-political preoccupation around which the black communities have to structure their choices and actions. For the latter, whether they choose to remain in the rural areas or migrate to the imagined city of the text, poverty is a factor of life which is defined from birth by the colour of one's skin. There are clearly defined limits above which the black characters should supposedly not hope to advance. These legislated boundaries have resulted in the protracted struggle that is in its final stages when the action of the novel begins. The struggle against racial injustices forms a rich subtext to the narrative of Toloki and Noria. Black and white characters come into more direct contact in *The Madonna of Excelsior*, but this aspect does not necessarily elevate or negate the impact of race relations in one text or the other. What it does allow, however, is an analysis of the incongruity of the enforcement by statutory instruments of the separation of races from a multiplicity of angles. In both texts, Mda consistently strives to break down the Manichean paradigms (of coloniser versus colonised, of white against black) that hold sway on both sides of the struggle, on the one hand to maintain, and on the other to dismantle the privileges of apartheid. Even amongst those who are fighting against racial domination of blacks by whites, there is engendered a hegemonic discourse that is at variance

with the larger philosophical context and stated objectives of the anti-apartheid struggle itself. It is with this in mind that I perceive Mda's project in both texts as being an examination of the absurd taxonomies of colour legislated under apartheid as well an objective critique of the black response to apartheid as epitomised in the struggle for racial equality. Put alternatively, Mda's intention is to deconstruct these imposed, unnatural categories and artificial demarcations.

To further clarify Mda's purpose as being a postcolonial deconstructive engagement with the apartheid era, it is useful to take into consideration the words of Stuart Hall (1996:1) who posits that:

Unlike other forms of critique which aim to supplant inadequate concepts with 'truer' ones, or which aspire to the production of productive knowledge, the deconstructive approach puts key concepts under erasure. This indicates that they are no longer serviceable – 'good to think with' – in their originary and unreconstructed form. But since they have not been superseded dialectically, and there are no other, entirely different concepts, with which to replace them, there is nothing to do but continue to think with them – albeit now in their detotalised or deconstructed forms, and no longer operating within the paradigm in which they were originally generated.

The term postcolonial is itself problematic and according to Javangwe (2005) the concerns lie in the periodicity implied by the term in the sense that the colonial period is perceived as having been followed by a 'post', as in after colonialism, implying a shift of focus away from what Mongia, cited in Javangwe (2005), sees as "the present iniquities – political, economic, and discursive – in the global system". In the light of the foregoing, *Ways of Dying* and *The Madonna of Excelsior* should be read as together constituting an alternative discourse to the

dominant tropes of the colonial era, such as apartheid effectively was, and that of aspects of the anti-apartheid struggle, which proved just as effective in stifling the individual will and impulse. Both had to be suppressed, ostensibly for the communal good, that is for the good of all black people in South Africa as a segregated race. Mda not only destabilises the prevailing political discourses but does so by employing elements of magical realist narratology which allow for inquiry into alternative perceptions and manifestations of reality, as opposed to the binary dimensions implied by both the Marxian, social realist engagement espoused by the struggle movements, as well as the Enlightenment scheme of the colonialists. Such social realist engagement was manifested in the corpus of contemporary literature that has been described as “protest” literature. Enlightenment is loosely used here to refer to the ideas in western thinking that the natives or the Other needed to be schooled in the western concept of civilisation and that it was the white man’s burden or duty, allotted by divine intervention – especially in light of Calvinist thinking – to achieve this objective. Mda suggests, to reappraise Hall’s definition of postcolonial deconstruction as cited above, that there are multiple views and conceptions of reality, possible third, fourth or even fifth ways as opposed to the simple binary oppositions described above, and the ground occupied by his main characters bears resemblance to the third space that has been suggested by Bhabha (1990 and 1994).

The opening sequence of *Ways of Dying* features the Nurse attempting to tell the truth about the manner of death of Noria’s son, the second Vutha:

‘This little brother was our own child and his death is more painful because it is of 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!’
(Mda 1995,2002:7)³

This statement immediately provokes heckles from the gathered crowd, led by members of the street committees which include the local faces and structures of the otherwise banned, militant anti-apartheid political parties. The scene is important in as far as it establishes the tensions and imposed silences that characterise this community of black people who are in the first instance all victims of the police state, but who, at the personal level, have to forego even the few individual liberties that they have not been denied through statutory proclamation in order that “the movement”, which by conjecture means the African National Congress (ANC), is not viewed by enemies and supporters alike in bad light. The result is that, from a particular angle, individuals within this oppressed black community suffer double domination because they have their voice taken away from them for the expedience of the party and the political objective of independence, over and above the silencing they suffer at the hands of a racist state. Mda seeks to undermine this subsuming of the individual voice for a perceived collective need, and he does so through the introduction of the seemingly asocial and eccentric character of Toloki. The expression of the individual voice is a key component of the identity of that individual as the absence or presence of the voice goes a long way in determining how the individual views him or herself, be it as an entity viewed separately from the group or as a constituent element of the larger community. Put differently, it is in the ability to give voice to their hopes, fears and myriad emotions that people are

³ Further textual references to *Ways of Dying* shall be abbreviated to WD instead of using the author’s name.

partly able to define who they see themselves as being. In the scene just alluded to, it is the Nurse who gives voice to the individual impulse, aspiration or fear, and the task is carried by Toloki through the rest of the text. In the personage of Toloki the voice of the individual is seen to resist the dominant discourses and is able to carve a niche for itself, even in the face of the totalising forms that Hall makes reference to above. Granted, as Hall (1996:4) suggests:

identities are constructed within, not outside discourse, we need to understand them within specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies.

Toloki's identity is a manifest response to a "specific historical" moment in which an individual feels isolation, even from the socially determined group to which he supposedly has a natural affinity. Hall's theorising above does not in any way preclude the complex, multi-faceted identities such as that of Toloki, in favour of monolithic ones suggested by the historic moment of opposition between black and white interests as well as culture in South Africa. The ability to locate and negotiate space for himself in the liminal zones between the imagined black and white worlds mark Toloki as being foresighted, especially in consideration of Hall's other description of identities as being about "questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming, rather than being." (1996:4) Clearly Toloki recognises his identity as a work in progress, as opposed to any conception of the self that is seemingly set in stone.

The promulgation of racial apartheid in South Africa is an example of what Bhabha (1996:54) describes as the "fatality of thinking of 'local' cultures as uncontaminated or self-contained". The Calvinist belief in

the separation of people according to notions of race is shown both in history and in literature as a futile insistence on unsustainable classifications because the inevitable interaction leads to black and white cultures feeding off each other, leading to hybridity, not only in the physical sense, but in the ideological and cultural sense as well. In Bhabha (1996:58) the concept of hybridity has been developed “to describe the construction of cultural authority within conditions of political antagonism or inequity”. In Toloki’s example one can discern that the theoretic cultural authority of his black race is – at least as far as he is concerned – equally undermined by its adoption, in the name of struggle, of the same hegemonic paradigms utilised by the repressive government. It is through negotiating these apexes of political power that the hybrid consciousness of Toloki emerges. Toloki, on the face of it, lacks an easily identifiable political programme. In reality though, the choices he makes – such as his choice of attire, vocation or diet, which can variously be described as humorous, quirky or even absurd – are ultimately political because they are avenues through which he is able to assert his sense of self as an individual entity. He has an independent consciousness quite apart from that of his social class or group, as determined by racist taxonomies on the one hand, and any sense of duty to this group on the other. Consequently, in becoming an outsider, living at the fringes of society, he makes a weighty political statement on its own. Fittingly, he selects for his garb a period costume that is described by the man who sells it to him as either belonging to “worlds that do not exist anymore” or “worlds that have never existed”. (Mda 1995:26) The effect of the costume is to place him outside the boundaries of logic, to the extent that he exists in a world of his own conception and comprehension. Toloki’s trademark outfit and the attendant rituals mark him, to the

casual observer, as a figure of great humour and absurdity. Hartje does not locate humour alone as the central plank for the creation of magical realism, but still finds that it evolves:

as one of its more predominant characteristics[...]the required duality in magic(sic) realism is an effective structure for incongruous situations or points of view[...]the amalgamation of the central dualities of the natural and supernatural can be by logic, 'absurd'.
(Hartje 2002:105)

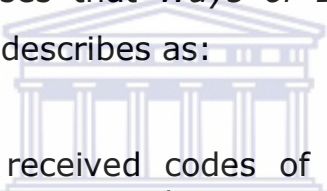
In line with Hartje's formulation above, Toloki's situation is one of incongruity in the manner in which there is nervous strain between him and society, at the personal level, and also by virtue of the fact that, on every plane, the conception and manifestation of apartheid is from the onset an absurd incongruity. Critically, Toloki's search for answers does not limit itself to the familiar, but rather radiates outwards to encompass elements of the new and strange. This philosophy is encapsulated for instance in the act of envisioning himself as a holy man:

Sometimes he transports himself through the pages of a pamphlet that he got from a pink-robed devotee who disembarked from a boat from the east two summers ago, and walks the ground that these holy men walk.[...] He spends his sparse existence on the cremation ground, cooks his food on the fire of the funeral pyre, and feeds on human waste and human corpses. He drinks his own urine to quench his thirst. The only detail missing is a mendicant's bowl made from a human skull, for he shuns the collection of alms.

(WD 1995:15)

In casting himself in the role of a votary or a monk, Toloki sees himself as the epitome of religious piety, figuratively surviving on "human waste and corpses" but at the same time unable to accept alms. The

boundaries between “reality” and the magical necessarily engender these kinds of contradictions as the lines are blurred between the norms of acceptable behaviour and that which is deemed unacceptable. Even in his dream persona Toloki maintains a modicum of dignity, much like he displays at the funeral of the little boy Vutha, but this sense of dignity is quickly undermined by the consumption of human waste and cadavers. Hartje (2002:112), paraphrasing Penner’s description of the absurd hero in literature, characterises this aspect manifested here as the absurd hero’s sense of isolation from humanity and love, adding that “the supernaturalism involved in most of the dramatic situations alienates characters from their own surroundings”. Similarly, Barnard surmises that *Ways of Dying* as a novel is less concerned with what she describes as:



the ratification of received codes of conduct, so much as a commitment to learning and writing new ones.[...]the novel’s narrative desire[...]is to transform fighting children into playful ones: to reproduce a sober militancy with gaiety and laughter.

(Barnard 2004: 279-280)

One way of reading these remarks is to interpret them to mean that realism has to be replaced by new forms of representation such as magical realism because the former has become inadequate as a representational and recuperative schema. That Vutha is killed by the Young Tigers, who are literally still children themselves, speaks to the dehumanising effect of apartheid because the taking of the innocent life also takes away, in a metaphorical sense, the childhood of the perpetrators, underlining the absurd nature of life under the apartheid state. More light is shed here in considering Barnard’s further remarks in her discussion of the role of laughter and the grotesque in the South African transition. She concludes that “to write about the grotesque in

the context of postcolonial Africa is to enter into a lively debate about power, aesthetics, and the circulation of signs". (Barnard 2004: 284) Toloki's new relationship with Noria, who grew up in his home village and whose singing had inspired Jwara to the heights of artistic creativity, allows for the reappraisal of the sets of relations possible between a man and a woman. At the end of the novel, Jwara's figurines help "to transform fighting children into playful ones" by teaching them to laugh again.

Of all the characters in the novel, Noria provides the most obvious connection with spiritual realm. The first time she sings for Jwara, Noria is about seven years old and the two are said to spend as long a time as a week in Jwara's workshop, "without eating any food or drinking any water, while he shaped his figurines and she sang". (WD 1995:29) Jwara's inspiration seems to come from a supernatural source, with Noria acting as the medium or intercessor. The bonds that bind the two cannot be understood in plain, human terms as the connection between them exists at the level of an unseen, immeasurable dimension – such as an indecipherable sign or language system that is exclusively theirs in practice and effect. Even the narrator of the story is unable to make a more than a cursory description of the two's relationship. The creative force in Noria is lost with the innocence of childhood, as economic necessities intrude themselves into the idyll and she is forced to prostitute herself. Toloki has to help the adult Noria find herself again. In like vein Margaret Mervis (1998:49) writes that Toloki teaches Noria:

how to live imaginatively as an individual empowered by creativity. Mda writes past apartheid which has resulted in the isolation of the individual and the inability of people to "connect

through fellowship, love or sexuality” (citing Horn 1990: xxxvi), towards an affirmation of fundamental humanity and solidarity.

The circle has made a full turn and it is left to Jwara’s son to inspire the recuperation of Noria’s voice and creativity. Importantly, he does not choose the sexual route to establish the connection, but rather shows Noria an alternative and less self-destructive path to the assertion of selfhood. Equally important here is that, given the context of apartheid – the poverty both in the squalid camps and the rural homesteads that are bereft of hope for prosperity, racial as well as internecine violence in the townships, and the almost ubiquitous lack of prerogative for black people – Toloki is still able to fashion a figurative niche in which the two can express themselves as they choose, for instance in bathing each other and decorating their shack with wall-paper fashioned from the pages of old magazines. This “wallpaper of sheer luxury”(WD :111), the pictures that Toloki plasters onto the walls flawlessly metamorphisise into actuality and back to being just pictures again. Toloki’s imagination engenders a magical transformation of the real, leading them both (Noria and himself) on an odyssey that is as ecstatic as it is temporary. Rothwell (2004:110), commenting on Mia Cuoto’s use of dreams in his short stories, surmises that dreaming is “more than a way to escape an unpalatable present; it is viewed as a mode of effecting change.” The two acts by Toloki and Noria just referred to prove more intimate and affirming of each other’s humanity than any physical act of sexual intercourse could have done. Besides being in keeping with Toloki’s avowed role as a pious votary, his abstinence here marks a paradigm shift wherein the woman’s body is not objectified as a site for violation or admiration by the dominant male subject.

In *The Madonna of Excelsior* the female body is more pronounced as a location for intercultural interface. The story of Niki and her family, which is set in an agricultural and small urban centre, offers differently nuanced oppositions between conceptions of race, whereby the members of different racial constructions have to relate in ways which are slightly different to those in the more industrialised conurbation of the imagined city of *Ways of Dying*. Here the interactions between the Occidental and the Other, as described by Edward Said (1978) in *Orientalism*, are carried out in terms that reveal both a certain amount of extremism, as well as the paradoxical mentality of denial structured along the biblical allegory of the forbidden fruit. The story of the Excelsior 19, as they became known, is a dramatic rendering of a situation in which the state dares to legislate the most intimate and primal areas of its citizens' lives. The white elders of the town, led by the Calvinist Reverend François Bornman, are caught in a classic dilemma that is inevitably set up in circumstances where one racial grouping seeks to dominate the other. Jane Taylor (1996:89) proposes the following:

When the British settled at the Cape, they brought with them the problematics of the Enlightenment logic, although unevenly distributed across the genders and the classes of the British settlers themselves. This positivism might have engaged uneasily with the languages and practices of Calvinism, which carries at its heart, a theological coherence based upon asymmetries and surplus. There are no balanced scales under this law; there is both an excess of sin and an excess of mercy.

Her remarks have greater relevance here when set against the historical backdrop of the nascence of apartheid from the Calvinist philosophy of "the chosen race", which the authors of segregation believed themselves to be. In *The Madonna of Excelsior*, Mda makes a

sustained critique of this thinking and in the process holds up to ridicule what can only be described as a cognitive discrepancy between the letter and practice of Christianity in general, and the Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK) – the Dutch Reformed Church so beloved of the Afrikaner – especially. As an instance of that church’s influence in the affairs of the apartheid state, besides being one of the latter’s guiding principles, is the fact that up to this day there are laws in the South African statutes that state that people of certain races cannot lawfully become members of the church. J.G. Strydom, South Africa’s Prime Minister between 1954 and 1958, besides having a plaque stone in his honour on the walls of the whites-only Excelsior church, also has these telling words attributed to him:

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 us into being separate nations, colours and languages.

(Mda 2002:29-30 Italics in original)⁴

Mda’s tack is not only to ridicule but also to subvert. The writing here and in other parts of the novel shows the author’s capable use of elements of intertextuality, as the archival record is skilfully enmeshed with creative fiction, giving his work both historical relevance and aesthetic beauty.

Rev. Bornman and the other leading lights of Excelsior certainly do not practise as they preach, preferring instead to partake of the proverbial forbidden fruit and when caught, making the dissociative rationalisations that it was the black women with whom they had been

³ Further textual references to *The Madonna of Excelsior* shall be abbreviated to ME instead of using the author’s name.

intimate who should actually be called to account for being temptresses bent on pulling them down into damnation. This logic removes any sense of responsibility or agency from the white "gentlemen" involved in the interracial sexual affairs, placing the burden of repentance and restitution squarely on their black female "co-conspirators". By criminalising sex between races, the Immorality Act manifests as the white man's fear of deracination, alternatively interpreted as the process of being transformed into the feared Other. In short, the "gentlemen" of Excelsior, when taken as proponents of Occidental practice, fail to recognise aspects of themselves in the Other, and inversely, aspects of the Other in themselves. This means the denial of a shared humanity with the black women who are reduced to no more than objects of curiosity, sexual experimentation and gratification. They are a continuation of the sad phenomenon of Saartjie Baartman, shipped to Europe as an example of the unbridled and animalistic sexuality of the African woman. In 20th century South Africa in Excelsior the vision has not changed in any significant way as the black women still endure the twin yoke of their race and feminine gender. One can extend the sexual metaphor to the relationship between the Occident and the Orient which Said (1978:5) has also characterised as a relationship marked by power, domination and "varying degrees of a complex hegemony".

Niki, one of the principal figures in this drama of power and betrayal is stuck in a loveless marriage to a largely absentee husband, Pule, who toils in the mines of Welkom and the only time he seems to come home for any extended period of time is actually to die, like many of the other mine workers who only return to their homes as shells of the people they used to be before working in the mines. Niki's life is

characterised less by material than emotional deprivation. To some in Mahlatswetsa Township she was the objective of envy, primarily because Pule regularly sent clothes and grocery parcels, and also because of her beauty. From the outset Niki does not seek conformity as she finds a job at the Excelsior Slaghuis, to earn extra income where other women would have been content to stay home and make do with the upkeep provided by their migrant-miner husbands. On occasion she also "attends" service at the Afrikaner church, where she and her son Viliki sit outside the church, listening to the sermon, and rising and sitting in unison with those inside. The absurd reality of this situation is that though Niki and Viliki hear the sermon and singing, they are not ever in full communion with their white counterparts. Still, Niki shows that she is able to make certain choices, however strange, and in doing so fashions her sense of self even though it means living in the liminal zones between black and white societies. Richard Samin, writing on marginality and history in the works of Mda, describes such an existence in isolation as marginality, and adds that it constitutes a "counter-discourse which questions both the hegemony of apartheid discourse and the assertive reductiveness of the liberation discourse" (Samín 2000a:198). In another paper, Samín also makes reference to the "metaphor of in-betweenness" (2000b:24) and Niki is a living metaphor of being in-between. She is between cultures and consciousnesses, and, as is the case with Toloki in *Ways of Dying*, it is important to see her undergoing the process of individuation. As Bhabha (1994:46) observes:

In the postcolonial text the problem of identity returns as a persistent questioning of the frame, the space of representation, where the image is confronted with its differences, its other.

This observation points to the fact that a character such as Niki is engaged in the re-negotiation of imposed boundaries, as she attempts to define her space. The most “agreeable” white character in *The Madonna of Excelsior* is Father Claerhout, who lives and practices his art and religion, seemingly in that order, at Thaba Nchu. It is as if he has been deliberately removed from the community of his fellow beings, finding them to be incompatible with his outlook on life, or they with his. Similarly, Niki in the end removes herself physically and spiritually from the ambit of her society, preferring instead to spend her days amongst the trees and bees.

In summation of the preceding discussion, one conclusion that can be made is that the absurd set of historical and social circumstances have elicited various responses from respective characters in the two novels. Another is that Mda is aware in his constructions of the limits that can be imposed on narrative art by an ideology that is purely informed by the doctrines of political liberation as they manifested themselves in the South African nation-space prior to, and even after 1994. It is important for him to identify different forms of representation and narratology, such as magical realism, because the Manichean dogmas of apartheid have been reflected in the politics and practice of liberation, and its attendant literatures. To paraphrase Devi Sarinjeive (2002:260), in postmodernism the notion of the self has to be recognised as a “complex, fluid entity, capable of constantly refashioning itself”. A subject that is static and unable to undergo such transformation, as suggested by both the tenets of apartheid and the cause of liberation, is unable to make a consequential interpretation of the historical situation and respond in a manner appropriate to his or her peculiar circumstances. Toloki and Niki are individuals on the other

hand, who are able to offer different perspectives on the historical moment, as informed by the respective causal circumstances of their lives. Durrant states in 'The invention of mourning in post-apartheid literature' that:

The "monstrous" histories of slavery, colonialism, or the holocaust are sublime in-so-far as they do violence both to the individual and the collective imagination.

(Durrant 2005:4)

I take "sublime" as used by Durrant here to denote some kind of disapproval of the extremism that is sometimes resorted to by artists writing of, and in opposition to slavery, colonialism or the holocaust, and in that way demeaning the lived experiences of the victims as lives are reduced to ideological symbolisms. Colonialism, of which apartheid is a mutation, as a dominant ideology violates the individual will and imagination of characters in both *Ways of Dying* and *The Madonna of Excelsior*. In the former text, most visibly, that dominant ideology of apartheid is replaced during transformation by that of the party in a way that stifles the individual's impulse to self-definition and the narration of individually determined courses of action. What Dambudzo Marechera(1988) calls the "individual's blind impulse" is sacrificed at the altar of ideological expediency.

Chapter Two: The itinerant Flâneur:- Toloki as a migrant in time and ideological space.

The late 1980s and early 1990s, the final stages of the anti-apartheid struggle and the transition to a democratic South Africa, was a time of great flux and fluidity, and not just in the political sense. The volatility was evident in various other strata of social and intellectual life. Mda foregrounds Toloki's attempts at defining his space in the imagined city against this backdrop of constant change in the relations between people and, more pertinently for the stated purposes of this chapter, the relationship between people and the city. The city is not a place usually associated in the imagination with magic, and in much of modern literature characters tend to move away from the city in order to experience magic. Either that or they have actually never left the rural space in the first place and therefore the magic seems to be a natural accoutrement to their daily lives. For instance Benito, in Mia Couto's short story "The Whales of Quissico", which forms part of the collection *Voices Made Night* (1990), has to leave his urbanised setting to experience his dream, even if the dream proves futile in the end. The character of Toloki enacts, amongst other possibilities, an inversion of this construction as he actually leaves his rural home, and its implied rusticity, but actually ends up discovering the magical dimension to his persona in the middle of the city. The city is normally viewed as the epitome of modernity and logic, and not the pantheon of the preternatural and inexplicable. New Orleans, with its rich multicultural heritage and idiosyncrasies, is an obvious exception to the "rule" because of the associations it has with festivities such as the Mardi Gras and the perceptions some people may have of it as a centre of the practice of voodoo.

In *Ways of Dying*, Mda does not represent Toloki's relocation to the city as not being accompanied by a simultaneous process of increased rationalisation and objectivity in the character – in the western sense of Enlightenment. Toloki therefore does not sink into faceless and anonymous conformity, disappearing into the mass that is the city and becoming forever indistinguishable in the seething human morass. On the contrary, Toloki embarks on a process of self-definition by looking at all that he can potentially be in the city – and is thus able to survive the city. In the unravelling of Toloki's nature and vocation the reader uncovers the character of the imagined city. The figure that Toloki cuts is that of the flâneur and the city for him is not simply a site of struggle and interaction between the mutually despised poor "black" underclass and the rich "white" overclass. For the sake of clarity, it is necessary to define this characterisation of the flâneur figure and Toloki in particular. According to Wikipedia, the online encyclopaedia:

The term "**Flâneur**" comes from the French verb *flâner*, which means "to stroll". A *flâneur* is thus a person who walks the city in order to experience it. Because of the term's usage and theorization by Charles Baudelaire and numerous thinkers in economic, cultural, literary and historical fields, the idea of the flâneur has accumulated significant meaning as a referent for understanding urban phenomena and modernity[...]While Baudelaire characterized the flâneur as a "gentleman stroller of city streets", he saw the flâneur as having a key role in understanding, participating in and portraying the city. A flâneur thus played a double role in city life and in theory, that is, while remaining a detached observer. This stance, simultaneously part of and apart from, combines sociological, anthropological, literary and historical notions of the relationship between the individual and the greater populace.
(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fl%C3%A2neur> accessed 28-10-07. Emphasis and italics in the original.)

The drama of the novel *Ways of Dying* is not restricted to the city and at first instance, Toloki, with his costume and absurd sense of hygiene as well as gastronomy, can be taken as a caricature of the “gentleman stroller” envisioned by Baudelaire, but closer examination will uncover more similarities than differences between the dandy of Baudelaire’s description and the professional mourner of Mda’s construction. Referring to the above quotation, one can discern several key aspects of the flâneur as defined in Toloki. The first and most striking is that of his location in the city, which is not important in just the physical sense but in an ideological way as well. Toloki redefines and appropriates his relations to the city. From his manner of dress, to his wanderings from the city centre, to the docks, the beach and finally the squatter camps, Toloki demonstrates a remarkable versatility in terms of survival strategies and also the extent to which his physical and imaginative boundaries are unlimited. These borders are neither limited by the demands and considerations of political imperatives, nor does he let the lack of economic wherewithal confine him to a particular corner of the cityspace.

Through the agency of Toloki, Mda ushers into post-apartheid discourse the actuality of several possible viewpoints beyond the standard binaries of white colonialism pitted against black nationalism and the protagonist is thus able to fulfil the role of the “detached observer”, being part of the city and syncretically existing outside it. As Toloki moves across the city on the afternoon of Vutha’s funeral, he surveys the quiet city with accompanying tones of pride:

The streets are empty, as all stores are closed. He struts like a king, for today the whole city belongs to him. He owns the wide tarmac roads, the skyscrapers, the traffic lights, and the flowers.

That is what he loves most about this city. It is a garden city, with flowers and well-tended shrubs growing at every conceivable place. In all seasons, blossoms fill the air.

(WD 1995:45-6)

Toloki has become, to borrow from the ideas of Baudelaire again, “a botanist of the sidewalk”(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fl%C3%A2neur> accessed 28-10-07). Experientially, the city affords Toloki infinite possibilities for mental and spiritual growth, whereas for some the encounter with the city can be overwhelming and stultifying, as is the case with the symbolic drunk at the funeral who uses alcohol as a shield against the pressing realities of day-to-day living. In the taxi to Noria’s squatter camp, Toloki seems genuinely puzzled at the reluctance of other passengers to share his seat, and when they have no choice but to do so, their strenuous efforts to physically avoid facing his direction in any conceivable way. Toloki is able to channel the tensions of living on sparse and meagre resources into a vitality of mind and spirit that is admirable. Gaylard remarks as follows:

The invention of character via narrativising the self is at the heart of the city because such narrativisation is a crucial mechanism of survival. The development of character as a result of trauma counters alienation and helps to balance or escape.

(Gaylard 2005:218)

Using Gaylard’s theoretical paradigm, I see Toloki - the flâneur figure - as being able to fashion his own story of the city rather than becoming helplessly subject to it.

This aspect of Toloki’s character is also illustrated in his determination to transcend the predominantly black, nationalist political framework that is at once the people’s liberator and their jailer. The direct

impetus for Toloki's leaving for the city is not dire economic necessity, although within the framework of apartheid this can never be discounted as one of the main considerations, but is rather his flight from a sterile relationship with his father Jwara. In an ironic twist, Jwara, who is imaginatively creative in his iron sculptures and figurines, cannot countenance an artistically inclined son. At one time, upon learning that one of the drawings made by Toloki had won a prize and would appear as a calendar page, he responds with a harshness that is difficult for Toloki to recover from:

Jwara was so angry that he decreed that the disastrous calendar must never be seen in his house again. From that day Toloki gave up trying to impress his father. And he gave up drawing pictures. He even – tearfully and with bitterness that gnawed him for a long time afterwards – destroyed his precious calendar. (WD 1995:68)

The experience of growing up unloved by a father he so looked up to prepares Toloki for the vagaries of city life. When his father puts out the artistic flame, Toloki has to find new ways of creatively reproducing himself and the guise of the Professional Mourner that he adopts later in life is one such manifestation of his writing himself. This persona exemplifies resistance to all forms of domination and their totalising effects, of which Jwara represents a particular facet. Margaret Mervis characterises Toloki as developing, when he arrives in the city, "a spirit of self-reliance which enables him to observe society with a 'fresh eye', to dream of love and fortune, and to create a new role for him in that society". (Mervis 1998:42) The father is only able to douse the flame of creativity temporarily, for the embers are soon able to break out into new fire and in new ways when Toloki makes the city his home.

In similar vein, Rita Barnard refers to Toloki as being a “survival entrepreneur” (Barnard 2004:279). Both Gaylard and Barnard’s descriptions allude to the adaptability of Toloki to changing circumstances, with the adaptability being sustained largely by the flâneur’s talent of watching the city. By the same token, this logic of watching and adaptability is extended to the choice that he makes to exist as Professional Mourner. It takes one with a keen, observant eye for opportunity to recognise the existence of such a niche in the hum-drum struggle for survival and meaning in a large city.

Toloki observed that Nefolovhodwe had attained all his wealth through death. Death was therefore profitable. He made up his mind that he too was going to benefit from death. Unlike Nefolovhodwe, he had no material items that he could make and sell that concerned death. But he had the saddest eyes that we had ever seen. His sad eyes were quite famous, even back in the village.[...]Even the fat Nefolovhodwe had told him, ‘Your face is a constant reminder that we are all going to die one day.’

(WD 1995:133)

In a certain way, instead of adapting himself to the changing city, Toloki is also able to change the city to meet his needs, such as in the invention of the Professional Mourner. This profession fills a vacuum occasioned by the breaking up of traditional African ties of the extended family, but at the same time is also discernible as a deliberate ploy by Toloki to create meaning in his life. Barnard (2004:281) also comments on the fact that “the new urban circumstances to which Mda responds are likely to put considerable strain on existing narrative forms and genres – including the novel”.

Writing in reference to economic theory and its explanation of the formation of value, Foucault (1986:36) points out that in any discourse there are various representational possibilities. Elsewhere, Foucault is cited by Holloway et al (2003:271) as emphasising the need to “undertake our analysis from our own point of perspective and avoid speaking on behalf of others” and that we should direct our attention to those forms of domination that appear to be globalized. To the extent possible, Toloki is left to narrate his own story and the narrative voice does not interject to moralise. Barnard (2004:279) comments that “the novel does not offer ratification of received codes of conduct” such as one would find in social realist literature, and magical realism avails itself as an alternative form of representation. Mda uses Toloki’s character as symbolic of the search for new forms of representation in the postcolonial period.

The slum – she always refers to it as a settlement – to which Noria eventually takes Toloki, in addition to their apparent lack of familial, or even tribal ties and reference points, demands new methodologies of representation that may not be adequately encapsulated in the traditional realist novel, hence the irruption of the twin paradigms of the flâneur and magical realism. Writing under the general rubric of writing the city or the city as text, Michel de Certeau makes the following observation whose relevance here is connected to the use I am making of the analytic paradigm of the flâneur:

Rather than remaining within the field of a discourse that upholds its privilege by inverting its content (speaking of catastrophe and no longer of progress), one can try another path[...]one can analyze the microbe-like, singular and plural practices which an urbanistic system was supposed to administer or suppress, but which outlived its decay; one can follow the

swarming activity of these procedures that far from being regulated or eliminated by panoptic administration, have reinforced themselves in a proliferating illegitimacy, developed and insinuated themselves into the networks of surveillance, and combined in accord with unreadable but stable tactics to the point of constituting everyday regulations and surreptitious creativities that are merely concealed by the frantic mechanisms and discourses of the observational organization.

(de Certeau 1988:96)

Viewed in this light, Toloki symbolises the “proliferating illegitimacy” drawn by de Certeau’s words above, because of his indomitable spirit. He does not resign himself to being the helpless victim of any grand metanarrative but continually seeks ways in which he can recreate himself and narrate himself into the fabric of the city. He describes the docklands, where he is housed until moving to the settlement with Noria, as his “headquarters”, giving the place a quasi-military air. It is from here that he directs his forays into the city and surrounds. Whereas many people just see him as no more than a beggar – due in large part to his dress code – he sees himself as the field-marshal of an army of one, invading the cityspace and making it his own. As an outsider and flâneur Toloki does not have to meet any moral or behavioural standards except those he decides on his own. Gaylard posits that:

Postcolonialism involves alterity, the eruption of the fantastic; but in this fantastic moment of hesitation, we also have self-reflexivity, a pausing doubt, a turning inwards in the attempt not to repeat the mistakes of the past, and to create.

(Gaylard 2005:49)

Toloki physically portrays this “alterity” because he is imaginatively outside the historical moment. He is the physical embodiment of the alternative forms of representation highlighted in this chapter. The

dominant ideologies that have to be resisted – which are understood here to be some of “the mistakes of the past” – consist of the paternal hegemony exercised by his now late father, which temporarily stunts Toloki’s creative growth, and the competing “isms” of apartheid and liberation. In Margaret Mervis’ words, “his struggle against impoverishment and victimisation provides a challenge to oppression of all kinds”. (Mervis 1998:40) Toloki casts himself in the figure of the outsider more to cultivate a sense of his own purity and less as a manifestation of any deficiency in terms of his humanity. In his paper, ‘Mourning the post-apartheid state already? The poetics of loss in Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying*’, Grant Farred (2000:188) describes this aspect of Toloki’s character as that of “the perpetual observer, the spiritual esoteric and devout outsider looking in and at the settlement community”. Again here, we have echoes of the flâneur, seeing and never quite belonging. As suggested at the beginning of this chapter, the city ideologically moves through Toloki because he is able to suggest probable avenues for existence outside the traditional oppositions. Because of his lived experience, “Toloki facilitates the transition the society he lives in undergoes; as an outsider he shows his fellow countrymen how they might live”. (Steinmeyer 2003:170) To further adapt (if not to stretch and slightly distort) this metaphor of the outsider, there are shades in Toloki of Plato’s caveman, who pioneers a journey outside the cave’s dark confines and, upon his return, is unable to make his fellow cave-dwellers believe in the possibility of a world different to the one of their own knowledge and conception.

Even though he is a close observer of the city, Toloki is keenly aware that the city, in its turn, also observes him. The act of scrutiny is not

mono-directional but seems to be reciprocated with equal fervour. While he takes interest in and observes the people around him, they in return display a certain morbid fascination in Toloki. As he walks through the settlement with Noria, "Toloki is the centre of attraction. Heads peer inquisitively from the small doors of shanties. Passers-by gawk at them." (WD 1995:96) On infrequent occasions he goes to the beach to do his toilet, producing some of the most memorable comical scenes in the story:

At the beach he goes straight to the change-room, takes his clothes off, and remains in green briefs that have holes in them. Then he goes to the open showers, and scrubs his body with a stone, while the cool water slides down his back. Soon a crowd gathers around him, and they foolishly snicker and chortle. He had forgotten that during the holiday season, especially between Christmas and New Year, the beaches are always infested with rich tourists from the inland provinces. Even though he came especially early in order to avoid spectators while performing his ablutions, you can't really beat these inland spoilers. They seem to practically live on the beach. A policeman, one of the idlers known as the beach patrol, comes and rudely tells him to clear off the beach.

(WD 1995:99)

The interaction or relationship between Toloki and those he observes, in as much they also watch him, is paradoxical in the sense of being based on a mutual fascination with elements of death, decay and the grotesque. Toloki is a celebrant in the arena of death and the city supplies abundant opportunities for him to partake in the connected rituals. At the same time, from the perspective of some of the other citizens, Toloki is a target for quiet disgust, abhorred but still a necessary presence as a reminder to the rest of the populace of lurking danger or folly, of the potential to sink to unknown levels of depravity. In this construct Toloki is fashioned as a metaphoric

embodiment of the Other, as envisioned in some of the work of Conrad(2002). His presence in the city is undesired because it disrupts and destabilises the paradigms we have convinced ourselves to be constitutive of progress and the Enlightenment.

The irony lies in that he is still needed as an example of the depths to which it is possible to sink, if society wavers and strays from the path of progress. The general attitudes to Toloki of some of the black and white citizens of the city may vary in terms of detail, but these attitudes are fundamentally similar because they are based on the same essential structures. The putative white community is likely to hold him up as an illustration of the unbalanced, backward and childish nature of the black "race". For its part, the supposed black community will also view Toloki as letting his "race" down by his behaviour. In essence, both views reflect the framework of the dominant discourses of apartheid (colonialism) and nationalism in their insistence on a subjugation of free will.

Clearly the protagonist, Toloki, is also ahead of his time in the way in which he has shed racialised references in speech and action, at a time when most people struggle to rise above the connotations of race. Farred describes Toloki as follows:

Toloki is a man who has correctly taken the pulse of his era. In this new dispensation the artist is ostensibly relieved of the anti-apartheid burden, and the importance of community is less pressing to him...[T]he opportunity to give full expression to black individuality is on the rise.

(Farred 2000:191-2)

Farred's analysis is applicable to the character of Toloki as well as to Mda as an author. For instance, Mda refuses "as a contemporary African writer [to] be held hostage by that history" (http://www.zakesmda.com/pages/Interview_Wark.html accessed 29 May 2007). Although he is referring here to orature as a supposedly requisite stylistic quality for the African novel, the statement reveals Mda's fiercely independent perspective on life.⁵ Both Toloki and Mda can be explained to have shed the inhibitions that are thought to naturally flow from their supposed belonging to a particular group or class of people. Their loyalties lie with themselves as respective individuals. In like fashion, Richard Samin in 'Marginality and History in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*' concludes that the novel "decentres what could be considered as essential at the time – the political issue of liberation – and instead focuses on marginality in terms of characters and places." (Samín 2000:191) Many of the funerals that Toloki attends are of people killed in political conflict but Toloki shies away from making any grand political statements. Again this does not necessarily mean that he is apolitical, but rather that in asserting his right of choice to express himself as an individual, he is making a political statement, yet one which is not explicit and not founded on the same precepts as those of the mainstream political actions in the novel.

In 'City forms and writing the "now" in South Africa', Sarah Nuttall (2004:742) sees the flâneur figure as inviting us "to read the city from its street level intimations, to encounter the city as lived complexity, to

⁵ Zakes Mda's father A.P. Mda rose as far as to become president of the African National Congress Youth League and the author's criticism of the political movement, whether viewed as satiric or otherwise, provides further proof of the latter's determination to move beyond the shackles of expectations.

seek alternative narratives and maps based on wandering.” This emphasis on “alternative narratives” is also expressed by Miki Flockemann, who in her analysis of trauma and transformation in the fiction of Mda and Lindsey Collen, recognises that a “shift from [the] old polarities emphasises representations of alterity, including attempts to generate meaning from an in-between space” (Flockemann 2004:250). In *Toloki* Mda avails himself of a vehicle for the expression and experiencing of a different kind of reality, and this alterity also requires new forms and elements of stylistic expression and these are realised through the novel’s destabilised plot and aspects of magical realism. As Toloki journeys across the city he is able to fashion links that transcend the binary limits or divides of apartheid, demonstrating at the same time how even in the spaces dominated by poverty, grief and conflict – such as the informal settlement – there is always room for expression of the most sublime beauty. Toloki, with his exterior affectation of poverty, still lives a more meaningful existence when compared to the rich Nefolovhodwe, whose soul is completely destroyed by the love for material wealth and who can only find enjoyment, notwithstanding the accumulated riches, in the company of the fleas he keeps. The money he has and his fear of losing it literally imprison him behind the high security walls of his mansion in suburbia whilst Toloki and Noria are still able to continue to dream in their shack. Toloki is indeed an example of a “complex figure[s] of difference and identity” (Bhabha 1994:1) and it is from his hybrid nature that much of the magic emanates, especially in recognition of the conclusion that Samin, writing on *Ways of Dying*, comes to. Samin (II, 2000:25) states that “[T]he magical realism of the novel lies in the unquestioned endorsement of the extraordinary”. Toloki, an extraordinary character living a truly extraordinary

existence, is his own justification or endorsement because he is never in any doubt about the “reality” of his self through self-narration.



Chapter Three: Sensual Madonnas: - the hyperbolic act of sex as self-narration.

Preceding chapters have illustrated the extent to which the principal characters have striven to define their subjectivity in the face of the insistent and dominant discourses of colonialism and nationalism. The strategies at the disposal of Toloki are neither necessarily available to Noria and Niki, nor are they always appropriate. Within the patriarchal paradigm, of which both colonialism (apartheid) and nationalism are the political manifestations, there is limited scope for the female subject to express her individuality in terms of agency on both the individual and the socio-political planes. This is because society is structured in a way that does not give due recognition to the female subject as an entity completely independent of male constructions and desires. In other words, females tend to be conceived – regardless of colour and social class – as appendages to male existence and identity. Women are reduced to the functional, biological purposes of providing gratification for men’s sexual desires and to reproduce boys who will grow into other men, and in this way women are pushed to exist at the periphery of society and men’s consciousness. Operating from these liminal zones at the edges of society, Noria and Niki seek ways to attest simultaneously to their humanity and individuality. As they have been denied the opportunity to express themselves in most other spheres of human endeavour they resort to using their bodies, their femaleness, as a means by which to avow their senses of self.

In her paper on humour and the postcolonial in Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness*, Wendy Woodward makes the following cogent remarks:

[T]he peasant culture, although not always anarchic as in the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, celebrates the body. It does so in ways reminiscent of grotesque realism: apparent debasement may also signify an assertion of the body, both of which connect with the 'sacred and exalted' and eternal renewal.

(Woodward 2005:292)

The use of the body and sex by the two women marks an ironic twist or shift, not only from the respective narratives in which they appear but also in terms of gendered relations between men and women. This is so because Noria and Niki are able, to varying degrees, to invert (by subversion) the paradigm of domination and oppression to which they are both subject by using their bodies to declare their independence from societal norms. The female body, the very thing that marks them as the Other, is the preferred tool of their liberation. The 'debasement' referred to by Woodward above includes a patriarchal denigration of women who show and engage in sexual desire and sexual activity, respectively, independent of any male agency or catalyst. The inversion therefore lies in subverting the intended meaning of debasement and showing the actions of the women to be instead acts of assertion, of defining themselves as fully independent entities. In Christian theology women simultaneously occupy dual poles as both the tempters and the mothers of men, hence the juxtaposition above of "debasement" and "eternal renewal".

In the introductory chapter I have cited Hartje's thesis that magical realism "by its nature connotes a breaking down of barriers of time and space" and that it "should not be limited by natural borders or cultural confines" (Hartje 2002:105). By extension, such an analogy of magical realist writing is applicable to the characters of Noria and Niki as they demonstrate themselves to be unwilling to fit snugly into roles

and categories that are predetermined for them by a male-dominated society. By the age of ten, virtually the whole village refers to Noria as “that stuck-up bitch”:

Jwara, for that was his father’s name, earned his bread by shoeing horses. But on some days – Toloki could not remember whether these were specially appointed days, or they were days when business was slack – he created figurines of iron and brass. On these days he got that stuck-up bitch, Noria, to sing while he shaped the red-hot iron and brass into images of strange people and animals that he had seen in his dreams. Noria was ten years old, but she considered herself very special, for she sang for the spirits that gave Jwara the power to create the figurines.

(WD 1995:29)

Noria starts singing for Jwara when she is as young as five. In the term “stuck-up bitch” is encapsulated the concomitant fears and desires of the male subject in relation to the body of the female as she represents something to be sexually desired but at the same time avoided for moral reasons. This goes against male conceptions of the male identity as being at the centre of the universe because Noria epitomises a disruption or destabilisation of the established order. Noria’s relations with Jwara here are shown to be on her own terms and not at the behest of the male figure, notwithstanding Jwara’s own misconceptions of their relationship. In her view, Noria is singing for the spirits and thus Jwara, the male figure, is actually removed from any position of superior significance to Noria as his creativity is negated by virtue of the fact that its (his creativity’s) manifestation is dependant upon Noria’s communication with the spirits. As in Farred’s analysis, Jwara and Toloki “produce their best art in – and because of – presence”. (Farred 2000:190) Jwara does not have a direct link with the spirit-world such as the discursive interaction that exists between

Noria and the spirits. He only serves the purpose of fashioning the end-product, which is the figurines, but he is merely a conduit; Jwara is disposable in the equation as the final product does not necessarily hinge on his being present. In sexual terms, the interaction between Jwara and Noria is that of ardent lover who labours through the sexual act whilst the lady to whom he is devoted is imaginatively in the arms of another.

The mystique of Noria as unattainable and therefore beyond objectification and oppression is emphasised by considering her mother's origins outside the village:

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 and talked with men anyhow she liked. [...] That Mountain Woman had no shame.

(WD 1995:34)

Noria's mother embodies the archetypal representation of the feared, unfathomable Other. She hails from outside the village and has a freedom of choice and action that threatens the moral order of the village. Xesibe, her husband, cannot dominate her in the manner that other village men dominate their wives and she shows him clearly that her stay in his household is entirely at her pleasure. The fact that she engages in sexual shenanigans with the "doctor" when she is eight months pregnant in, of all places, her father's hut, only adds to her aura of being a disturbing presence in the village because she displays a liberty of action that is normally considered as the prerogative of

males. In the instance of Noria and her mother, as with other characters in the novel *Ways of Dying*, Mda represents what Devi Sarinjeive means when she refers to “the self [as] both socially formed and self-negotiated” (Sarinjeive 2002:260) because mother and daughter are not totally at the mercy of the social formations of the village but rather, are able to claim as much freedom as possible to define their space and a sense of who they are as individuals. In the introductory chapter I read the ideas of Freud to mean that the human subject stands in a commonsense and pragmatic relation to objective reality but Mda shows here the potential for the subject to create and recreate his or her own reality.

While it remains a matter for speculation whether there is ever actual sexual contact between Jwara and Noria, as she grows older she actually discovers the sensual dimension to her character which runs parallel to the pleasure that she gives with her laughter and music:

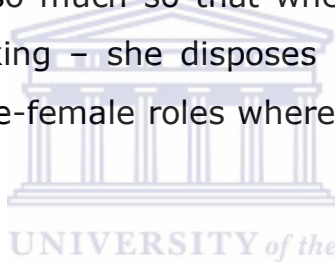
She would walk with the other pupils only as far as the general dealer’s store, where she would disappear in one of the pit latrines. A few minutes later she would emerge wearing the polka-dot dress that That Mountain Woman bought her against Xesibe’s wishes; [...H]er face would be pale with powder, and her lips red with lipstick. [...]She would then catch the bus to town, where she would give pleasure to bus drivers and conductors. Later when there were mini-bus taxis that raced between the village and the town, she would ride around in these taxis, dispensing pleasure to the drivers, who would buy her gifts and flatter her. In the afternoons, she would go back to the public toilet, change into her school uniform, remove her make-up, and go home.

(WD 1995:72-73)

The narrator, an apparent amalgam of the omniscient narrator and the communal voice, is presumptuous about the direction of the pleasure-

giving here, because he tells the story informed by a culture that sees women as having been created for the specific purpose of servicing men. Such a point of view does not consider the possibility that a woman can go out to seek sexual pleasure in the way a man is supposedly allowed to and therefore such a philosophy cannot countenance the fully liberated female subject. The direction of flow of pleasure giving and taking remains misunderstood because the narrator bases his understanding on false premises.

This situation described above is akin to that in which Jwara wrongly assumes that Noria is at his service, when it would be more correct to say that he is at hers, so much so that when she has had her fill of him – figuratively speaking – she disposes of or abandons him in a classic switch of the male-female roles where the woman is disposable to the man:



When Noria got married to Napu and moved to town, she stopped singing for Jwara altogether. He sat in his workshop for days on end, without ever venturing out. Policemen brought horses to be shod, but Jwara told them to go away. He was mourning the death of his creativity. He just sat in his workshop, and refused to eat. We went to take a look at him and found him sitting wide-eyed, staring at the figurines. We brought him food and fruit, but these remained untouched. [...]While the food decayed, and there were worms all over the place, and a stench, he stayed intact for months on end, just staring at the figurines, and pining away. Not even once did he go out in all that time.

(WD 1995:110)

The question that can be posed here from a realist perspective is what, in mythical fashion, sustained Jwara in the time that it took him to die, a period of time encompassing many years which began when Toloki was “on the road to the city, and was completed many years after he

had reached the city.” (WD 1995:110) A characteristic of magical realist writing, as described by Richard Samin in the previous chapter, is “the unquestioned endorsement of the extraordinary” (Samin 2000:25). The authorial voice does not hesitate over the details of Jwara’s death, even if they seem patently illogical from a realist perspective. Jwara is sustained by the figurines, thus prolonging his dying. There are shades of Dickens’ Miss Havisham here because Jwara, having been jilted by his spiritual lover, is similarly unable or unwilling to function. In the story “The Fire” from Mia Couto’s collection *Voices Made Night* the old man in like fashion is consumed by his love for his old wife as he labours under the false impression that she would die before he did, by which time he would not have the strength to dig her grave. He decides to start digging her grave but in the end the effort ironically kills him instead.

Noria gives birth to her first son, named Vutha – a name also given to his younger sibling who is “necklaced” to death in the informal settlement – after a gestation of fifteen months, showing again how the “natural order” has been subverted. However, the birth of the second Vutha is even more fascinating, not just because of his unnatural conception but because of its ramifications of the male-female subject relations:

But a turning point in her life came when she learnt of the death of her son, and of Napu. From that day she lost all interest in men, and her body had not to this very day, touched that of a man. The cruelty of the world killed not only her uplifting laughter, but all desires of the flesh.

Then one day, seven years ago, she discovered that she was pregnant. The homegirls did not believe when she told them that she did not know how it happened, as she had eschewed all contact with men.

(WD 1995:149)

For his part Toloki does not question the truthfulness of this explanation and neither is the reader meant to. By foregoing all contact with men and then proceeding to fall pregnant in the immaculate fashion of the Madonna, Noria completes the process of severing the bonds that tie her, as a woman, to a subservient relation with men. Men have assumed so much insignificance in her life that she apparently does not even need one to perform that most manly of functions, that of impregnating her. Figuratively speaking, Noria has managed to write the male subject out of the story of her life and what remains is her own, unadulterated story. Her reunion with Toloki is aided by the latter's non-insistence on a sexual relationship, thus allowing the two to cultivate new terms of relating between a woman and a man, terms that are not couched in sexual overtones with the attendant pitfalls of subjugation and dominance. Explaining her preference of Toloki over the more materially endowed Shadrack she softly says that "He knows how to live, Bhut'Shaddy." (WD 1995:144)

The female body is celebrated, thematically and stylistically, with greater emphasis in *The Madonna of Excelsior*. The art of Father Claerhout plays a predominant role in the life and consciousness of the principal character Niki, the mother of Viliki and Popi. Fr Claerhout's paintings of naked women, which are referred to as "his creations", echo Jwara's figurines in *Ways of Dying* and provide a rich subtext of affirmation of the female form. Women in *The Madonna of Excelsior* metaphorically attest to the existence of the woman as a substantive entity or self and not just as an index to the life of an individual man. In using the naked female as the subject of his art, Fr Claerhout ushers in a process of writing the female subject into the imagination:

After twenty-five years, these naked Madonnas still live. Popi tells that they will live forever because such things never die.

(ME 2002:12)

The Madonnas live not just because their author and painter has willed them into existence but also because they are symbolic representations of the very real women who pose as models for the paintings. These women are not figments of a fertile imagination but real material beings whose actions ultimately define who they are, their sense of self. The Catholic priest's paintings constitute representations of the women as subjects and the sensuality of their rendering on canvass is echoed in their real life sexual "proclivities". The liminal zones which these characters inhabit are zones of hybridity and subversion of some of the ethical considerations that are the accompaniments to the progress of Enlightenment. A case in point is the unique position occupied by Fr Claerhout himself. His art transcends and ultimately outlives the individual life and again, like Jwara's figurines, seems inspired by forces from a spiritual realm, the latter of which seem to give him a unique perspective that, when transformed into the brushstroke, manifests as "distortions" in the paintings. In a kind of exquisite irony, at least from the point of view of an orthodox Christian morality, Father Claerhout, the supposed guardian of the same morality, is actually subverting it by painting the naked women.

Mda makes use of his dual heritage in the way that he is able to draw both on African influences and western experiences to produce art of rich quality which flawlessly mingles traditional and western art, as well as mythology. Characterising magical realist writers in general as

showing such traits, Cooper (1998:17) alludes to the “urge to demonstrate, capture and celebrate ways of being and of seeing that are uncontaminated by European domination”. I interpret “European domination” to mean the privileging of the white male perspective as being the only rational point of view, in the process silencing alternative discourses and ways of narrating the self. In her seminal work on the female body as text, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Elizabeth Grosz advocates an alternative account of the suppositions of male theorists on the body, saying such work would involve:

[...] producing new discourses and knowledges, new modes of art and new forms of representational practice outside of the patriarchal frameworks, which have thus far ensured the impossibility of women’s autonomous self-representation, thus being temporally outside or beyond itself.

(Grosz 1994:187)

In the light of the above quotation, it is important to trace how Mda divests the female subject in the two novels, *Ways of Dying* and *The Madonna of Excelsior*, of the vestiges of the “patriarchal frameworks” referred to by Grosz here. One way the author is able to achieve this is through the use of a neutral narrator or authorial voice. In both *Ways of Dying* and *The Madonna of Excelsior*, the narrator’s voice is not gendered in any discernible way. This allows a voice that not does not moralise or condemn, and consequently the individual characters are able to freely engage in a narration of the self. By deploying such a new form of “representational practice” Mda is able to subvert the overriding discourses of apartheid and nationalism, as has already been amply demonstrated in earlier sections of this thesis.

Another route out of the problematic posed by the male author describing a female subject is offered by Ute Kauer, writing in 'Nation and Gender: Female Identity in Contemporary South African Writing'. Kauer's suggested solution is that:

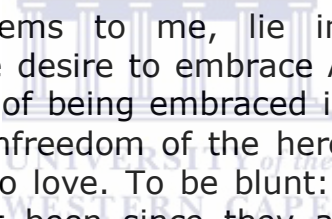
[T]he male view as an external perspective on femininity may thus offer insights into how women are imagined by male writers, without necessarily reflecting the actual social and cultural position of women in society. The very fact that male authors show a preoccupation with aspects of gender hints at an uncertainty concerning their own position: constructions of femininity thus reflect back on the need to redefine masculinity as well.

(Kauer 2003:108)

The female subject is, therefore, better placed to narrate her self, especially after considering what males perceive her to be, which does not encompass the subjective experience of a woman's position in society. In the same breath Kauer is also suggesting how the exercise of defining the Other, the man writing the woman, is ultimately self-reflexive. This last interpretation is of particular importance in the consideration of Niki's character because of the manner in which she is able to deflect the light of society's criticism of her behaviour by refocusing the light on society's own shortcomings. In so doing, Niki reenergises the notion that "history can be interpreted from various perspectives representing class, gender, culture, period" (Wenzel 2001:138). Niki's story, which is a story of South Africa, cannot be told from a single perspective because it has a multiplicity of strands and meanings.

In her late teens Niki's body "had the fullness of the moon" (ME 2002:14). This voluptuousness does not go unnoticed by some of the

white farmers like Johannes Smit “whose great sport was to waylay black girls in the fields” (ME 15). When Johannes is later seen crying into his beer after failing to consummate his fantastical desire for Niki, it becomes clear that the “sport” is actually no sport at all, but has only been rationalised as such by the white farmers who are fearful of relating to these black women in ways which though substantial, are deemed socially unacceptable because of their different races. This social doubt has been reinforced by the historical enactment of the Immorality Act in 1959 which was meant to prevent the deracination of the white race. J.M. Coetzee attributes the sense of duality, of ambivalence about belonging and being fearful, to what he discerns to be the origins of the act:



Its origins, it seems to me, lie in denial: denial of an unacknowledgeable desire to embrace Africa, embrace the body of Africa, and fear of being embraced in return by Africa [...] At the heart of the unfreedom of the hereditary masters of South Africa is a failure to love. To be blunt: their love is not enough today and has not been since they arrived on the continent; furthermore, their talk, their excessive talk about how they love South Africa has been consistently directed toward *the land*, that is toward what is least likely to respond to love: mountains and deserts, birds and animals and flowers.

(Coetzee 1992:97)

The conquest of the nubile black female, seen in this light, suggests a symbolic representation of the conquering of the land of Africa because the white men involved do not seek, beyond the gratification of their sexual desires, any meaningful relations with their conquests. By directing their love towards the land, the colonialists, in their various guises, preclude the necessity to relate to the African people on terms of equality. The latter are presumptuously perceived as an inferior

Other, who cannot be engaged with on an egalitarian basis, or by mutual affirmation of each other's humanity.

As alluded to in an earlier chapter, the female body is a site of struggle and in this instance the female African body is regarded as place of entry into the mythical heart of the land. Grosz is rightly of the view that patriarchal frameworks see the female body as a site of "permeability or incompleteness" (Grosz 1994:187). In this construction women are seen not only as receptacles for men – literally and figuratively – but are regarded as otherwise incomplete beings without men to affirm them. Through the agency of Niki, Mda seeks to subvert this notion and show how in the emerging postcolony, the female Other increasingly asserts her rights to previously denied political and imaginative space. Colonial and traditional authority are shown to be based on the same essential structures of male dominance and so neither can adequately speak for the women, hence the need for the female to find her own voice. The old representational structures can no longer be deployed to narrate an emergent new reality. Niki increasingly occupies space that is at the fringes of society. She actually inhabits the hybrid zones, the third space, in between the competing conceptions of black and white nationhood. It is from such spaces that the magical realist impulse is manifested and enhanced. Wendy B. Faris characterises magical realism as radically modifying and replenishing the dominant mode of realism and "challenging its basis of representation from within" (Faris 2004:1). Magical realism is therefore an apt mode for narration of the transition from a colonial (apartheid) framework, to a decolonised structure that is not, however, precolonial or atavistic. Magical realism also allows for

the deconstruction of the colonial *status quo* without resorting to a return to the “primitivism” alluded to by Heywood (2004:192).

Niki uses the strategy of disrupting the existing order, as illustrated above, as she engages with modes of narrating her self. Once she recognises and synthesises the attraction that she poses for Johannes Smit and Stephanus Cronje, Niki quickly assumes a position of strength rather than subjugation. This position is augmented by the sexual failings of Johannes, who is her first suitor:

His pants were at his ankles. He lay on top of her and pleaded, “I am sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt you. But if you make noise, people will come and spoil our fun.”

Niki wept softly as his hardness touched her thighs. Intense heat sucked out his slimy seed before he could penetrate her. He cursed his pipe as it leaked all over her. He damned its sudden limpness. He just lay there like a plastic bag full of decaying tripe on top of her.

(ME 2002:16)

Even though he, on a different occasion, manages to consummate his desires once, Johannes is a caricature of the heroic, dominant male figure and has earned the reputation of being ineffectual as a sexual being. Niki’s friends Maria and Mmampe derisively refer to him as “Limp Stick”, “Sleeping Horn” or “Lame Horn”, and other similarly derogatory nicknames. The contrast between the voluptuous and nubile Niki and the sexually dysfunctional Johannes is a figurative rendering of the shift in the balance of power between male and female. While Niki feels like vomiting out the presence of Johannes – on the day that he manages to rape her– because he has imposed his will on her, her encounter with Pule on her wedding night is a totally different kind of experience:

He danced inside her like a whirlwind until they both exploded. The hollowness that had existed since the yellowness dripped with her screams was filled. The stubborn stain was bleached away. Once more she was whole. Once more she belonged to herself. And she gave herself permission to share herself with someone else.

The following day, Pule boarded the red railway bus back to Welkom. There to be drained by the gold that he extracted from the dust of the depths of the earth.

(ME 2002:22)

Pule is like Jwara in that his labour seems to suck the life-force out of him but more important in this extract is the realisation that the woman is clearly no longer a compliant receptacle of the man's semen. She has begun to set the terms and limits of sexual engagement, and this freedom soon finds allegorical reflection in the other spheres of Niki's life.

Having been deflowered by the less-than-manly Johannes, Niki marries Pule who is portrayed to a certain extent as a desexualised version of the "true" man. The source of his deficiencies as a man derives from his subordinate status as an unskilled worker in a racist and capitalist society. By necessity he spends extended periods of time in the mines of Welkom and away from the marital home in Excelsior. These absences, taken as a whole, engender Niki's developing sense of independence as she increasingly feels no injunctions to behave according to the traditionally defined roles of a woman. Pule, for his part, holds no actual male authority over Niki beyond the occasional threat of physical beatings. On the few occasions that he is at home he, like the other migrant miners, constitutes a ghostly, inconsequential presence in the house. Niki is quickly aware of the potential power that she wields because of her sex and uses it to her advantage in the circumstances. When Cornelia Cronje, for whom she

works at the Excelsior Slaghuis, humiliates Niki by falsely accusing her of stealing meat and by stripping her naked in front of the other workers, she decides to use the very instrument of her humiliation – her nudity – to exact a carnal vengeance on her tormentor:

For Stephanus Cronje, Niki's pubes, with their short entangled hair became the stuff of fantasies. From that day he saw Niki only as body parts rather than as one whole person. He saw her breasts, pubes, lips and buttocks.

While the Cronje men were seized by the fiends of lust, anger was slowly simmering in Niki. [...] In the starless nights of Mahlatswetsa Location, she was nursing an ungodly grudge.

(ME 2002:42)

In due time and in true Bakhtinian style, the "depredations" and impingements of the Immorality Act begin to play themselves out, in carnivalesque fashion, against the backdrop of the various festivals of rural Orange Free State such as the Ficksburg Cherry Festival:

She looked into his eyes in the light of the moon. She did not see a boss or a lover. She saw Madam Cornelia's husband, with the emphasis on *Madam*. And she had entirely in her power. Chewing him to pieces. She felt him inside her, pumping in and out. Raising a sweat. Squealing like a pig being slaughtered. Heaving like a dying pig.

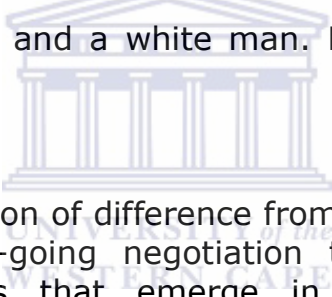
Ag, shame. Madam Cornelia's husband. She who had the power of life and death over her. He became a whimpering fool on top of her, babbling insanities that she could not make out.

(ME 2002:50)

In Niki's arms, Johannes and Stephanus are reduced to pliant clay, subverting the master-servant paradigm. The two men are never able to exercise control over her; rather, she assumes conductorship of the sensual opera that she has composed. Stephanus is later driven to distraction and suicide. Niki utilises her sex as a measure of her power

and not as the symbol of her weakness, her “permeability” as described by Grosz in an earlier reference in this chapter.

In the event, Niki conceives and delivers “A truly coloured baby” (ME 2002:63). Popi is a hybrid creation. She mirrors the explosion of bright colours that Fr Claerhout favours for his paintings – as opposed to the dour and staid monotones of black and white. As an expression of Niki’s self, the birth of Popi marks a veritable Rubicon in the manner in which Niki has fully determined the terms of the child’s conception and birth. In keeping with the subversion of the Madonna as a metaphor for purity, Popi’s conception is anything but immaculate because she is the result of the double “transgressions” of an adulterous affair between a black woman and a white man. Homi Bhabha remarks in *The Location of Culture*:



The social articulation of difference from the minority perspective is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorise cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation.

(Bhabha 1994:2)

Niki is articulating the minority position, not because of demographic considerations but because she belongs to a social group that has been politically doubly disempowered by, virtue of race (being black) and gender (being female). Popi comes from multiple heritages and can be understood as embodying a statement on difference and the possibility for multiple perspectives on history. Still, there is a marked moment of hesitation on Niki’s part as the flames of the “scandal” threaten to consume her:

She held a naked Popi above the fire, smoking the pinkness out of her. Both heat and smoke would surely brown her and no one would say she was a light-skinned child again. The baby whooped, then yelled, as the heat of the brazier roasted her little body and the smoke stung her eyes and nostrils.[...] She assured the baby that it was for her own good. She sang a lullaby as she swung her over the fire. Rocking her from side to side. Turning her round and round so that she would be browned on all sides.
(ME 2002:66)

Faced with the possibility of incarceration, Niki attempts to re-write history by making her daughter appear darker than she is and this action, though futile, is pivotal in Niki's growth as it marks another instance in which Niki tries to exercise agency over her life story. Rather than being a submissive subject, she chooses to be proactive. The attempt to change Popi's complexion has undertones steeped more in ritual, as opposed to practical considerations.

The trial at which Niki and her friends are charged along with their white partners with transgressions of the Immorality Act in a way marks a climatic milestone in the progress of Niki towards self-definition. Prior to the actual trial, their male accomplices are the first to be released before the women finally have bail paid for them as well. Although the charges are finally dropped before the end of the trial, the media circus that accompanies it and the lewd interest that is engendered in the Excelsior community, set Niki on the path towards self-ostracisation. Her growing sense of loneliness and isolation is evident even in the cells of the jailhouse where "she saw things happening to her as if she had another life outside her body" (ME 2002:70). Notwithstanding the "not guilty" verdict she begins to spiritually withdraw from her community, a process highlighted by the anger that she feels for "everyone but herself" (ME 2002:105). Fr

Claerhout is at times called The Trinity by the narratorial voice – in reference to his role as priest, artist and man – and his paintings dissipate much of the anger inside Niki, but there is a chasm or void that even they cannot fill. Only by adopting the bees and seeking fellowship with them does Niki begin a more comprehensive process of healing. By the end of the novel, Niki is basically eschewing all human contact, save that of her two children, Viliki and Popi. She turns to spending long periods of time in the forests around Mahlatswetsa Location, keeping beehives and communing with the bees which she regards as the emissaries of her ancestors. The bees give her spiritual sustenance as well as the physical nourishment of honey. In the end the bees provide healing for mother and daughter:

And the bees began to swarm. They buzzed away from one of the hives in a black ball round the queen. And then they formed a big black cloud. We saw Niki and Popi walking under the cloud, following the bees. Or were the bees following them? We did not know.

(ME 2002:267)

Tellingly, Niki chooses the company of a colony of bees. The life of the colony revolves around keeping the queen bee happy enough to continue the process of reproducing the colony. The centrality of the queen bee in the colony is an allegorical attestation to the rise of the female subject. To borrow the words of Goodman (2004:69), “identity is in fact complex, unpredictable, and not as the practice of apartheid suggested, related to mere surface appearances”. Noria and Niki prove in their respective, individual stories their substantial worth as human beings and not just as subaltern subjects inferior to the male. Their existence at the margins demands appropriate strategies for self-narration as the old and familiar paradigms are now lacking

functionality; hence the recourse to the hybrid consciousness and the carnivalesque, both of which are central planks in magical realist writing. Commenting on the work of the Mozambican writer Mia Couto, Rothwell goes so far as to suggest that:

It is no longer just the self which needs to – but cannot – dream of being other than it is; it is the community as a whole. Dreaming is presented as more than a way to escape an unpalatable present; it is viewed as a mode of effecting change.
(Rothwell 2004:110)

Notwithstanding the contextual idiosyncrasies, this analogy is applicable to the stories of Noria and Niki because the two women teach their respective communities how to dream and how to live by showing that difference is not necessarily a negative quality. It is actually through difference that society is able to regenerate itself and grow because difference shows us what is possible.

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Chapter Four: Narrations of the Grotesque in the post-apartheid state.

Funerals, festivals, social gatherings, political rallies and even court hearings all constitute opportunities for the analysis of the collective psyche. The Roman mob that is roused by Mark Anthony in *Julius Caesar* is still echoed in the gatherings in the postcolonial state with all its grotesque distortions. The communal consciousness displayed in moments where people gather socially reflects the extent to which some semblance of cultural authority is possible, or even necessary, in the postapartheid nation in South Africa. In the moment of transition the very notion of nationhood is in doubt. It has been demonstrated in the preceding sections of this project how Mda endeavours to challenge the dominant discourses of colonialism and nationalism through various strategies such as the privileging of the individual over the communal consciousness, as well as the subverting of dominant discourses by moving the site of struggle to territories that are unfamiliar, and therefore treacherous for the previously privileged positions. The grotesque is a central plank to magical realist writing and it is pertinent to enquire into the juxtaposition of the supposed grotesqueness – based on a realist analysis – of individual characters such as Toloki, Noria and Niki to the apparent absurdities displayed by the collective, especially in circumstances or situations which are intended or organised to affirm the validity of social values.

The grotesque is best considered and understood from its roots in the Gothic and 18th century literature. By definition the grotesque refers to the distortions, ostensibly, of the body, but through metaphorical illumination it also evokes the underbelly of a “civilised” society that

must be kept hidden from view because of its undermining effect. The 18th century is characterised in history, philosophy and literature as an age of reason, with the rise of industrialisation and the ascendance of the machine which imaginatively represent order. Against this rather utopian formulaic for order, the human body with all its peculiarities and unpredictability represents an irruption, an insinuation or instability and chaos. The rationality of the so-called "age of reason" is dramatically contradicted by the irrationality of the body. Apartheid and the nationalist struggle against it are informed, to a large extent, by the rational thinking arising out of the Enlightenment. As a result, and notwithstanding any ideological dichotomy between them, both colonialism (apartheid) and nationalism assume the character of dominant discourses. Zakes Mda contends with these discourses in *Ways of Dying* and *The Madonna of Excelsior*, albeit in subtly different ways in each respective text. The desired "perfection" of the society is structured against the perceived "deficiencies" of the individual and the reaction of Mda's principal characters in the two novels is to engage in the process of self-narration as a counter-discourse to the dominant and oppressive effects of the meta-narratives of apartheid and nationalism.

Among the central tenets of the two ideologies described above, that is apartheid and nationalism, is the suppression of the individual will or self, and by extension that of the body, for the sake of the purported collective or communal benefit of a racialised segment of society. Woodward, referring to Mda's deployment of laughter in his engagement with the postcolonial in *The Heart of Redness*, makes the pertinent observation that:

... [A]pposite in Mda's representations of colonialism is the Bakhtinian grotesque with its emphasis on the 'materiality of the body' in popular culture, as opposed to the disembodiment and 'humourless seriousness' of official culture.

(Woodward 2005:291)

The attempt, by official culture – by both apartheid and nationalism – to deny the “materiality of the body” marks an insistence on the non-existence of the self. By extension of this “logic”, the self is denied the opportunity to experience life, be it physically or mythically (imaginatively), because limits are set as to what is permissible and what is not. In *Ways of Dying*, Toloki is constructed as the outsider but in his physicality he is more affirming of his humanity than some of the other people who go through life loyal to notions of order and reason which are, at best, misconstrued. At the risk of sounding essentialist – thus contradicting this project's intention to illustrate the potential for variable ways in which the individual can interpret and narrate the self – Toloki increasingly grows more and more integrated with his sense of self throughout the novel. Above all, in spite of outward signs to the contrary, Toloki is an artist:

This politicking was interfering with Toloki's *inspired* mourning. He calmed the crowd down, and told them to concentrate on the business of mourning.

(WD 1995:23 my emphasis)

An artist knows how to live meaningfully and intensely. Toloki's is a performative and conciliatory function, and in the novel he “performs” the funerals that he attends in order to lighten the grief of the people. In the case of Vutha's death, Noria is not allowed to fully grieve the passing of her son because of the favouring of the political needs of the “movement” over her personal need to mourn her loss. This is in

keeping with the discourse of nationalism and its insistence on order outlined above whereby the individual cannot question or challenge. Despite the outward signs of the grotesque and “unnatural”, such as his unkempt appearance and extraordinary dietary habits, Toloki displays a greater humanity than the collective. Food is a cultural sign and what he eats shapes who Toloki conceives himself to be. In other words, he narrates a sense of his self through what he chooses to eat. His extraordinary diet marks him as an eccentric person but more importantly as an imaginative one. Reading the grotesque as meaning the giving of oneself over to what is normally regarded as aberrant or untasty – in Toloki’s case, for instance, the consumption of a strange combination of green onions and Swiss rolls – or in fact, the Other, I see the author’s intent as that of taking the grotesque and humanising it. In the context of magical realist writing this is a necessary project because the absurd does not exist separately from what we perceive to be our normal lives and therefore we need to become accustomed to it as such.

In Mda’s writing the grotesque is present in the attrition between the individual body and the collective will. The collective is always seeking the subjugation of the individual body. Elizabeth Grosz, in her enquiry into the volatility of the represented body, cites the ideas of Mary Douglas in saying:

... [T]he body can and does function to represent, to symbolize, social and collective fantasies and obsessions: its orifices and surfaces can represent the sites of cultural marginality, places of social entry and exit, regions of confrontation and compromise. Rituals and practices designed to cleanse or purify the body may seem as processes of cultural homogeneity.

(Grosz 1994:193)

The individual human body, with its “orifices” structured as points of weakness and therefore “permeability”, is under the constant threat of a dominant discourse, which Grosz delineates above as “cultural homogeneity”. The collective has an almost manic impulse for control and Mda shows how this can be absurd and dehumanising. The central tenet of the Enlightenment is supposedly the affirmation of human progress but in the postcolonial state the discourses that seek to dominate are shown to be contradictory to the premise of humanity because they are inimical to the expression, by the individual, of humanness in all its possible potential variations. The grotesque always threatens to break out and “disrupt” society, for instance by inverting the cultural “norms”, but through a character like Toloki Mda avails himself of a strategy to show how the grotesque shakes us out of our known zones of comfort and makes us see the world anew.

Allied to the use of laughter and the grotesque in the novel as tools for narration of the self, are also moments when the collective voices demonstrate great sadism, the effect of which is to reveal a kind of absurd, distorted and “grotesque” morality. For instance, Noria’s young son Vutha dies at the hands of the Young Tigers, the youth wing of the liberation movement (who were historically called Young Lions). His death comes about because of the suspicion that he has divulged the security secrets of the settlement to the migrant residents of the hostels with whom the settlement residents are engaged in an internecine war. That such a “crime” is deemed punishable by death in such a young boy is startling on its own, but the callous nature of the death is even more shocking. An old tyre, soaked in petrol, is placed around his neck before it is ignited. The apartheid police would have been hard pressed to match or surpass this method of killing for

cruelty and remorseless severity. The first son, also named Vutha, dies a similar and unimaginably horrifying death, chained to a pole under a bridge by a drunk and delinquent father (Napu) who returns days later only to find dogs fighting over the corpse of his dead son. The second Vutha is, ironically, buried on Christmas Day and the author in this way inverts the mythology of Christmas. The gathered mourners, instead of celebrating new life, are congregating for a death. The normal is inverted and portrayed as grotesque. Another instance of the sadistic is when Toloki, still on his way to the city, is working at a mill and a newly made friend is killed by his white co-workers:

Toloki heard how his friend was burnt to death in a deadly game he played with a white colleague. During their lunch break his white colleague sent him to fetch a gallon of petrol from the mill's petrol depot. When he came back with the petrol he found a black labourer, who was known as the white man's crony, on the floor, struggling to free himself from his white friend who had his knee on his chest. The crony later said, 'I do not know exactly how it happened, but I remember kicking the container and the man was doused with petrol all over.' As he was trying to clean his face with a piece of cloth, the white colleague jokingly said that he was going to burn him. He then struck a match and threw it at him.

(WD 1995:64)

The "crony" later reveals that he himself had been set on fire the previous month and that he considers the "white baas" friendly because he "likes to play with black labourers". (WD1995:65) Shadrack is luckier in that he survives an encounter with a group of right-wingers who beat him up and kidnap him and take him on what is euphemistically referred to as a "hell-ride". This involves Shadrack being beaten up and getting taken to a mortuary where he is made to copulate with dead women on pain of death. The white baases at the mill and the right-wingers display an absurd and grotesque sense of

what is fun in finding their enjoyment in the pain and humiliation they are able to inflict on their hapless victims precisely because the abusers occupy racially privileged positions. J.M. Coetzee, in an interview with David Attwell, characterises this problematic (present in conditions of unequal power relations) by pointing out that “it is not that one *grants* the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body *takes* this authority: that is its power [...] its power is undeniable.” (Coetzee 1992:248) The suffering that is inflicted has the ironic effect of giving the body, the potential site of the grotesque, greater legitimacy instead of the intended purpose of the demeaning of the individual. Thus Toloki and Shadrack develop increased awareness of their respective sense of self through such encounters with pain and humiliation. Their sense of self-worth is undiminished.

In *The Madonna of Excelsior* the grotesque is utilised and examined in the same manner as in *Ways of Dying*, but perhaps with extended emphasis on the notion of communal grotesqueness than appears in the latter text. The grotesque in *The Madonna of Excelsior* is inexorably linked to the idea of the festival or of the “Bakhtinian carnivalesque” as alluded to in the preceding chapter. The portrayal of the Jaycee Cherry Festival in Ficksburg begins innocently enough with descriptions of the Jaycees’ decision to:

... organise a festival around a product unique to this part of South Africa, the intention [of which] was to bring to the attention of visitors the charms of the entire region, not just of Ficksburg.

(ME 2002:44)

The festival speaks of an Afrikaner community trying to affirm its identity and at the same time carve a niche for itself in the national

imagination. It, however, soon becomes clear that the bright colours of the festival, which mirror Fr Claerhout's paintings and are accentuated by the gay (in its non-sexual sense) costumes of the Cape Town minstrels as well as the multi-coloured floats, conceal a darker and more sinister aspect. This shady side begins to manifest in the actions of the Excelsior farmers in leaving their wives at home when they attend the festival. The festival offers this motley group an opportunity to engage in "debauchery" away from the control of their prissy and proper wives. There is a dichotomy between conceptions of "white" males and individual manifestations thereof. For instance Johannes' impotence dramatically undermines chauvinistic perceptions of the male body. Viewed metaphorically as a figurative whole, this group of men – comprising Stephanus Cronje, Johannes Smit, Sergeant Klein-Jan Lombard, Groot-Jan Lombard and Rev Francois Bornman – represent in their desires the lurking danger that is feared to be threatening to erupt and disrupt white Afrikaner society. Their behaviour is disruptive because in many white constructions of black people such behaviour – what is viewed as sexual "depravity" – is normally assigned to the latter group as it is conceived of as a mark of Otherness. This collective distortion is therefore more shocking and less acceptable to the imagined white society because it unerringly points to the presence of the Other within "us". In terms of authorial strategy and intent, the effect achieved by Mda in this sequence – where white men are portrayed as desirously slobbering after black women – is an inversion of the normal paradigm where black men are usually seen as having designs on white women. Writing in 'Mythology, magic realism, and white writing after apartheid', Sandra Chait observes that Andre Brink seems to suggest in his writing "that only by sacrificing his enormous sexuality can the black man live in harmony

with the white woman". (Chait 2000:20) However, in Mda's hypothesis, the white male body has the same grotesque libidousness normally associated with the Other.

The cherry festival slips almost seamlessly into what can best be described as a festival of sexual indulgence across "the colour bar", as the five men indulge their whims in a bizarre carnal pact with Niki, Maria, Mmampe and other women from the township. Johannes' fixation with Niki carries over from Ficksburg to the orgies that they now routinely host in the barns of their farms:

Since the cherry festival, Johannes Smit died of desire every time he thought of her. Especially when he imagined all the things she must have done with Stephanus Cronje. He had hoped that during these partner-swopping orgies, he would have his opportunity. But Stephanus Cronje was obviously becoming unsportsmanly. As if he had sole ownership of Niki. And this was the same Stephanus Cronje who had a taste of other men's partners when Niki was not there!

(ME 2002:53)

By couching the debasement in terms of sport, the rationale by Johannes and the others is to remove the harmfulness of their actions. The black women are mere game, pawns who can be deployed and disposed of as directed by their masters. Johannes even speaks of "sole ownership". As highlighted a few paragraphs above, the Other is nearer to them than the "occidentals" imagine. Mda is successful in subverting the "normal" structures of representation as they appear in Eurocentric discourse because in this case it is not the natives or the Others who are purveyors of irrationality but the very "white" men on whose shoulders the burden of the Enlightenment supposedly falls. In

his comments on postmodernism and magical realism, Gaylard notes that:

[I]t is necessary to keep in mind that Latin American magical realism determinedly violated the norms of European fictions because they are associated with colonialism, and African writers have had similar violatory impulses.

(Gaylard 2005:37)

In his subversion which manifests as “violatory impulses” Mda is not merely in pursuit of a moral dialectic but employs his brand of satire to:

expose[s] the embedded colonial discourses imposed by apartheid so that satire and postcolonial practice converge in their mutually subversive intent.

(Goodman 2004:64)

The authorial voice does not rise to condemnation but is even more effective in unravelling the ills of society because it is never didactic. The upshot of these “barn romps” is the court trial, in which the participants in the romps stand accused of miscegenation. Stephanus, unable to face public scrutiny of his actions, takes his own life.

Mda weaves the court trial into an intertextual tapestry – with contemporaneous accounts from *The Friend* newspaper supported by no less an “authoritative” voice than that of the British Broadcasting Corporation – foregrounding what the narrator describes as a “feast of miscegenation”. (ME 2002:89) The notion of the festival is repeated here with just as much chaotic intensity. The feverish, worldwide media attention that the case generates borders on the absurd, more especially because of the premise on which the court case is based,

the Immorality Act of 1959. The act encapsulates what Coetzee, in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* defines as “the unnatural structures of power that define the South African state”. (Coetzee 1992:97) I interpret Coetzee’s remarks to mean that these structures of power are an imaginative and political barrier impeding fraternity between the races because there can be no fraternity without liberty and equality. Speaking on race relations in South Africa in general, Coetzee stated in his ‘Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech’ in 1987:

The deformed and stunted relations between human beings that were created under colonialism and exacerbated under what is loosely called apartheid have their psychic representation in a deformed and stunted inner life.

(Coetzee 1992:98)

The “deformed and stunted inner life”, a version of the grotesque, results from situations where the state legislates how people can or should relate. The narrator makes this wry observation:

It was the Golden Age of Immorality in the Free State. Immorality was a pastime. It had always been popular before laws were enacted in Parliament to curb it. It became a pastime the every first day explorers’ ships weighed anchor at the Cape Peninsula centuries ago, and saw the yellow body parts of Khoikhoi women. But what we were seeing during this Golden Age was like a plague. In various platteland towns Afrikaner magistrates were sitting at their benches, listening to salacious details, and concealing painful erections under their magisterial gowns. [...] All because of black body parts.

(ME 2002:93-4)

The use of the term “plague” has the effect of likening the miscegenation to an outbreak but the narrator quickly shows that it is a practice that cannot be condemned by alluding to its long history and the fact of its naturalness. In the narrator’s mouth or hand the word

“plague” has an ironic resonance but it assumes an entirely different meaning when used by the oppressive state. Writing in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* on measures taken in certain towns in Europe in the seventeenth century at times of plague, Michel Foucault finds that:

A whole literary fiction of the festival grew up around the plague: suspended laws, lifted prohibitions, the frenzy of passing time, bodies mingling together without respect, individuals unmasked, abandoning their statutory identity and the figure under which they had been recognized, allowing a quite different truth to appear. But there was also a political dream of the plague, which was exactly its reverse: not the collective festival, but strict divisions; not laws transgressed, but the penetration of regulation into even the smallest details of everyday life through the mediation of the complete hierarchy that assured the capillary functioning of power; not masks that were put on and taken off, but the assignment to each individual of his ‘true’ name, his ‘true’ place, his ‘true’ body, his ‘true’ disease.
(Foucault 1982:197-198)

The first half of the above quotation refers to the chaos of the grotesque, epitomised by the erasure of chronological and spatial borders, whereas the second half marks the insinuation by the state into all the facets of the life of the individual in order to assert discipline and control, to ensure the triumph of reason. The plague is something to be feared in the second formulation but in the work of Mda, as a representation of individuals narrating their respective “selves”, it is mocked or satirised. The representations of “immoral” sex in *The Madonna of Excelsior* are like the literary fiction in which a “truth”, so unlike the apartheid laws, incorporates the carnivalesque or the festival, as I have argued earlier.

When democracy finally arrives Niki has already begun the process of withdrawing from society. She retreats first onto the canvasses painted by Fr Claerhout and finally into the bush where she finds community in the bees whose hives she looks after. Her children temporarily dabble in ruling party politics at the level of the local council but are themselves increasingly ostracised as they discover the demands placed on them by their roles to be inimical to their natural inclinations. Popi, because of her mixed heritage, initially struggles with her sense of self and tries to mask the vestiges of her “white” roots by tying her long, smooth hair in a doek, and by shaving her legs and wearing long skirts. Displaying shades of Toloki’s Professional Mourner, Popi becomes a fixture at funerals and political rallies in the town and surrounding areas, using her magical voice to console or to sing the praises of the moment, respectively. For his part Viliki – an active participant in the underground movement that emerges as the ruling party – becomes increasingly disillusioned with his society:

Viliki took to the world with the Seller of Songs. They traversed the Free State, from one farm village to another, selling their songs at people’s feasts and parties. [...]The two of them alone under the big sky. Away from the petty world of Excelsior, and particularly of Mahlatswetsa Location. Away from the politics and 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.

(ME 2002:245-246)

In the description above there some ironic references to political freedom – as in “free at last” and “freedom” – which instead gesture to self-expression and self-narration through art. Viliki’s outlook on life and himself here is like that of the character Garabha in Charles Mungoshi’s *Waiting for the Rain* (1975). Garabha is an unsettled eldest

son who eschews the responsibilities of ensuring the survival of the family name, as expected of the first born son in traditional Shona society, but instead gives himself to revelry and the expression of his one natural talent – playing the drum at ancestral rituals and parties. His drum-playing is magical and, providing as he does a connection between the world of the living and that of his ancestors; Garabha assumes a mythological status almost equal to that of the spirit medium. (Shades of the younger Noria in *Ways of Dying* singing for Jwara.) This sets him at odds with most of his family, especially with his father's professed Christianity and love for modernity, the latter epitomised by the schooled second son on the verge of departing for England. In the event, Garabha willingly assumes the mantle of outcast as his peculiar talents are misconstrued and he is labelled a layabout, rather than a symbolic contact between the spiritual and physical realms.



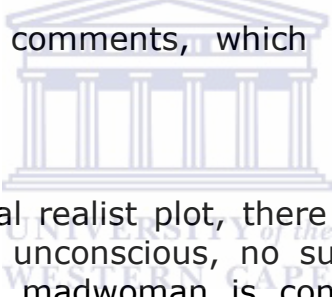
In the final analysis, Toloki is not as absurd as may first be conceived, because he has a meaningful world that he has created for himself and his strength lies in his ability to embrace all otherness. Noria pulls him out of the docklands and socialises him, becoming in this way a figure of mercy. In complementing her role as caregiver Toloki, as artist, teaches Noria to laugh again. Through the story, there is a sense that Toloki is deconstructing his sense of self and is able, for instance, to wait in the queue for water with the women and children of the settlement. Niki and Popi are similarly able to fashion their own sense of self, even in the face of the absurd demands for conformity from an overbearing social paradigm in both nationalism and apartheid. In all these female characters' cases is an insistence that women are an integral presence in the social landscape and not mere objects. The

central philosophy of both texts is respect for both women and men, for the living and the dead. These border crossings also underline the extent to which fantasy can become a part of an everyday reality.



Conclusion: Humour and Pain:- The twin threads of the rejuvenation of the self and the real.

In *Ways of Dying* and *The Madonna of Excelsior* Zakes Mda offers a different aesthetic to the realist method favoured by practitioners of what is often referred to as the “protest literature” generation that was writing at the height of the anti-apartheid struggle. The effect of this is doubly significant in the sense that Mda not only offers an alternative perspective on the interpretation of reality, but simultaneously opens up his work to a wider meaning in terms of thematic content beyond the overt political project of the repudiation of apartheid. Writing on magical realist writing in West African fiction, Brenda Cooper makes the following insightful comments, which are I think are largely applicable to Mda here:



In the ideal magical realist plot, there is no gothic subtext, no dark space of the unconscious, no suppressed libidinous attic space, in which a madwoman is concealed. The mysterious, sensuous unknown and unknowable are not in the subtext, as in realist writing, but rather share the fictional space with history. The alternative histories, mysteries, dreams, pain, bewilderments and nightmares labyrinths, struggle to be inscribed within the texts’ surfaces. This cacophony is viewed through the lens of the ambiguously ironic gaze of the creator of the magical realist plot.

(Cooper 1998:17)

These thoughts by and large encapsulate the form and content of Mda’s in *Ways of Dying* and *The Madonna of Excelsior*. Both texts seek to deal with the transition from apartheid to democracy but do not do so in ways which are blindly optimistic about the future but rather seek to initiate debate about how different and specific individuals can engage with the potentialities of their present and future, in full

cognisance of their peculiar past not just as South Africans but as individual South Africans experiencing life differently. The two novels are as a consequence, in my view, devoid of the grand political gestures characteristic of many of the exponents of the canon of the aforementioned protest literature. This is by no means to suggest that Mda's work is bereft of political content, but rather that he succeeds in engaging with the socio-political realities of apartheid and its postcolonial period in ways which are manifestly resourceful because they are nuanced by the experiential, lived life of the individual as opposed to the reduction of individuals to symbolic characters, often prone to political posturing. Mda's principal characters, Toloki, Noria, Niki, Viliki and Popi generally eschew the radicalised political consciousness of some of the heroes in novels by, for instance, Alex la Guma. Toloki does not let politics supersede the business of mourning, in certain instances even playing peacemaker by calming restless crowds gathered at the funerals of victims of political violence, and similarly Niki does not seem to differentiate between her affection for Viliki and Tjaart, the son of Stephanus Cronje. That she can look on both with equal fondness shows the extent to which her political outlook, if it can be called such, is deracialised to the degree that her natural instincts for love cannot distinguish between the two boys. Through Niki, for example, the author is engaged in the renunciation of constructions of race as the primary dialectic and dominant discourse of postcolonial South Africa. As the late Zimbabwean writer Yvonne Vera asks in the title to one of her novels, Mda also figuratively poses the question: Why don't we carve other animals?

Mda, as an illustration of Cooper's formulation – that "the mysterious, sensuous unknown and unknowable are not in the subtext, as in realist

writing, but rather share the fictional space with history” – as referred to above, has always insisted on the presence of magic in everyday life. In an interview with Elly Williams for ‘The Missouri Review’ he makes the point that:

[T]he sources of my magic realism – if you can call it that – are really in the traditional literatures of the various peoples of southern Africa. In our oral traditions the world of the supernatural and that of objective reality exist side by side in the same context. You do not find a line of demarcation between what in the west is called magic and what is empirical reality.
(Williams 2005:71)

Mda’s sentiments here are important in manifold ways, two of which I deal with here. The first consideration is that Mda reaffirms views he has expressed elsewhere and which lie at the heart of critical thinking about magical realist art, and that is the inseparability of the realistic and the magical or fantastic. The unusual or “the unknown and unknowable” are a part of everyday existence and there is no hesitation when they are encountered, a case in point being Noria’s fifteen month pregnancy or Vutha’s “second coming”. To the Occidental mind, with its insistence on the rational and empirical, such events would be beyond credulity (and credibility) whereas to the non-West consciousness, as Mda portrays in life and art, these are perfectly acceptable episodes of the life process. The second consideration is the author’s acknowledgement of a shared history and mythology by various Southern African peoples. The effect of such a view is to affirm historical ties in the region that are not structured by European colonialism. In other words, Mda’s writing opens up an investigation into the ways different peoples on the subcontinent related to each other in precolonial times, and continue to relate in the postcolonial era. This kind of enquiry is pertinent because of misconceptions in

some quarters, influenced by some of the ideas of Hegel(1996) and Kant, in which African peoples only began to have a history and philosophy after the political act of colonisation. The result is that relations between some postcolonial nations are often structured according to the paradigms of a common colonial power rather than those of a common history and humanity. Mda at the same time also lifts his own art above a dichromatic frame of reference, in which a lot of the apartheid-era writing seems steeped, because of an apparent obsession with race, and begins to give it a global view and relevance. Commenting specifically on *Ways of Dying*, Mervis (1998:44) is of the view that:

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 their societies.

This also implies that individuals and communities have to structure new ways of narrating their singular and collective identities. An example of this expanded vision is that the freedom fighters in *The Madonna of Excelsior* adopt Shona songs from the liberation war in Zimbabwe (Rhodesia). In certain ways Mda is prefiguring and at the same time shaping and contributing to the growing debate on the African Renaissance, most recently mentioned in association with the incumbent South African president Thabo Mbeki.

By insisting on the self-narration of the individual, Zakes Mda also opens up space for the reconsideration of gendered constructions of individuals in society. Humour and pain are distinct sensations that lie at opposite emotional poles. The two selected texts by Mda use these, along with magical realist elements, as part of an overarching strategy

to pursue the deconstruction of postcolonial South African society with particular reference to the patriarchal structures of power that are inherently contradictory to the thesis and process of liberation, because with patriarchy in place, liberation is seen as little more than a ruse to substitute one dominant discourse for another. It is in this regard that the two texts carry their most potent message, that of allowing the individuals to define their own spaces, in effect to narrate their own senses of self. Tellingly, Noria and Niki ultimately eschew the materialistic life as espoused by Nefolovhodwe and Sekatle, for instance, choosing instead the humble humanism of Toloki and the recuperative qualities of nature respectively.

Mda's writing does not aspire to the status of metanarrative, true to the spirit of all magical realist writing, because this would be a subversion of the intrinsic principles that inform it. Rather it celebrates difference and hybridity, showing the limitlessness of the potential for interpretations of the individual subject and narrations of the self.

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