

# Things of Darkness: Character Construction in the Earlier Plays of Zakes Mda

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An important dialectic in western-based studies of African literature concerns the problem of the so-called weakness in character construction. The camps are divided but the two main opposing views, while they agree on the outcome, differ as to the reasons. The Albert Gérard (1971:111) camp would maintain that character depiction in African literature is defective in the main:

In tribal societies, little attention is paid to individual inwardness. A person's awareness of self is primarily as a member of a group, and not—as is the case in Western society—as an autonomous individual whose chief legitimate preoccupations are with his own personal identity, rights and privileges. This fundamental culture trait has many literary implications. Not only are African writers notoriously clumsy in the expression of strictly personal emotions such as love but also, more generally, their interests are ethical rather than psychological, and they are seldom able to present convincing individual characters. Their societal outlook drives them to turn character into type, so that the reader's response is one of moral edification rather than one of imaginative empathy.

Fanon (quoted in Bhabha 1994:110), on the other hand, attributes the state of the colonised person as one of 'absolute depersonalisation'. Bhabha (1994:114) in the same essay, discuss and attribute 'this colonial alienation of the person—this end of the "idea" of the individual' to the effects of colonialism. They all seem to agree then on the absence of a clearly defined sense of individual self in African society and consequently in African writing, whatever the causes.

On first reading Zakes Mda's plays, the initial impression would be that here is a perfect set of proofs for the above hypothesis and that all that remains to be done is to decide on the camp affiliation.

This view, however, proved to be wrong. Of course one is a product of one's history and one's culture, and Mda would surely be no exception. But there is definitely a deliberateness in his lack of 'individual inwardness' or 'awareness of self'. Not only does he share this trait with Brechtian theatrical technique. His focus on the

social and political requires a certain shying away from the individualistic. There is a weighting in favour of the ethical over the psychological, but the main reason is that the individual is not his subject: his subject is people in groups—society. Mda has taken every opportunity to avoid inwardness in his characters for fear of clouding the main purpose, i.e. the analysis of a society.

Mda's characters are without exception, types. One needs not go further than the *dramatis personae* to identify this pattern. He goes to great lengths not to name them. Even when he goes so far as to introduce a name, that very fact is highlighted by means of juxtaposition. Consequently, the name loses its impact as a means of identification. Generic names such as Man, Young Man, Old Man, Woman, Lady etc. abound and it is blatantly obvious that these characters are broadly representative of their types. The young man in 'The Hill' (TH), for example, is Everyman. Although it is set in Lesotho, this persona need not even be confined to Africa. He is typical of the young—innocent, idealistic and enthusiastic—and is specific in that he is desperately poor. The details of his existence are peripheral. The essence is universal—to the deprived. From a small rural village he must make his way in the world to help support his family—a tale told the world over. There is hardly a country that escapes the young's moving away from its countryside—young men in particular. Post-colonialist countries in particular seem susceptible to their young's moving to the cities, often due to poverty.

Although Mda sets up his characters as types, this does not preclude their individuality. While he observes generalised situations and conflicts, he engages his audience through the quirks and foibles of his individuals. Personally, Young Man exudes an innocent and touching trust in humanity. Things will come right because he has been told to have faith and he believes what he has been told. In the first part of the play he displays this naiveté with an assurance that is typical of the young. His reassurances, for example, to the Man (and, obliquely, to himself), are sprinkled with optimistic clichés:

We must retain our faith, child of my mother .... You need faith. I survive on faith. That is why I don't despair .... Faith can do anything. They teach us that it can move mountains .... We have retained our faith for two months, child of my mother. We must not lose it now. They promised me at the NRC that things will be right soon. I shall see them on Monday (TH 82f).

This is the view expressed even in the face of being fobbed off by the NRC for two months and being ignored by the Nun (symbolising religion and the church).

His enthusiasm is unquenchable and he looks forward to his life on the mines despite warnings from Man and Veteran. 'I am ahead—reaching for success' (TH 83)

he says and will not be deterred by the Man at his lack of experience. He looks for the positive and focuses on it. 'I have not served them [the mines] yet, but I am young and strong. And I don't have tax arrears' (TH 84).

Even when Mda becomes a little more specific, his characters are still broadly general representations. The Lady and the Woman in 'And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses' (GSD), apart from representing prostitutes and housewives respectively, are defined by their names. The Lady attests by her name to the importance she needs to place on her appearance but she also serves as an example of pre-feminist concerns. Feminists disapprove of the term Lady as biased and judgmental but its role here is ironically reversed. She is anything but a lady in the colonial sense of the word. She is described in the stage directions as

... a bit overdressed, albeit in the latest fashion. One can see that there was a conscious effort on her part to make herself appear chic and sexy. Her mannerisms are of a sophisticated woman of the world, but of course, at the end of it all she appears pretentious—even ridiculous (GSD 4).

She wears make-up, she tells us, because most people do—"to improve their looks" (GSD 8). But hers is applied thickly in order to cover-up bad skin. However, the end result is to make her look like a whore. The Woman's dowdiness and her initial appearance of subservience are not incongruous. Of course, she is only a maid and of course, she is exploited sexually by her employer only to be deserted. Of course, she must resort to domestic work to survive—isn't that the lot of a woman? But then, when she turns to political rhetoric and trade unionism we are not surprised—especially when we consider the political correctness of her name.

Other characters are defined by their occupations. We are not in the dark on what to expect from characters who rejoice in designations such as Banker, Businessman, Sergeant, Ofisiri (Officer), Farmer, Labourer, the Nun, the Veteran, Soldier One and Two, not to mention Mourners, Interrogators and Wedding Guests. The stereotypical pictures we are able to call up at the mention of these names are important. They need to be stereotypical because Mda is commenting, as we have seen, on their roles in society. The petty bourgeois servant in the form of Ofisiri in 'We shall Sing for the Fatherland' (WSF) is prepared to exploit his inferiors in the way he has learned by experience. His feelings about the bribery by the hoboes seem quite ambivalent and he has no qualms about raising the price of the bribe from twenty cents to fifty cents in one week. Having got them to give him the required amount he allows them to stay in the park with surely the most understated cynicism: 'Ofisiri (taking the coin): Well, I'll have to leave you. At least you haven't littered the place' (WSF 31). He understands well that he must retain the upper hand despite having been 'only an upstart

trooper' (WSF 32) to Sergeant's NCO status. When he fails to do this at the end of the play he is relegated to the role of prison warden supervising prisoners digging graves because the hoboes froze to death on his beat—surely harsh punishment by his superiors for something not exactly in his control.

Our initial expectations of Banker and Businessman, two cronies in the same play, are modified when we discover that Banker is white in this ambiguous African country ten years after independence. The question is immediately raised as to why this banker is white and not black, especially in view of the power he claims and the control he has, not only over individuals but the running of the country. Despite Businessman's obvious prosperity, his success is suspect and begins to seem hollow when we discover that he, representative of the commercial success of the formerly colonised, is a mere puppet, still under the control of outside (i.e. foreign) and most likely western and white influence. Initially one would be inclined to sympathise with him but the scenario is not so simple and this by virtue of the fact that Mda gives him a name. He is called Mr. Mafutha by the hoboes—meaning 'Mr. Fat' in Sesotho. Allied with the other 'fat ones' (WSF 44) of Maseru West, he has obviously achieved his position at the expense of others in this capitalist society. The huge divergence between his lifestyle and that of the two hoboes as well as his deliberate snubbing them is adequate evidence.

That the two hoboes have names too also serves to foreground their plight. To be called Sergeant-Major ten years after the Wars of Freedom and to be still dressed in army uniform (notably tattered ones) has a two-fold effect. The audience is constantly reminded that they once had status and social function during the war but that these are now robbed of meaning by the total indifference displayed by the other characters. None of the other characters address them by name nor is there any reference by anyone to their military record. Their personal risk for their country's freedom has dwindled into insignificance and, more insidiously, the tattered uniforms seem to suggest that the ideals of revolution have fallen by the wayside.

Janabari (a corruption of January) is merely a joke name and so therefore no name at all. He doesn't even have the dignity of a designation such as Veteran or Soldier, nor even a general name such as Man or Young Man. His name isn't a person's name and it isn't even pronounced properly—he is nothing in the eyes of society. The only affirmation of his existence is his relationship with Sergeant and it is a warm one. Their good humoured banter is comradely and Sergeant, at one stage, calls him Janie—thus attesting to his humanness and personal right to compassion.

Charley and Tseli in 'Dead End' (DE) appear to have definitive names, but when one considers the pronunciation of Tseli one realises that there is some ambivalence in them. The first two letters in Tseli are pronounced in a similar way to the English 'ch' and so their names are almost identical thus blurring their identities as

individuals. The most individual of all Mda's main characters, they are, nonetheless, approaching anonymity by this phonetic manipulation. Similarly, in 'Joys of War', the child, Nana, appears to have a name, but when it is put alongside her grandmother's and father's names—Mama and Papa—we realise once again that they are, at best, generic. Although Nana is a real name it has a childlike ring, and the character becomes representative of the plight of children and childhood in rural South Africa. Her individuality is thus negated alongside the other two.

When characters address each other, Mda neatly side-steps the problem in many ways. In 'Dark Voices Ring' (DVR) the Man calls the Woman 'mama' or 'ma' while she calls him 'child'—not unusual practice in black South African society. In 'The Road' (TR), Labourer and Farmer call each other nothing throughout the play except for the *Jim/bwana* interlude. In 'Joys of War', Mama and Nana call each other those names, while the two soldiers use 'pally' or 'mate' when addressing one another—most of the time they don't call each other anything. In 'The Hill', Man and Young Man constantly use the phrase 'child of my mother' which has a two-fold effect. On the one hand it establishes a comradeship between them and suggests a fraternal caring relationship while on the other hand its irony is underlined when, in the end, an 'every man for himself' attitude towards the NRC contract supplants all other considerations. Similarly, in 'And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses', the Lady calls the Woman 'sister woman' and invites her to reciprocate. She says she learned it from American tourists which suggests a tenuous sophistication through a brush with the exotic. Initially, it is simply a convenient tag but by the end of the play it has come to suggest an aspiration towards a feminist autonomy as well as an acceptance of mutual dependency.

The only individual names that Mda allows are for off stage characters or for whites. It does not matter that off stage characters may acquire individuality in this way as they have no autonomy in the action of the play or in the minds of the audience. Dr. Zuma, the *sangoma* in 'Dead End', needs his name to conjure up his Zulu cultural 'otherness', thus setting up a confidence, in the minds of the audience, in his medicinal powers. In the end, neither Charley nor the audience is clear about the culpability for Tseli's tragic situation. Is she dying because of Frikkie's blow to her stomach or from Dr. Zuma's medicine that Charley has insisted on her taking?

Nontobeko, the dead baby, needs her name to emphasise her reality in her mother's eyes. It is ironic that Nontobeko, the character in 'Dark Voices Ring' who only exists in her mother's imagination, has a name while the others do not. Labourer's wife, Lucy, in 'The Road', needs her name to confirm the duplicity of her position as Farmer's mistress, while Young Man's sister, Ntati, in 'The Hill', needs her name to allow him to focus on his personal despair at his beloved sister's degradation as a shebeen owner.

It is significant that all the whites both on or off stage, with the exception of Banker, have names and are all Afrikaans. Without their names, their nationalities would be ambiguous so it becomes strikingly obvious that Mda means to emphasise their Afrikanerness. Banker may be any of the former European colonists (i.e. English, Dutch, French, Portuguese, German as well as Afrikaans) and so it is important that he has no name if his universality is to be maintained. But Frikkie du Toit and the Koornhofs (DE), Baas Jan van Wyk (DVR), Johannes Koekemoer and his wife Maria as well as his dastardly foreman Boetie van Rensburg (TR) are all unequivocally Afrikaans. The ruling Nationalist Party in South Africa—the creator of the Apartheid system—was originally exclusively Afrikaner-supported and latterly largely so. Mda seems to be placing the responsibility for exploitation and oppression squarely in their hands.

It is interesting to note further significances in the Afrikaner names in 'The Road'. Boetie van Rensburg is held in extreme contempt by Farmer, not alone for the seduction of his wife but for the fact that he had 'this imbecile habit of sitting with the Bantu labourers in their hovels, drinking their miasmatic beer, and sleeping with their women' (TR 129)—indeed 'a disgrace to the Afrikaner race' (TR 129). The word, boetie, is thus ironic when we note where van Rensburg's allegiances lie but it is even more ironic that Farmer is completely oblivious of any significance in this name and the insult he hurls at Labourer before he realises his blackness—'You Kafferboetie you!' (TR 127) intensifies the dichotomy of his position and the ambiguity of his name.

Finally, during the historical re-enactment scene in the same play, Farmer sees fit to rename both himself and the Labourer. He rudely elects to call the Labourer Jim—a name associated in literature with slavery—because Labourer must act as his slave bearer/guide. (One of the reasons for the Great Trek in 1836 and the opening up by whites of the hinterland of South Africa and the establishment of the two Afrikaner republics was the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1834.) Farmer prefers to be called bwana, a Swahili word meaning master or sir, and consequently foreign to South Africa—thus boosting his status in his own eyes by its exoticism but also serving to emphasise his foreignness and thus his alien position.

The named characters are referred to many times during the course of the plays thus affirming the importance of the names.

An easy conclusion on Mda's characterisation would be that there is a lack of individuality or even humanness. One would be tempted to see the characters, because they are ideological vehicles, as lacking humanness due to their typographical nature. But this very notion is a contradiction because of what they represent. In depicting the plight of a particular group of people in a particular society, Mda is, in fact, stressing their humanness because the problems they illustrate are human ones. All his political

and social concerns have a direct bearing on what is fundamental to all humans i.e. their quality of life. To be black in a white or formerly white-controlled country must cause one, perforce, to focus on one's inferior position in that society and to become conscious of a selfhood as defined by nationalism, racism and, ultimately, a sense of blackness (as a positive affirmation). In addition, Mda presents his audience with plays that are peopled by engaging characters, however representative they are meant to be. While we must surely take Tseli's side in 'Dead End' we do not altogether condemn Charley. His irrepressible wit touches us as much as Tseli's predicament. Although 'Dark Voices Ring' is largely didactic, it ensures—through the Woman—that the audience cares about the outcome. Her acute sufferings at the loss of her beloved child balance the blind selfishness of the Old Man's former position as *induna*. Mda manipulates the audience's emotional response by simultaneously encouraging its concern and forcing it to judge.

Sergeant and Janabari are, perhaps, the most human (and consequently loveable) of all the characters concerned here. In 'We Shall Sing for the Fatherland' their good natured humour and care for each other cannot fail to stimulate the audience's sense of altruism. Their warmth of character, displayed mostly towards each other, but also in their courtesy towards and Sergeant's excuses for the other characters, is juxtaposed by the unremitting coldness they encounter. The other characters are deliberately two-dimensional (with perhaps the exception of Ofisiri), which also serves to highlight their humanity.

Straight didacticism in 'The Hill' is softened largely by Young Man. His unflinching optimism in the face of constant evidence to the contrary emphasises the human predicament of both the present and the future. 'The Road' might also remain within the realms of didacticism but for the link between the two men in the form of Lucy, the wife/mistress. Labourer's hatred for Farmer then becomes personal as well as ideological. Both judgement and emotion are called on and the audience's concern for the outcome is not merely academic.

In 'And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses', both the Woman and the Lady strive for a certain dignity despite the abjectness of their positions. The Lady keeps up appearances literally despite having nothing in the world but the R10 for a bag of rice. The Woman quietly and patiently assists the Lady in joining her in a growing sense of autonomy and they face the future together, no longer victims but agents. This is, perhaps, the least engaging of the plays and may be due to some rather heavy didacticism in parts. But it is relieved in most part by the humanity of the Lady.

In 'Joys of War', the obvious judgement with regard to engagement would be on behalf of Mama and Nana. An old woman and a child would be the obvious focus for the audience's concern, but the two soldiers, while articulating the case for and the lot of an armed rebellion, are far more convincing as points of argument because of

their all too human backgrounds. The audience does not question their right to arms—their humanity has already convinced.

Wilson and Thompson (1975) discuss nationalism in South Africa or indeed the lack of a sense of nationalism. They argue that, because of its multicultural and multilingual diaspora—whether it be white (not united in one group) or the multifarious black groups (divided linguistically and culturally)—there is a distinct lack of syncretism in the South African concept of nationalism:

The concept of nationalism is reserved for movements of national consciousness and organisation among all the African peoples of South Africa. Its basis is thus a perception of a common racial identity, a shared historical experience of subordination, and a common civic status in South African society. There is neither a common traditional language nor common traditional culture, and the common territory is that established by the incorporation of the various African groups into the union of South Africa (Wilson & Thompson 1975:425).

This is the reason why Mda is careful not to focus on a sense of nationalism. True, two of his plays are set in Lesotho and deal with problems particular to that country, but it is obvious that his concerns are with southern Africa as a whole throughout all his plays. He says as much in 'And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses' when Woman tells the Lady:

One day it's going to dawn on you, and on the rest of the others who think like you, that this struggle is not just South African. It is Southern African (GSD 26).

Indeed, this attitude would be wholly in keeping with ANC policy (which is based on class), illustrated, as we have seen, in 'We shall Sing for the Fatherland' (socialism being favoured over capitalism).

Instead of focusing on nationalism or tribalism, Mda points up racism and investigates blackness (either negatively in the form of 'othering' or positively in the form of a sense of selfhood). While racism in itself may be viewed thematically, Mda has his characters embody and express a sense of what it means to be a black person. All of the plays, with the exception of 'We shall Sing for the Fatherland' are illustrative.

Frikkie, in 'Dead End', knows that he can count on a system based on racism when he is able to transfer the responsibility of Tseli's impending death to Charley. Charley explains to God:

And there is Frikkie, arms akimbo, with a big grin hollering to the police 'Vang 'om. What are you waiting for? I will report you to the big baas at the station' (DE 20).

Frikkie expresses an almost axiomatic confidence through his physical attitude—his ‘arms akimbo’ and his ‘big grin’ express his sense of racial superiority knowing that the ‘big baas’ will experience no qualms when it comes to taking sides. White will side with white regardless of the facts of the case and Charley understands this. ‘You see, he was in the right .... He was white’ (DE 20), he says, not questioning the validity of the statement. He does not refute the concept in any way. To him, people are defined by colour and he seems to accept this as a fact—unpalatable but incontrovertible. God must have a colour too and he pursues the point despite the denial.

The Woman and Old Man in ‘Dark Voices Ring’ embody the subservient attitude of an oppressed people towards their oppressors. Unable to detect until the last that all their misfortune is as a direct result of the power wielded on racist terms, the Woman is only able to focus on the ‘prestige’ enjoyed by Nontobeko for having been ‘[t]he only child on the farm, from the beginning of time, to have been born in the huis of the master’ (DVR 56). Racism, in this play, is taken an insidious step further when the Old Man, encouraged by van Wyk and the warder, who are drinking brandy on the stoep of the house, wields his whip all the more:

... when the prisoners winced with pain they went into a great frenzy and pride swelled in the chest of the Old Man. He had the prisoners in his hands—more power than he had ever had before—and he was enjoying it (DVR 62).

The Old Man has collaborated with the warders and has thus become one of them. His punishment in the form of his daughter’s death, though harsh, is appropriate. His toadying has backfired. The civil servants, castigated by the Man ‘who carry out the repressive laws’ (DVR 64) later in the play, are adumbrations of the Old Man. He personifies what they are and what will happen to them.

‘The Road’, because its main theme is Apartheid, is suffused with racism, and the two characters are representative of the black and white races in South Africa. Although the entire play is allegorical, the two characters are more subtly so. Farmer represents the extreme right wing white Afrikaans Nationalist Government supporter. He is unequivocally racist. His speech, attitudes and demeanour all proclaim him to be so. His conversation is peppered with reference to colour. Initially he claims that he likes blacks when challenged by Labourer—‘I have known some of the finest blacks in my life’ (TR 125)—and admits to having a black mistress, but he is outraged when he ‘discovers’ that Labourer is actually black and that he has unwittingly shared the shade of the same tree with him. From this moment on, he unbridles all his racialistic animosity and is seen as an extreme example of a white supremacist. His distaste of Labourer’s colour is all the more irrational and ludicrous in that he hasn’t recognised it until this moment and it highlights the irrationality of his immediate assumption of

an attitude of unquestioned superiority and arrogance. He immediately assumes the role of master and begins dictating the terms of that relationship.

Labourer, also representative, is more subtly drawn. His role is two-fold. Representative of the black race in general, he is, nevertheless, a 'foreign' black from Lesotho. Ostensibly not used to racist treatment, he has none of the imposed humility expected of the oppressed. He expresses the selfhood of a person devoid of a sense of race/colour and is understandably baffled by Farmer's change of attitude after the colour recognition scene. When he assumes the role of 'Jim' the slave/bearer his attitude changes to one of obsequiousness and he gives an impression of the way Farmer believes blacks should behave. As a foreign black unused to racism he shows how blacks should behave whereas as Jim he behaves as blacks are forced to do in a racist society. Therefore the characterisation in 'The Road' is complex and made all the more so by its quasi simplicity. Labourer represents not only the black point of view of Apartheid, but the view of the outsider of any colour. Farmer, because he is almost a caricature in his extreme behaviour, satirises racialism.

In balance with these broader focuses, Mda then zones in on the notion of black selfhood and explores and develops this area of the human psyche. Chinua Achebe (1966:135) maintains that:

[w]ithout subscribing to the view that Africa gained nothing at all in her long encounter with Europe, one can still say, in all fairness, that she suffered many terrible and lasting misfortunes. In terms of human dignity and human relations the encounter was almost a complete disaster for the black races. It has warped the mental attitudes of both black and white. In giving expression to the plight of their people, black writers have shown again and again how strongly this traumatic experience can possess the sensibility.

Mda's characters, both black and white, all reveal themselves to be products of this disaster. Fanon goes on to define these mental stances and, as far as the colonising whites are concerned, has discerned an overall patronising attitude: 'A white man addressing a Negro behaves exactly like an adult with a child and starts smirking, whispering, patronising, cozening' (Fanon 1968:31). He goes on to quote O. Mannoni:

What the colonial in common with Prospero lacks is awareness of the world of Others, a world in which Others have to be respected. This is the world from which the colonial has fled because he cannot accept men as they are. Rejection of that world is combined with an urge to dominate, an urge which is infantile in origin and which social adaptation has failed to discipline (Fanon 1968:108).

Frikkie du Toit, Jan van Wyk, Johannes Koekemoer, even the Koornhofs, all display the need to dominate. None of them is able to live in harmony with their black

colleagues; instead, all of them observe a distance and maintain a sense of Otherness. Banker is an especially good example of what Fanon is describing. Ten years after independence he is as patronising as it is possible to be. His false bonhomie is given the lie when he makes it very plain who is in charge. Businessman will only gain his position because Banker has had to threaten his customers and he pooh-poohs Businessman's concerns about trouble from white quarters: 'If you do your job well how can they cause trouble for you? The only thing you have to do is to listen to our advice' (WSF). The message is clear: according to Banker, Businessman cannot act on his own initiative—indeed, can he act at all? And Businessman accepts it.

Most people would agree that a sense of the Other is necessary in order to define oneself. What one is not helps to affirm what one is. Bhabha (1994:117), in analysing Fanon's concept of black identity, argues that there are 'three conditions that underlie an understanding of the process of identification in the analytic of desire'. These may be summarised as, firstly: 'to exist is to be called into being in relation to an Otherness'; secondly, a 'space of splitting' i.e. a desire to have the advantages of Others but at the same time maintaining one's own position; and thirdly, identification and transformation by the assumption of an image (Fanon 1994:117).

Bhabha (1994:118) goes on to refute Fanon's assumptions based on the above, and asserts that:

[t]he Other must be seen as the necessary negation of a primordial identity—cultural or psychic—that introduces the system of differentiation (118).

Said (1978:54) developed this concept in terms of the colonial milieu when he explained:

... this universal practice of designating in one's mind a familiar space which is 'ours' and an unfamiliar space beyond 'ours' which is 'theirs' as a way of making geographical distinctions that can be entirely arbitrary. I use the word 'arbitrary' here because imaginative geography of the 'our land—barbarian land' variety does not require that the barbarians acknowledge the distinction. It is enough for 'us' to set up these boundaries in our own minds; 'they' become 'they' accordingly, and both their territory and mentality are designated as different from 'ours'.

This type of mental distancing is clearly seen in the attitudes of the whites in Mda's plays. In 'Dead End', having replaced Tseli's African name with a more acceptable 'white' one, the Koornhofs are constantly 'othering' her: 'What's wrong with you Bantu girls .... You are dirty .... And cut those damn long black nails' (DE 7). Even Mr. Koornhof's sexual innuendo is done at a condescending distance: 'Anna, you are *quite* a nice kaffir maid' (DE 7,e.a.).

The Old Man in 'Dark Voices Ring' is called 'my faithful induna' (DVR 55) by van Wyk—rather like a pet dog that is owned by a more evolved being. The imaginary phone call by the Man underlines this dominance which insists that any events in the Others' lives must be of lesser importance than that of their 'superiors':

Man: (dials on an imaginary phone) Hello. I am Kaptein's wife. [She is alone and in labour.] Yes, baasie, the wife of the faithful induna. May I make an appointment with him for five o'clock? Tomorrow afternoon, yes .... Well, baasie, I would like to discuss with him family affairs .... Pains in my stomach (DVR 56).

In everything he utters in his short scene, Banker in 'We shall Sing for the Fatherland' epitomises all that colonialism and, more insidiously, post-colonialism is. This probably culminates in the damning statement: 'I met your Ministers about this'. [Note it is 'your' Ministers and not 'our', considering that they are living in the same country.] They too are quite clear about this. They know that without us they wouldn't be where they are now' (WSF). The pronouns say it all. And, of course, everything that Farmer in 'The Road' does and says, is a re-iteration and confirmation of Said's assertions.

The natural result of this sort of Othering is the development of a national or racial sense of inferiority. According to Fanon (1968:93):

[i]n South Africa there are two million whites against almost thirteen million native people [in 1967], and it has never occurred to a single black to consider himself superior to any member of the white minority.

Perhaps, this is an over simplification and not altogether true, especially in the 1960s, but the point is made. Manganyi (1985:156) investigates this aspect of colonialism from a psychiatric perspective, concluding that:

[t]he fixity of the representation of the Other (blackness) which race science places before our eyes pronounces the genetic inferiority of blacks particularly with regard to intelligence'.

Though all the characters adopt an inferior attitude in their dealings with whites, it is perhaps the Lady who symbolises this state of being. Thankfully a practice now going out of fashion, the Lady has ruined her skin with skin lightening creams:

Lady: ... You remember the skin lightening creams we used, eh?

Woman: Very well. Ambi Extra, Artra ....

Lady: Super Rose and all the rest. When we were girls we used them, 'cause we wanted to be white. We bloody hated ourselves, so we used them. They've got some-

thing called hydroquinone in them, but we didn't know it then. All we wanted was to have white skins. Hydroquinone, sister woman, it destroys the skin (GSD 8).

This symbolises perhaps the most profound effect of racial oppression—an attempt to change the unchangeable. As Fanon (1968:98) expresses it:

I begin to suffer from not being a white man to the degree that the white man imposes discrimination on me, makes me a colonised native, robs me of all worth, all individuality, tells me that I am a parasite on the world, that I must bring myself as quickly as possible into step with the white world .... Then I will simply try to make myself white: that is, I will compel the white man to acknowledge that I am human.

It is not sufficient either to

return, after the catastrophe of colonialism, to an unsullied indigenous cultural tradition, as in various forms of cultural nationalism (Williams & Chrisman 1993:14).

As the Woman in 'And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses' says:

It is now time for us to change things. To liberate not only ourselves, but the men themselves, for we are all in bondage! Yes, the men in this free and independent country are in bondage, mostly to their attitudes. That is why you see them sitting back and swimming in the glories of the past (GSD 27).

Chinweizu et al. (1983: 257f) understand fully the need that this sort of historic romanticism satisfies but they repudiate it too:

It was an understandably extreme reaction, offering blanket praise in retort to Europe's blanket condemnation of Africa. But that mythical portrait of traditional Africa can prove to be a new prison. In the task of decolonisation we cannot afford an uncritical glorification of the past. We may brandish our memories of empires of ages ago as shields against Western disparagement but we also know that before colonialism came there was slavery. Who hunted the slaves? And who sold them for guns, trinkets and gin? And the African attitudes and roles which made that slave trade possible, are they not part of that nostalgic past? Are those attitudes not still with us, poisoning our present? How much of this illusion of purity and sanctity can survive the events of the past decade? After all, 'When a nigger kicks a nigger/Where is the negritude?' (Madubuike). Even though other parts of the blame lie elsewhere, we cannot deny our own share of the responsibility.

Mda sees the need for blacks to seize agency and develop a positive sense of blackness. In 'And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses', as has already been seen, the

two women have personified the endemic sense of black inferiority by their attempts at whitening their skin. Typically, as women, they also display the prevalence of defining themselves through men. The Lady makes her living by whoring after a failed marriage while the Woman has been a housemaid for a man and then a mistress. In both cases their salvation has been seen in terms of a man. Marriage, at best, or some sexual relationship with a man is their insurance for the future—and they do not question this. Even the office girls, we are told, have to ‘lay some dirty old man to get a promotion’ (GSD 19). However, Mda takes this feminist issue and extends it in a racial sense. Both women have battened on a man (the same one coincidentally) but, in their case, he is white—and not only white but European. As a European, his allegiance is not with Africa, and, when times get tough, he has a natural leaning towards Europe—an escape from Lesotho for the two women or from Africa when viewed in broader focus. They are not alone. The Lady tells us of the many of her profession who have succeeded in securing just this kind of insurance:

There are many of us who are married all over Europe .... The women now lead respectable lives as housewives. Others have forged careers for themselves. Only a few days ago I met one of my old colleagues. She is visiting home, you know, from Switzerland where she has a successful marriage and a successful career as a singer. She sings gospel music all over the place. Sometimes she gets invited to sing in anti-apartheid rallies all over Europe. You can't get more respectable than that (GSD 21).

Note how the marriage is equated with the career and viewed as success—there is no reference to emotional fulfilment. This is business and success and can only be achieved through a foreign man.

However, by the end of the play, the two women have rationalised their attitudes and consequently their position. They take agency. The Woman, it transpires, has already done this through her trade union involvement but the Lady eventually shows that she, too, has become empowered through the help of the Woman. She says:

When the revolution comes I want to carry a gun. I don't sit in the sidelines and darn socks for soldiers (GSD 33).

The Woman replies:

You don't wait for a revolution. You make it happen.

Lady (carried away): No, I don't sit on the sidelines and sing songs and ululate with melilietane to make the blood of men boil so that they may bravely march into battle. I carry the gun. I march into battle.

Woman: There is hope for all of us yet (GSD 33f).

They have renounced their dependence on men, and, by inference, European men, and resolve to control and direct their own lives in their own country—Lesotho. This signals positive, affirmative action by women.

A sense of agency then, according to Mda, whether it be as a woman or as a black person is essential if one is to retain any sense of hope for the future. Mda's attitude to Negritude however seems to be ambivalent. Senghor, who claims, along with Aime Césaire, the honour of launching the concept of Negritude is quoted by J.M. Ita (1968:118) as saying:

To launch an effective revolution, our revolution, we had to discard our borrowed garments—those of assimilation—and affirm an existence, that is to say, our Negritude. However, Negritude, even defined as the 'cultural values of Black Africa' could offer us but a beginning of the solution to our problem, not the solution itself.

Others, like Mphahlele, would disagree, seeing Negritude as confirming or even categorising an affirmation or intensification of Otherness. He argues that because of the magnitude of the continent of Africa and because of the multiplicity of her peoples, there cannot be a single definable concept. Initially, when the idea of Negritude was first mooted,

... this idea of an African personality took on a palpable shape: something that could express the longings and ambitions, aches and torments, the anger and hunger of our people and shout them out to the outside world (Mphahlele 1962:19).

However, on analysing the concept he finds that, as far as cultural activities are concerned—the arts in particular for example:

... the only culture worth exhibiting [by the proponents of Negritude] was traditional or indigenous. And so they concentrated on countries where interaction of streams of consciousness between black and white has not taken place to any significant or obvious degree, or doesn't so much as touch the cultural subsoil (Mphahlele 1962:27).

This seems to be Mda's attitude. While lamenting the sense of inferiority ingrained in most blacks due to the ravages of colonisation he does not seem to be embracing an attitude of black for black sake—rather an empowering of the person, whatever the colour, gender or politics. As Fanon (1968:8) says: 'To us, the man who adores the Negro is as "sick" as the man who abominates him'. Chinweizu et al. would seem to be in confirmation with this notion. While agreeing only partly with Mphahlele they also, like Mda, denigrate a vague and romanticised harking back to the past, but applaud and embrace those aspects of Negritude which raise an African nationalist

consciousness and the recapturing and development of African literary traditions within the modern African literary canon.

For too long has the African voice been either silent or ignored. As Said (1985) says:

The challenge to Orientalism and the colonial era of which it was so organically a part was a challenge to the muteness imposed upon the Orient as object .... The Orient was ... not Europe's interlocutor, but its silent Other.

Mda's characters are not mute, and by their universality discourage muteness in anyone with any sense of identification with them.

Many writers have emphasised the importance of group identification in the African psyche and writers as diverse as Charles A. Larson and Senghor attest to the difference between the African and the Western concept of the world in other ways. Senghor (1993:30) asserts that:

the African ... conceives the world, beyond the diversity of its forms, as a fundamentally mobile, yet unique reality that seeks synthesis.

He goes on to explain that what matter for the African,

... is only a system of signs which translates the single reality of the universe being, which is spirit, which is life force (Senghor 1993:30).

And again:

As far as African ontology is concerned, too, there is no such thing as dead matter: every being, everything—be it only a grain of sand—radiates a life force, a sort of wave particle; and sages, priests, kings, doctors and artists all use it to help bring the universe to its fulfillment (Senghor 1993:31).

Larson, twenty years earlier, developed this concept in the difference between African and Western ideas on death for instance. In Western culture, once a person dies he is virtually forgotten but for the African,

the dead are not dead but alive in the trees, the water, the fire ... In Africa the dead cannot be forgotten: they control the destinies of those who are still alive (Larson 1973:469).

As far as nature is concerned:

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The African does not think that nature is something he is separate from: for the African there is no ontological gap. He is every bit as much a part of the natural world as his environment is part of him (Larson 1973:469).

In his plays it would seem that Mda displays these ontological concepts, not because they are an intrinsic part of him (which they may well be and therefore he is unable to act differently) but apparently deliberately as part of his individual creative process. 'The conceptualisation of "race", ethnicity and ethnic identity is a major concern both within and alongside post-colonial theory', according to Williams and Chrisman (1993:17). Even so, they also decry the fact that ethnicity should be associated exclusively with people of colour. Black South Africans are what they are now, not what they were and their attitude to what they are now will determine what they might be in the future. In South African terms, however, it seems that the emergence of a positive black sense of self, a sense of black identification and subjectification is essential before there can emerge an all-South African psyche and consequently a real all-South African selfhood.

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