

Book Reviews

Literature and transformation

The Heart of Redness

by Zakes Mda

Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 320 pp.

ISBN: 0-19-571477-6

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They had often discussed prejudice and the dangers of generalising about a people (Mda 2000:191).

Apart from his other artistic talents, Zakes Mda has published three novels within five years. *Ways of Dying* (1995) focused on South Africa during the transitional periods of 1990 – 1991, and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995) explored political instability, social injustice and corruption, cultural changes and dysfunctional families. The latter also powerfully highlights the determining effects of the Lesotho landscape and harsh weather on social life and developmental progress. *The Heart of Redness* relates the story of Nongqawuse, the 19th century prophetess who convinced the Qorlasha Xhosa people that they should drive all the white people to the sea and destroy all livestock and crops so that a new Eastern Cape would arise. This, she claimed, was her prophetic message from the ancestors. Drawing extensively on the work of historians, Mda focuses on the effect of this vain prophecy, the conflict amongst the influential families, and how the traumas of the past reverberate in the present.

In *Ways of Dying* Mda foregrounds black on black violence – Hostel dwellers against Township people – and the material poverty and imaginative richness of those living in informal settlements. The love triangle between Toloki, Noria and Jwara highlights the rural community life versus the slum capitalistic town life of the big South African city. All of this coming to a point in the criticisms of the

failings of the government of the day in South Africa. In *She Plays with the Darkness* he incorporates the instability of the Lesotho government, the role of the monarchy and the corruption of civil society. The love triangle of Radisene, Tampololo and Troopet Motsali spans the urban lowlands and the rural mountain lands, shaped by the dependency of Lesotho on both South Africa and the weather for social development and daily life. It is here that Radisene laments:

We live in an age when a woman can do no wrong. When things go badly in a relationship people automatically take her side. She is the innocent party. Its payback time for all the centuries of oppression women have suffered. A woman is no longer a human being with human flaws (Mda 1995:194).

British colonialism and the effects of its control in the Eastern Cape are explored through the lives of the influential families of Twin and Twin Twin.

Mda's experience of exile is reflected in *The Heart of Redness* when the protagonist Camegu reflects his experiences as an ex-exile, spiraling into disenchantment as he lobbies endlessly for jobs he is qualified for. *The Heart of Redness* accuses the post-apartheid government of distributing job opportunities according to those who are, according to its own criteria, believers and those who are non-believers. This is the pastness of the present and the presence of the present in the past that Mda recovers in the story of Nongqawuse. In many ways *The Heart of Redness* is a text preoccupied with women and representations of women, and the theme of gender is articulated with issues of class and race. Mda resurrects the legendary status of mountain Women, and the Caves of the Barwa and Zim 'for whom the living slaughter animals so that he may communicate their message to Qamata' (Mda 2000:315).

On a note of criticism, one wonders if all urbanised Africans are as alienated as Mda suggests. There is also an unsettling sentimental aura around female characters as Mda's heroines are musical dreamers, dancers, and singers; earthy and supernatural. In *The Heart of Redness* the educated woman Mitsi is brought to earth by ancestral intervention, and female empowerment is represented by a chieftainess who is addressed as 'Father'. These representations of black female characters contrast unfavourably with those of, for example, Sembéne Ousmane who has given women leading roles in his narratives of the struggle against oppression. Gender stereotyping is accompanied by a racialised sentimentality about land as blacks are, once again, sons of the soil able to draw on the limitless powers of autochthony. But this exclusivity may be negotiable, as the character John Dalton (married to an Afrikaner) remonstrates to his English liberal friends on the subject of

'Everyone is leaving':

'I'm staying here,' says Dalton. 'I am not joining your chicken run. This is my land. I belong here. It is the land of my forefathers.'

'That is self-delusion, John,' warns the first emigrant.

Dalton is now getting angry. Against his better judgement he raises his voice and says, 'The Afrikaner is more reliable than you chaps, he belongs to the soil. He is of Africa. Even if he is not happy about the present situation he will not go anywhere. He cannot go anywhere' (Mda 2000:160).

Is this romanticisation endorsed by Mda? The multiple levels of *The Heart of Redness* do not offer any solutions or easy answers. But what is consistently opposed to colonialism in its past or present forms is a faith, despite the formidable obstacles, in the creative power of grass-roots organisation and an unwavering commitment to the future of South Africa.

So far Mda has produced a significant trilogy of political novels aiming to comprehend the present with the help of the past, interweaving anecdotal episode and epic narrative. Like Tutuola, he is an inspired storyteller who remodels traditional narrative techniques and goes on to ground them in specific areas and definite political and cultural issues. If the element of 'magic realism' is a striking feature of these texts then so too is a complex social realism. In this sense Mda contributes to the development of a committed African literature as described by Chidi Amuta (1989:8): 'Literature is in addition one (only one) of the instruments for the sharpening and mobilisation of social consciousness in pursuit or negation of qualitative change, an instrument for the preservation or subversion of the existing order'.

References

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