Zakes Mda: Towards a new ontology of postcolonial vision?

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Abstract
Zakes Mda — novelist, playwright, painter and musician of the ‘new’ South Africa — started his career as a writer working in theatre-for-development with the Maratholi Travelling Theatre in Lesotho in 1985. Since then, Mda has written numerous plays which incorporate popular indigenous modes of performance to educate his audience for democracy. With the ending of apartheid in South Africa in 1994, creative writers transferred their energies from themes of resistance and struggle to issues of reconciliation in a newly democratic nation. They were, in Njabulo Ndebele’s terms, free now to ‘rediscover the ordinary’. Mda responded by moving to novel writing, finding in this fictional genre a new narrative freedom. Over the last few years he has published Ways of Dying (1995), The Heart of Redness (2000), The Madonna of Excelsior (2002), The Whale Caller (2005), Cion (2007) and Black Diamond (2009).
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Introduction
Zakes Mda — novelist, playwright, painter and musician of the ‘new’ South Africa — started his career as a writer working in theatre-for-development with the Maratholi Travelling Theatre in Lesotho in 1985. Since then, Mda has written numerous plays which incorporate popular indigenous modes of performance to educate his audience for democracy. With the ending of apartheid in South Africa in 1994, creative writers transferred their energies from themes of resistance and struggle to issues of reconciliation in a newly democratic nation. They were, in Njabulo Ndebele’s terms, free now to ‘rediscover the ordinary’. Mda responded by moving to novel writing, finding in this fictional genre a new narrative freedom. Over the last few years he has published *Ways of Dying* (1995), *The Heart of Redness* (2000), *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002), *The Whale Caller* (2005), *Cion* (2007) and *Black Diamond* (2009). His unique position in contemporary South Africa is reflected in the publishers’ blurb for his latest novel: ‘he commutes between South Africa and the USA, working as a professor of creative writing at Ohio University, as a beekeeper in the Eastern Cape, a dramaturge at the Market Theatre, Johannesburg, and a director of the Southern African Multimedia AIDS trust in Sophiatown, Johannesburg’ (2009). Commenting on Mda’s relationship to leading contemporary writers in South Africa, Johan Jacobs writes:

To the extent that Mda has made his mark as a literary and social theorist, as well as a playwright and novelist, he … invites comparison with a writer such as André P. Brink, or, for that matter, Njabulo S. Ndebele. The degree of self-reflexivity in Mda’s novels positions them in the same category as the metafictional discourse of J.M. Coetzee, just as their imaginative inventiveness is matched perhaps only in the fictional works of Ivan Vladislavić or Etienne van Heerden. And like Antjie Krog — indeed, all of these contemporary South African writers — Mda is concerned with examining the lives and experiences of ordinary people in democratic South Africa, and the ways in which they are coming to terms with the apartheid past, without their being overwhelmed by it or constrained by its categories. Mda’s is a significant voice among the many in contemporary South Africa that are exploring innovative forms to … scrutinise a culture in transition, voices that demand attention and critical appraisal. (Jacobs 1–2)

Mda’s third novel, *The Madonna of Excelsior*, is centrally concerned with ‘examining the lives and experiences of ordinary people’ as they move between apartheid and democracy. *The Madonna* achieves this dramatisation of a culture in transition by drawing extensively both on popular media representations (the
newspaper coverage of the notorious Miscegenation Trial in the small town of Excelsior in the Orange Free State) and the expressionist/symbolist paintings of the Jesuit priest, Frans Claerhout. In this article, I concentrate on Mda’s remarkable relationship as a writer of fiction to the visual. I argue that he inducts the reader into processes of vision or focalisation1 that radically destabilise conventional patriarchal perspectives. Creating these altered ways of seeing begins to construct, I believe, a new ontology of postcolonial vision, one that transcends our contemporary sense that vision always implies surveillance or coercion.

The phrase in my title ‘towards a new ontology of postcolonial vision’ derives from David Levin’s discussion, in Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision, of the way in which Western culture ‘has been dominated by an oculocentric paradigm, a vision-generated, vision-centred interpretation of knowledge, truth and reality’ (2). This paradigm of vision has been associated with domination. Levin asks, ‘[w]hat is left, today, of the rational vision of the Enlightenment? Has its institutionalization in the course of modernity given it historically distinctive forms of incorporation, power and normativity? How has the paradigm of vision ruled, and with what effects?’ (3). He remarks that these questions are complex since they involve ‘historical connections between vision and knowledge, vision and ontology, vision and power, vision and ethics’ (3). Where Levin asks whether there is ‘a postmodern future beyond the governance of ocularcentrism’ (3) and wonders what such a postmodern vision would look like, I ask to what extent a postcolonial writer like Mda can shift the boundaries of the visual in his readers’ apprehension so as to create an entirely altered political reality. Of course this subversion of dominant culture has been undertaken by artists and critics throughout the centuries. The contemporary theorist, Mieke Bal, shows how Rembrandt’s painting, Danae (1636), ‘[constructs] a masculine viewer whose visual potency is extremely problematic, (Bal qtd in Levin 387). She further argues that in Olympia (1863), Edouard Manet makes the gaze of the black woman looking at the white woman deeply ambiguous. Is her glance ‘of desire, of engagement, of friendship, or is it one of curiosity, of jealousy, of contempt?’ (Bal qtd in Levin 401). In Bal’s readings of these paintings ‘vision can be pluralized so as to deprive the colonizing, patriarchal gaze of its authority’ (Bal qtd in Levin 401). In this challenge to patriarchy issues of race, class and gender become central. Claerhout’s symbolist/expressionist paintings similarly foreground issues of race, class and gender, and Mda appropriates these perspectives for The Madonna of Excelsior. Where the discussion of art as subversion of dominant culture is for Bal centred on European artists, my investigation of Mda’s use of the paintings of Frans Claerhout brings into play a specifically African context: the political, social and cultural environment of a small town in the Orange Free State as South Africa moves from the oppressions of apartheid to a multiracial, multicultural context post-apartheid. Mda appropriates Claerhout’s vision by creating a story world drenched in the colours and forms of Claerhout’s paintings. The design of
The Madonna is distinctively African, both in its geographical settings and in its narrative structure, which incorporates such oral storytelling devices as the voice of a communal narrator who speaks for the whole community.

In the Trinity’s Studio

Figure 1 shows Frans Claerhout, referred to as ‘The Trinity’ because he is ‘man, priest and artist’ in Mda’s story world. Jacobs points out that the actual Frans Claerhout was born in Pittem, West Flanders, in 1919 and came to South Africa in 1946 to work as a Catholic missionary, eventually settling at Thaba Nchu in the eastern Free State (284). Claerhout was a leading exponent of South African expressionism and his work is both locally and internationally recognised. Jacobs divides the history of South African expressionism into three waves. The first, based on German expressionism, is represented by Irma Stern and Maggie Laubscher, the second by the Flemish immigrants Maurice van Essche, Hermann van Nazaret and Claerhout himself, and the third by a number of black artists of the 1960s such as Gerard Sekoto, Sydney Kumalo, Julian Motau, Tshidiso Motjuoadi, Louis Maqhubela, Lucky Sibiya, Cyprian Shilakoe and Dan Rakgoathe’. Later waves include ‘Andre van Vuuren, Phillip Badenhorst and Marnus Havenga’ (286).

In the photo in Figure 1, Frans Claerhout is surrounded by paintings depicting mothers and children who have modelled for him as Madonna and Child. These models are drawn from the very poor local people on Claerhout’s mission station who earn money by sitting for him. You can see the artist at work among his paintings, adding brush strokes to incomplete studies, or comparing the positions and expressions of seated models. These are in the middle picture on the top left, which shows a single figure, and the large picture on the bottom right, where two women are seated next to a table on which paint tins and brushes are arrayed. Mda creates his fictional characters from these non-fictional models of Excelsior visible in Claerhout’s studio.

The most important fictional protagonists in The Madonna of Excelsior are Niki and Popi, the mother and daughter whose story dominates the novel. Niki works as a domestic servant for the white Afrikaans-speaking middle-class burghers of Excelsior, and ekes out her meagre wages by modelling with her child for the Trinity at the Roman Catholic mission at Thaba Nchu, 30 kilometres distant from Mahlatswetsa Township where she lives. The first chapter of the novel introduces Niki and Popi, who are visiting the Trinity. Popi, a child of five, is both excited and distressed by the lack of realism of the Trinity’s paintings. She is moved by his striking elongated people amid skewed houses, but distressed by their distortion, since she feels she can draw more accurate people and houses. Niki and Popi do not of course figure in this photo of the paintings in Claerhout’s studio, because they are Mda’s fictional characters rather than the real-life villagers on whom Claerhout based his pictures. Mda appropriates Claerhout’s paintings for the story world he creates around Niki and Popi.
Figure 1. ‘Claerhout in his Studio’. 

Claerhout, however, adores his materials. He paints on canvas, but he uses them as representations, as a basis on which he creates a whole idea.

Women come from all over to pose for him, as he pays them well. Once a mother and daughter arrived to pose. Upon inspection, Claerhout said that the daughter was too fat, but he gave them each 150 francs for their troubles. The mother was most perturbed and demanded 150 francs as she said that she was three times the size of her daughter.
In the top right hand photo the artist can be seen to the side of a painting of a brown-skinned girl with dark eyes, long dark hair, and a white dress. Mda uses this painting to describe Popi at fourteen. A mixed-race or ‘hotnot’ girl born of the liaison between Afrikaner farmers and their black servants that is to give rise to the Miscegenation Trial at the heart of the novel, Popi is here introduced by a question: ‘Who is this little girl standing against a powder-blue sky with pink flowers for stars? Big sky and pink cosmos down to her bare feet like wallpaper. Who is this little girl in a snow-white long-sleeved frock?’ (113). The questions framing Popi’s identity here are central to her adolescent consciousness, for she is in search of herself and longs to be more like the other black children of Mahlatsweta Township. Her slow journey towards self-acceptance is to become a feature of her bildungsroman. The celebration of difference at the heart of Popi’s story is everywhere evident both in Claerhout’s paintings and in Mda’s fictionalisation of these paintings.

For instance, in the bottom photo a brown Madonna can be seen on the wall at the back of the studio, a brown Madonna, described by Mda as having a ‘gaping mouth’ and ‘naked breast’. She is cradling a baby on her lap. The Madonna of this painting bears little resemblance to her Western Renaissance counterparts. She is secular, embodied, sculptural and somatic, wrapped up in the nurturing of her infant. Mda is attracted to this visceral closeness of mother and child which Claerhout constantly explores. What in Mda’s novel distinguishes the gaze of the Trinity from the gaze of the white farmers who lust after black women, is his calm, non-erotic attention to the subjects of his paintings. Two paintings away from the Brown Madonna, the photo shows Claerhout sketching at his easel. Beside the figure of the sketching artist is a striking, full-scale painting (see Figure 2, ‘A Sunburnt Christ’). This Christ is brown-skinned. The heavy lines and bloodstained colouring of his face bespeak his agony. Yet he is surrounded by vibrant colour and growth: huge, yellow sunflowers, and pink and white cosmos against a turquoise background. Behind the crucified Christ, a shadowy nun-like figure in a blue veil takes the place of the grieving Mary. Four figures in blue with red hats pass a round green and blue sun. The sky is awhirl with cloud effects, suggesting a gathering storm. This powerful painting is appropriated by Mda for the depiction of his protagonist Niki, victim of the cruelty of apartheid laws. No less a figure than the crucified Christ is appropriated by Mda to figure Niki’s suffering. Unlike Christ’s, Niki’s face has been ravaged not by the sun but by the skin-lightening chemicals she has applied over the years to change her racial categorisation from black to white. These chemicals have now caused her skin to cake and crack. Her trauma, as a victim of racial prejudice, is to be taken seriously, no less seriously than the suffering of the incarnate Christ — despised, rejected, and tortured on the cross. Here truly, crossing gender and race boundaries, are Claerhout’s and Mda’s visions of the Mater Dolorosa. Once again, there seems little connection between Claerhout’s painting, Mda’s story world, and the conventional religious paintings
of the Renaissance. Where paintings of the Mater Dolorosa in Renaissance iconography convey the Madonna’s premonitions of the tragic fate of her child, this shadowy Madonna figure behind the Christ figure is enigmatic.

**Ecphrasis: Turning Paintings into Fiction**

Explaining the process of ecphrasis, Jacobs writes:

To appreciate fully how in *The Madonna of Excelsior* Mda narratively further indigenises a Western European art form that has already been indigenised by Claerhout, one needs to understand his fictional discourse in this novel in terms of ecphrasis, ‘the literary description of a work of art’ (Hollander, 1998, 86) … *The Madonna of Excelsior* is … an example of actual ecphrasis, where a literary work incorporates actual, particular works of art that pre-exist it, as opposed to notional ecphrasis where a literary text incorporates descriptions of purely fictive works of art. (288, 289)

I argue that Mda’s explorations of refuged identity are rooted in his strongly painterly imagination. This teaches the reader how to see anew by creating changed spaces in memory and culture which redress the negativity of the colonial experience. Mda uses authorial and figural points of view, perspective and focalisation to alter the reader’s understanding. Both the novelist Zakes Mda and the painter Frans Claerhout create, for ‘ordinary people’, the social and psychological conditions that may result in freedom. Through the narrator’s graphic depiction of the paintings, the reader is shown the art of Frans Claerhout. Claerhout’s style is a blend of expressionism and symbolism, transposing into an African context the bright colours, bold impasto brush strokes and deviation from realism that connects back to his European past: to Van Gogh, Gauguin, Munch and Cezanne, right back to Breughel. Like Breughel’s, Claerhout’s subjects are ‘ordinary folk doing ordinary things’. Yet, the novel insists, ‘God radiates from them’ (131).

Why does Mda build his story world on Claerhout’s art? According to Strydom, Claerhout’s expressionism foregrounds emotion, using contrast, dynamic movement and distortion to convince the viewer in a direct and empathetic way of the artist’s interpretation of reality: ‘The expressionist painting suggests involvement (wonder, compassion, humour) rather than detachment (contrast, judgement, caricature). It implies a view of reality rather than a mere representation of reality, one which is felt rather than seen’ (Strydom 10). In addition to his involvement of the viewer, Mda is attracted to the painter’s capacity to reconcile oppositions and to place individuals in dynamic, creative interaction with their communities.

From the opening of the novel the reader is inducted into a visual and epistemological world of startling complexity. Real paintings by a real painter illuminate the lives of fictional characters. These real paintings are seen and interpreted by Mda’s authorial narrator, who not only describes Claerhout’s expressionist and symbolist techniques, but also suggests that Claerhout’s ‘3-ness’ as ‘man, priest and artist’ captures the ‘3-ness’ of the ‘pen skies, the vastness
and the loneliness of the Free State’ (2). The Claerhout paintings at the centre of Mda’s story world are vividly described by the narrator’s words. For instance, the Brown Madonna who appears on the back wall of Claerhout’s studio in the photo is depicted as

[exuding tenderness. Burnt umber mother in a blue shirt, squatting in a field of yellow ochre wheat. Burnt sienna baby wrapped in white lace resting between her thighs. Mother with a gaping mouth. Big oval eyes. Naked breast dangling above the baby’s head. Flaky blue suggesting a halo. Unhampered bonding of mother and child and wheat. (11)]

But the reader has to imagine and focalise this portrait without the assistance of any visual material in the novel itself, for the text contains no traces of the Claerhout paintings. The only exceptions are an enlarged black and white Madonna and child on the inside front cover against which is juxtaposed a photo of a smiling Zakes Mda, and part of a black and white painting showing a donkey, a sunflower and some skewed houses on the inside back cover. No acknowledgement is made of either of these extracts, though the full-colour photo of sunflower fields near Bethlehem, Free State, that is used for the front cover, is acknowledged. My article reproduces and discusses several of Claerhout’s paintings which are important for *The Madonna of Excelsior*. These reproductions are taken from the book by Dirk and Dominique Schwager. The paintings are easily recognised from the narrator’s descriptions of them; but the only visual ‘quotations’ from Claerhout’s paintings used by Mda are postage-stamp-size images extracted from the paintings. These tiny sepia fragments preface each chapter, occurring as tiny images on the left next to the words of each chapter heading. Their relationship to the paintings from which they are extracted is virtually unrecognisable. Mda’s verbal and textual appropriation of Claerhout’s images is thus total. He adopts those painterly depictions that fit his fictional world, leaving the reader in no doubt that it is not Claerhout but Mda who controls the novel’s story world. This supremacy of textual authority over painterly authority is made clear on the last page, where the authorial narrator comments on the healing begun in Niki and Popi by the creations of the Trinity. Yet, the authorial narrator insists, ‘the trinity never knew all these things. His work was to paint the subjects, and not to poke his nose into their lives beyond the canvas’ (268). This fact brings me back to my title ‘Towards a New Ontology of Postcolonial Vision’ and the question of how a postcolonial writer may wish to adopt focalising strategies that enable readers to perceive cultural and political perspectives not endorsed by a dominant culture. When Bal writes about artists’ subversions of European culture, she does so from a feminist perspective. But both Mda and Claerhout are males, very much in the ‘God business’ of authoring painterly or fictional worlds. Can their mediation enable the escape from patriarchal values which my title implies?

Mda’s selection and ordering of Claerhout’s paintings makes use of two principles derived from multi-panelled altarpieces in Claerhout’s native Belgium.
which date back to the eleventh century — the principles of the cycle (which depicts a theme in a time-space continuum, showing consecutive episodes or phases in a history, such as the Stations of the Cross), and the series: ‘a repetition of a theme discontinuous in time and space’ (Strydom 16). These alternating principles of cycle and series allow the viewer or reader to understand continuity and change, development and variety: ‘the viewer recognises time and again the old in the new in a different guise’ (Strydom 17).

A further complication with which the reader is confronted from the very beginning of the novel is that of narrative levels. Mda makes use of two complementary but very different narrators. The first is the authorial narrator, responsible for delivering the author’s overall design. Through the authorial narrator may be glimpsed the implied author. Chatman explains this term: ‘The implied author is the agency within the narrative fiction itself which guides any reading of it. Every fiction contains such an agency. It is the source — on each reading — of the work’s intent [and refers to] a work’s “whole” or “overall” meaning, including its connotations, implications, unspoken messages’ (174). In addition to the authorial narrator, Mda uses the communal narrator, a resident of Mahlatswetsa Township who knows all the protagonists and is involved in the novel’s action. As a member of Mda’s story world, the communal narrator is what Seymour Chatman calls a ‘fallible filter’, a term that he prefers to that of ‘unreliable narrator’. As Chatman explains, ‘“[f]allible” seems a good term for a filter character’s inaccurate, misled or self-serving perceptions of events, situations and other characters, for it attributes less culpability to the character than does “unreliable”’ (150). Thinking of the communal narrator in this novel as a ‘fallible filter’ of the experiences of his community allows the reader to register his remarkable insight and compassion as he recounts the lives of his fellow township dwellers. It also explains his occasional lapses into racism and sexism. These are the inevitable result of his social conditioning under the oppressive and distorting ideology of apartheid. He is, after all, historically as much a victim of apartheid as any other character in the novel.

**WOMEN, DONKEYS, SUNFLOWERS**

From the first page of the first chapter of *The Madonna of Excelsior*, the reader is drawn into the landscape of the Free State and the paintings of Frans Claerhout, whose chief subjects are women, donkeys and sunflowers. (See Figure 3, ‘Women Harvesting’, and Figure 4, ‘Boy Riding Donkey Backwards’). These subjects are imbricated throughout the novel, and woven into Mda’s story world:

Colour explodes. Green, yellow, red and blue. Sleepy-eyed women are walking among sunflowers. Naked women are chasing white doves among sunflowers ... A boy is riding a donkey backwards among sunflowers. The ground is red. The sky is blue. The boy is red. The faces of the women are blue. Their hats are yellow and their dresses are blue. Women are harvesting wheat. (1)
Figure 3. "Women Harvesting".
Figure 4. "Boy Riding Donkey Backwards".
The novel begins with the voice of the authorial narrator who remarks ‘all these things flow from the sins of our mothers’ (1). His is also the novel’s closing statement: ‘From the sins of our mothers all these things flow’ (268). The cycle begun in the first sentence — where the narrator ironically registers patriarchy’s simultaneous demonisation and instrumentalisation of women — will be closed by Mda’s choice of the concluding painting of four women described in the last chapter. This description begins:

The real new millennium has dawned. Four women with painted breasts walk in single file. Their long necks carry their multicoloured heads with studied grace. Their hair is white with age, but their faces glow with youth. They do not lose their way, even though they undertake their journey with closed eyes. (265)

The cycle of exploitation and humiliation that started with the Afrikaner farmers’ rape of young black women in the sunflower fields, and that reached its climax in the notorious Excelsior miscegenation trial, has ended with the same women. They now access a new identity as they choose their own way forward — just as Niki and Popi have moved from victimhood to agency by the end of the novel.

This section is entitled ‘Women, donkeys, sunflowers’. What of the donkeys? (See Figure 4, ‘Boy Riding Donkey Backwards’, Figure 5, ‘The Cherry Festival’, and Figure 6, ‘Profound Nostalgia’). Here I think Mda is again making use of the idea of the cycle, relying on the reader to perceive the connections between the donkey paintings and the characters and events of his story world. The donkey paintings can be understood as constituting another cycle. The first initiates us into Claerhout’s vibrant use of colour and expressionist distortion. Why is the boy riding backwards? For the same reason, presumably, that Claerhout sometimes places signposts in the middle of sunflower fields or depicts people ‘without feet or toes’ (1). The reader has to suspend disbelief and enter the characters’ own imaginative worlds, however unlike the real world these imaginative worlds may be. That is to say, he or she has to relate to the intensity of the yellow sun, the yellow sunflowers and the yellow donkey. Together these represent the joyful union of man, animal and landscape against the blue sky.

There are dozens of women, donkeys and sunflowers in the Claerhout paintings; but the donkey who starts ‘Cherry Festival’ is quite unlike the other donkeys described in this chapter, which records festivity, with gaily decorated processions of floats, people and animals in the main street on a Saturday morning. The donkey in this painting is not part of a landscape or a procession. It is enormous, and takes up the whole painting. The authorial narrator comments: ‘There is no room for anything else, except the red cock that the ass carries in a transparent bag strapped on its back and hanging from its side. The donkey and the cock own the world’ (43). This donkey is obsessive, excessive, exaggerated. Why?

In Mda’s accompanying story world, Niki and the Afrikaner, Johannes Smit, are at the Ficksburg Cherry Festival selling their wares at wooden tables under umbrellas. The white farmers Smit and Cronje fight for Niki’s favours. Cronje
Figure 5. ‘Cherry Festival’. 
wins, and triumphantly drives Niki to a field on the outskirts of town for a night of passion, while the disconsolate Smit mopes alone at the Cherry Ball back in town. Now Niki has the husband of her enemy, Cornelia Cronje — who has previously humiliated her by forcing her to strip naked in front of the workers at the Excelsior Butchery — completely at her mercy. Niki’s focalisation changes in this moment:

[Stephanus Cronje] was deep inside her. Under the stars. She looked into his eyes in the light of the moon. She did not see Stephanus Cronje, owner of Excelsior Slaghuis. She did not see a boss or a lover. She saw Madam Cornelia’s husband with the emphasis on Madam. And she had him entirely in her power. (50)

Now Niki can see the stars that she could not see in the previous chapter. Like the cock and the donkey who preface this chapter she feels that she owns the world. So the magisterial donkey and red cock are chosen by Mda as objective correlates for Niki’s moment of triumph; but the donkey is blinkered. Niki’s ‘triumph’ will prove short-lived in that it will lead to Cronje’s suicide, and her own and Popi’s ostracisation by the community. Niki will be shunned because of her liaison with the white farmers, and Popi will be shunned because she is
‘coloured’. This trajectory of suffering and bitterness on the women’s part will only be resolved at the end of the novel. Unlike the first donkey, which celebrates creative freedom, Mda chooses this blinkered donkey because it communicates foreboding.

Finally, the third donkey painting introduces a new era. It occurs in a late chapter called ‘Profound Nostalgia’ which begins: ‘All things are bright and beautiful’ (239), and tells of the changed fortunes of Niki and Viliki, the Pule Siblings, after the arrival of democracy in South Africa. Now the communal narrator enters, recording a major change that affects many of the township residents: they have ‘gradually moved from cow-dung to coal’ (239). The authorial narrator, though, records a much deeper and more pervasive change. Despite the new political freedom, neither Popi nor Viliki is contented. They long for the past: ‘A profound nostalgia for the romantic days of the struggle attacked them. Days of sacrifice and death. Days of selfless service and hope’ (240). In this painting of the donkey with the candle, Mda seems to challenge the reader to imagine a new time of transformation and hope where — the evils of apartheid now over — people of all races will be able to create a better future together; but as the next chapter, ‘Betrayed by the Elders’, makes clear, the way forward is full of pitfalls and disappointments. The candle-bearing donkey fuses the ordinary with the visionary. This fusion recalls the photographs in Schwager’s book which show Claerhout’s simple, usually illiterate congregation attending services in the mission church they built themselves. Their eyes are bright, and they hold candles in their hands. In the spirit which Jacobs has called ‘evenhanded’ in its ability to show corruption both amongst blacks currently in power and their white predecessors (5), Mda signals that change must be social as well as political. The candle must be kept burning to ensure that one cycle of oppression does not end only to be followed by another.

‘Women, Donkeys, Sunflowers’ — and what of sunflowers? Yellow sunflowers and pink, red and white cosmos appear abundantly in Claerhout’s paintings as constant accompaniments to individual depictions. In this respect, the flowers are woven into the painter’s chronotopes, part of the recurring space-time continua of his paintings. They also mark significant cycles. It is in the sunflower fields at the beginning of the novel that the histories of Mda’s instrumentalised women begin, and in the sunflower fields at the end of the novel that these same women come to experience creative community.

**Appropriating the ‘Madonna’ Motif**

Frans Claerhout as Belgian artist must of course have been thoroughly familiar with the depictions of the Madonna in Western painting, which have so complicated a relation to the legacy of Eve. Marina Warner writes, ‘[t]he emphasis on Mary’s body, on her miraculous virginity and motherhood, concentrates attention on female physicality and biological processes; it carnalises her figure, *grounding her character in the flesh even as it makes her an exception to all*
mankind’ (Warner xviii [my emphasis]). Deriving from tenth-century Byzantine icons which survived the Roman Empire, early madonnas were stylised and formalised rather than realistic. But with Chimabue, Giotto and Duce in the thirteenth century, depictions of the Madonna moved toward humanism and away from symbolism — so that Rafael portrayed ordinary women in portraits which reflected a new secularisation through robust, sculptural qualities, while the Florentine painter, Masaccio, broke away from the conventions of European gothic art to depict realistically observed people in convincing situations. He was interested particularly in the way people see each other. In the high Renaissance painting of Pierro della Francesca the Madonna is surrounded by panoplies of saints and angels. In this ‘Sacre Conversazione’ mode between Madonna, saints and angels, della Francesca may be seen to convey a balance between humanism and scientific enquiry by depicting the changes in the world he was living in, exploring particularly the new relationship of Man to God.

The Madonna motif which recurs in both Claerhout’s paintings and Mda’s text is a good example of what Strydom has called the series as opposed to the cycle: ‘the repetition of a theme discontinuous in time and space’ (Strydom 16.) The Blue Madonna who frames Chapter 17 is described by the authorial narrator as ‘different from the other madonnas. No cosmos blooms surround her. She is not sitting in a brown field of wheat. No sunflowers flourish in her shadow. Yet she exudes tenderness like all the others’ (107). (See Figure 7, ‘The Blue Madonna’.) This tender and youthful Madonna embodies, in Mda’s overall design, the creative interactions between the Trinity and the people he paints. In this chapter the Trinity transforms his models, Popi and Niki of the flesh. He gives his Madonna the features of her child — or rather, the features Popi will have as she grows older. Though initially neither woman perceives the extent of the Trinity’s influence on their lives, both Niki and Popi come to recognise the importance of his vision and of his values to their sense of themselves. Initially indignant at his creative licence, his ‘right to change things at the dictates of his whims. To invent his own truths’ (108), Niki will come to value the Trinity’s humorous interventions. She wonders, ‘[f]rom where did he get all that power, to re-create what had already been created?’ (108). Niki also comes to treasure the priest’s near-miraculous ability to heal discord. He dissolves an argument between mother and daughter by the gift of laughter. His impersonations of the braying of a donkey convulse Popi and completely melt her anger against Niki. Vision and the laughter that leads to self-acceptance: these are the Trinity’s gifts. The gift of laughter will later be celebrated in the novel when the daughter makes the mother laugh. Popi alludes to her identity as a coloured or mixed-race person and Niki laughs ‘for the first time in many years’. She exclaims: ‘I am so happy that at last you are so free of shame about being coloured that you can even make a joke about it’ (260). On one of her visits to the Trinity’s mission station, Niki prays for the continuing creativity of the priest who is also a comforter: ‘for his hands that must stay
strong. For his vision that must continue to find joy in cosmos, donkeys, women and sunflowers. For his passion for colour that must never fade. And for his muse that occasionally flung him into a mother-and-child mode’ (112).

The final painting I want to touch on is from Chapter 11. (See Figure 8, ‘Eyes in the Sky’.) Here we are shown an unusual Nativity. The Holy Family is bottom centre but most of the painting is given over to the ‘big eyes in the sky’ that observe the trio. Here surely Claerhout — and Mda — are responding to the ‘Sacre
Conversazione’ mode of della Francesco’s Madonnas, surrounded as they are by saints and angels who help the viewer to understand the relationship between man and God. Discussing ‘Sacre Conversazione’ Charles Hope remarks: ‘It has been suggested … that the saints gathered around the Virgin are celebrating the celestial
liturgy, or that the child is held up like the Eucharistic host ... more generally, altarpieces are said to be “about aspects of doctrine, such as the Incarnation” (Hope qtd in Verdon and Henderson 536.). Unlike della Francesco’s saints and angels, the voices and gazes of the citizens of Mahlatwetsa Township who are Niki’s neighbours are far from unambiguously affirmative. Their mockery has over the years ostracised Niki for her miscegenation, and Popi as the product of that miscegenation. The communal narrator confesses his own involvement in the community’s media-fuelled accusations:

‘We fear that even in your Johannesburg, people will see us as the bad women of Excelsior,’ added Susanna.
We jeered and cheered. The women were both heroes and villains to various sections of the crowd.
We mocked Maria: ‘Hello, Mrs. Lombard’.
We taunted Mmampe: ‘Hello, Mrs. Smit’.
We leered at Niki: ‘Hello Mrs. Cronje’.
We called each of the women by the name of the lover with whom she had been charged. (98)

Equally, the communal narrator enters into the community’s contempt of the black women’s white Afrikaner lovers: ‘[w]e cheered and jeered even louder when Johannes Smit and Groot-Jan Lombard emerged from the courtroom’ (98).

By contrast with the communal narrator, the authorial narrator is not judgemental. In this his world view resembles that of the Trinity, whose paintings celebrate and immortalise the previously instrumentalised. Though both Mda and Claerhout are male, their verbal and visual strategies may be argued to destabilise the will to domination of the male gaze. Bal, writing about the way in which the paintings of Rembrandt and Manet problematise the voyeuristic gaze, remarks:

The mode of vision I am trying to describe is ... a different way of getting to know. The epistemology that is being tested here is based on relationality, or more precisely, on the model of friendship. Friendship requires getting to know other people in a dialogic mode. In the visual domain, this means a seeing radically different from the voyeuristic, asymmetrical mode that has for too long been hegemonic ... it calls for a suspension of what we think we see, for a recognition of historical positionality, and for an appreciation of relations of reciprocity. (400)

Claerhout’s distorted, impassioned expressionist-symbolist paintings refuse voyeuristic hegemonic ways of knowing and seeing. This is why Mda appropriates them for The Madonna of Excelsior.

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NOTES

1 Mieke Bal defines focalisation as ‘the relationship between the ‘vision’, the agent that sees, and that which is seen’ (146).

2 For a discussion of the contrast between political revolution (following the removal of colonial political control) and social revolution (promoting equity and justice) see Mike Kissick and Michael Titlestad, pp. 149–67 in Jacobs.

3 The notion of ‘appropriating’ in this section draws the reader’s attention to issues of intertextual borrowing in Mda’s work. I attempt to demonstrate throughout this essay that Mda’s use of Claerhout’s paintings and his transposition of Claerhout’s story world into the story world of The Madonna is strikingly original. But there has been an international controversy over Mda’s incorporation in The Heart of Redness of verbatim quotations derived from Jeff Peires’ historical account of the Great Xhosa Cattle Killing of 1856–1857 in his book The Dead Will Arise. The controversy was sparked by the publication of an essay by a Yale Ph.D. student, Andrew Offenburger, who accused Mda of lifting dozens of quotations from Peires’ book without acknowledgement. BOOK SA ran a series of commentaries from South African and international scholars, including the South African writer Stephen Gray (who alleged plagiarism), American academic Byron Caminero-Santangelo (who denied plagiarism) and Mda himself. Mda argued that the Xhosa language is full of proverbs based on the Cattle Killing episode, just as Xhosa culture is full of songs about the Prophetess: ‘It is our story. Jeff Peires does not own that story. So I can’t steal it from him’ (Mda 2008b online). Mda also quoted South African philosopher Aryan Kaganof who argued that nobody objects to the intertextual borrowings of James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, or William Shakespeare. Kagan pointed out that ‘the greatest philosopher of all, Nietzsche, rarely, almost never, used footnotes. And indeed, he also lifted sentences wholesale from Schopenhauer, and from the New Testament, and from Kant, without mentioning where he lifted them from’ (Mda 2008b online). I close with the conclusions of the editor of BOOK SA. He maintained that Peires’ acceptance of Mda’s acknowledgement made the accusation of plagiarism untenable:

Peires is a top South African scholar. Call him a dissident scholar, in contrast to Offenburger’s orthodoxy, because, by accepting Mda’s acknowledgement as sufficient, he accepts the possibility of a world of greys. The thoughts of a top scholar are not nothing: indeed, they are oppositional to the thoughts of other scholars; they are potentially standard-setting. This means that in a top scholar’s opinion, the question of the book’s literary merit is the central one in relation to the value of the work. It follows that Offenburger has only succeeded in rejuvenating this question with his accusations: he has not displaced it, not succeeded in crystallising The Heart of Redness as ‘that work with plagiarism at its heart’, not transported the book to a world of blacks and white. We remain in grey territory, where art rules.

WORKS CITED


