



# Guilt, Self-Flagellation and Penitence: the Discursive Significance of Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller*

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# EPI-REVEL

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## Guilt, Self-Flagellation and Penitence: the Discursive Significance of Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller*

Brian Worsfold\*

Towards the end of Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller* (2005), Sharisha, the stranded right whale, is blown up on the beach at Hermanus, South Africa. The Whale Caller looks on, impotently, as

they rig Sharisha with dynamite. [...] the emergency workers place more than five hundred kilograms of dynamite in all the strategic places, especially close to Sharisha's head.

Like a high priest in a ritual sacrifice a man stands over a contraption that is connected to the whale with a long red cable. With all due solemnity he triggers the explosives. Sharisha goes up in a gigantic ball of smoke and flame. [...] [The Whale Caller] is looking intently at the red, yellow and white flames as Sharisha rises in the sky. It is like Guy Fawkes fireworks (205) <sup>1</sup>.

The following day, the Whale Caller "returns to the place where the ritual murder was committed yesterday. He grieves but takes solace in the *beauty* of the death. She could have lived to be fifty years old. Southern rights live that long" (my italics 209). Yet there is nothing that rises, phoenix-like, out of the ashes. All the Whale Caller can do at the scene of the explosion is sit "silent and still as blubber rains on him. Until he is completely larded with it" (205), while seagulls "brave the black smoke and descend to scavenge on the tiny pieces that are strewn on the sand and on the rocks" (205). There is an obvious symbolism in the aesthetics. This is a death with no resurrection. Is this, though, really the end of an era?

\* \* \*

Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller* is not just post-apartheid; it is also post-9/11. Following the events in New York on that fateful autumn morning in 2001, V.S. Naipaul was moved to write that, from the moment of

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<sup>1</sup> This fusion of explosion, destruction and art has its precedents in and echoes the Talebans' destruction of the twin Buddhas in Bamiyan, Afghanistan and Al-Qaeda's destruction of the World Trade Centre's twin towers in New York.

impact of the planes into the World Trade Centre, the novel was dead.<sup>2</sup> The Indian/Caribbean writer meant that from the moment the images of jetliners impacting the twin towers of the World Trade Centre were visualised across the world, the aesthetics of creative artistry had been transmuted, like transubstantiation in a religious ritual. In a sense, *The Whale Caller* is a fictionalised manifestation of that finality.

The narrative of *The Whale Caller* is suspended in space and in time. Its spatial setting is a seafront on the southern tip of South Africa, the brink of the inhabited world, the edge of continent that gives onto the southern oceans and, eventually, the vastness of the wastes of Antarctica. The time is post-9/11 – “There is silence once more. The world is at peace with itself. American armies are not invading third world countries, making the world unsafe for the rest of humanity; *terrorists are not engaging in the slaughter of the innocent in high-rise buildings* and at holiday resorts” (my italics 75).<sup>3</sup> Like the setting and the time, the plot is stark and symmetrical – the love of a young woman for an older man who desires a right whale; the protagonists are just three – a sixty plus-year-old man, a young woman and a right whale; the characterisation is spare.

\* \* \*

It is significant that *The Whale Caller* follows Zakes Mda’s novels *The Heart of Redness* (2000) and *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002). *The Heart of Redness* is rooted in the historical schism within amaXhosa society that dates from the time of Nongqawuse and the Xhosa Cattle-Killing that took place in the Eastern Cape in 1856.<sup>4</sup> *The Madonna of Excelsior* is based

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<sup>2</sup> Amongst the reaction of other well-known creative artists, the German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen stated that the image of the Boeings exploding in the twin towers against the crystal blue Manhattan skyline was “the greatest work of art ever ... for the whole cosmos” (*New York Times*, September 19, 2001); the British artist Damian Hurst called the same image “visually stunning”; another British artist David Hockney declared it to be the “most wicked piece of artwork”; and in an interview with the BBC, the Irish dramatist Frank McGuinness said: “After 9/11 I could not believe the scale of grief in the country [Ireland]... It was a terrible act. [...] The world has changed ... and art has changed. [...] 9/11, that was the beginning of the change” (BBC *HardTalk*, June 30, 2006). For sources, see under *References*.

<sup>3</sup> It is undeniably the case that South African novelists are overtly aware of 9/11 and that the impact the event on their art is highly evident. For example, in *Before I Forget* (2004), André Brink writes: “Perhaps macho America is finally finding a way to break out of the terrible depression brought on by women’s liberation and by the crushing blow inflicted by 9/11 on the two phallic towers that embodied the national male ego” (my italics 105), and in *Get a Life* (2005), one of Nadine Gordimer’s protagonists Lyndsay has “a flashback of the plane plunging into the second of the World Trade Center towers” (107).

<sup>4</sup> In 1856, the sixteen-year-old Xhosa girl Nongqawuse prophesied that if her people killed all their cattle, the ancestors would rise up and drive the White colonialists into the sea. Not all amaXhosa acted on her instructions, causing a schism to develop within amaXhosa society. In Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness*, the Xhosa men and women descended from those

on the miscegenation practised during the apartheid era by White Free State farmers with local Black women, acts that were criminalised in those times under the terms of the Immorality Act.<sup>5</sup> Unlike *The Heart of Redness* and *The Madonna of Excelsior*, however, *The Whale Caller* represents a complete break with the discursive tradition by which the evils of apartheid – its idiosyncrasies, absurdities and incongruities –, a system Jacques Derrida called “the lowest extreme of racism, [...] its eschatology, the death rattle of what is already an interminable agony” (1985: 292-293), were made familiar to readerships across the world through metaphors of racism and sexuality.

As already pointed out, the narrative of *The Whale Caller* presents a variety of existentialist minimalism. In this fictionalisation by Zakes Mda of events in contemporary South Africa, life is reduced to its essential ingredients. The world he creates is elemental, primitive, painted in primary colours. The Whale Caller himself, Saluni, his young lover, Sharisha, the whale, the Wendy house, a crag on the African coastline – these are all symbols whose meanings are undefined. This is a world of scant resources – meals of macaroni and cheese and the odd fish the Whale Caller catches on his sporadic fishing trips. But Mda’s world is a complete one. The spiritual, meditative aspects of life are satisfied at Mr Yodd’s, a grotto in the side of the cliff overrun by rock rabbits, a shrine that serves both the Whale Caller and Saluni for their confessions and absolutions. Saluni’s entertainment and artistic yearnings are satisfied in the company of the Bored Twins whose singing and surreal activities raise her spirits to a state of euphoria. Likewise, the sexualities of the Whale Caller and Saluni are mutually satisfied in frequent “breathless days” (185), “cleansing moments” (195) and acts of pampering. However, within this world, neither the Whale Caller’s desire for the right whale Sharisha nor Saluni’s love for the Whale Caller are ever fully requited; both the aged man and the young woman are caught in a warp of suspended time, like the right whales off the South African shoreline that entertain tourists as they wait for the season to change and for their return to the southern oceans to commence.

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families that followed Nongqawuse’s orders are called “Believers” and those descended from the families who did not are called “Unbelievers.” The “Believers,” that is, the traditionalists, are also referred to as “red” on account of the red blanket they wore around their shoulders. The novel is set on the coast of Eastern Cape, close to where Nongqawuse is believed to have seen the vision that engendered her prophecy. Hence the novel’s title, *The Heart of Redness*.

<sup>5</sup> Like *The Heart of Redness*, Zakes Mda’s *The Madonna of Excelsior* is also based on historical fact. In 1971, fourteen White farmers from the Free State town of Excelsior, near the Lesotho border, were charged with having sexual relations with Black women from the area, a crime under the terms of the Immorality Act in force at the time.

In *The Whale Caller*, life is brought ‘back to basics’ – a basic setting, the minimum number of characters required for social interaction, an essentialist spirituality, and, helped by the Bored Twins, a glimpse of the surreal. The post-9/11 world is a world in which all superfluity has become inappropriate and, therefore, redundant and absurd; only that which affects the ‘here and the now’ directly has any meaning or significance.

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In this respect, *The Whale Caller* is itself a representation of the effects of 9/11. In the novel, Zakes Mda presents a twelve-year-old Black boy Lunga Tubu whom, he says, “is disturbing the peace of the world” (77). It is not only the little Black boy who is “disturbing the peace of the world”; it is *The Whale Caller* itself. Cartesian, existentialist, *The Whale Caller* is a product of post-9/11 creativity and for this reason its symbolism is highly significant for discursive writing coming from South Africa. Unlike much of the South African fiction that has preceded it, *The Whale Caller* is remarkable for its lack of allusions to race, miscegenation, discrimination – the trappings of apartheid and post-apartheid – to which reference is made only in passing and not in any focused or marked way. There are no suggestions of didactics or censure in *The Whale Caller*, no lessons to be learned, and no sense of protest or propaganda. Indeed, there is a timelessness about the narrative structure of the novel and a lack of pace, immediacy or urgency. Several references are made in passing to the Khoikhoi (138) who were among the first human beings to settle in the Cape, and to former colonial personalities such as the Honourable William Phillip Schreiner KC CMG, brother of Olive Schreiner, who is famous for having “caught a fifty-kilogram kabeljou” (151) near Hermanus at the beginning of the twentieth century. But at the end of the novel, the Whale Caller and Saluni walk on into an unknown, indefinite future, figures in an undefined landscape uncluttered by personalities or events of historical memory.

Yet there is something of the hackneyed in *The Whale Caller*. As the Whale Caller and Saluni, his partner, – “[c]reated in sin, she is such a wonderful sinner. A glorious celebrant of worldliness. He envies her for that” (69) – lope the beaches of Hermanus and Walker Bay the image of the couple brings to mind other South African archetypes such as Athol Fugard’s Boesman and Lena on the beach at Port Elizabeth and J.M. Coetzee’s Michael K and his dying mother as they journey on foot into the Karoo.<sup>6</sup> This is disturbing if, as is posited here, the characters, setting and action of *The Whale Caller* are symbolic of aspects of contemporary South

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<sup>6</sup> See Athol Fugard’s Boesman and Lena (1973) in *Three Port Elizabeth Plays: The Blood Knot, Hello and Goodbye*, Boesman and Lena (London: OUP, 1974) and J.M. Coetzee’s *The Life and Times of Michael K* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1983).

Africa, the new South African Rainbow Nation. It suggests that although colonialism and apartheid have come and gone, and post-apartheid has run its course, in the new post-9/11 era the old archetypes continue to be valid and useful in an aesthetic way. It is disturbing that, in his description of Lunga Tubu, Zakes Mda reveals that the dualities that were the hallmarks of neo-colonial South African society – social division and poverty – persist even today.

In *The Whale Caller*, Lunga Tubu symbolises a duality extant in post-9/11 South African society today. Ironically, as he sings operatic arias – *O Sole Mio* and *La Donna È Mobile* – in the style of the three tenors, Luciano Pavarotti, Plácido Domingo and José Carreras<sup>7</sup> to whale-watching tourists on the Hermanus seafront, Lunga Tubu symbolises “another world that is not at peace with itself”<sup>8</sup>:

a whole festering world of the disillusioned, those who have no stake in the much talked about black economic empowerment, which is really the issue of the black middle class rather than of people like Lunga Tubu. While the town of Hermanus is raking in fortunes from tourism, the mothers and fathers of Zwelihle are unemployed. It is a world where people have lost all faith in politicians. Once they had dreams, but they have seen politicians and trade union leaders become overnight millionaires instead. Only tiny crumbs trickle down to what used to be called ‘the masses’ in the heyday of the revolution.

Of course only a liar can claim that things are as bad as they were during the days of apartheid, [...] More people have been housed than ever before. Even shacks in informal settlements here and in the inland provinces have been electrified. Services such as telephones and water have been provided even in the remote villages. But in a country with such high unemployment this has come with new problems. People are unable to pay for these services. (77-78)

Disturbingly, therefore, although apartheid has been dismantled and the victims have been “empowered,” the same quality of archetypes can be used to symbolise the new dispensation. Again disturbingly, there are many similarities between the world of apartheid South Africa and post-apartheid, post-9/11 South Africa. In this sense, both the novel *The Whale Caller* and one of its minor characters, Lunga Tubu, are themselves “disturbing the peace of the world” (77). For Zakes Mda, the significance of the symbolism is also troubling, perhaps even guilt-ridden. In the final paragraph of the

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<sup>7</sup> Ironically, well-known European tenors, performers of works from opera, an archetypal European art form.

<sup>8</sup> Compare previous description of the world in the quotation referring to the attack on the World Trade Centre: “There is silence once more. The world is at peace with itself. American armies are not invading third world countries, making the world unsafe for the rest of humanity; terrorists are not engaging in the slaughter of the innocent in high-rise buildings and at holiday resorts” (my italics 75).



novel, when the Whale Caller hears “Lunga Tubu’s voice coming from the waves, singing a Pavarotti song,” he muses wistfully that “maybe one day Pavarotti will adopt him” (210), an aspiration whose high improbability of being fulfilled renders the comment cynical in the circumstances.

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At the beginning of the post-apartheid era, Elleke Boehmer, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, called for more “open-endedness” and a more varied and complex “manipulation of aesthetic form” in South African fiction once apartheid had gone. *The Whale Caller* is pointedly open-ended – the Whale Caller

turns his back on Walker Bay for the last time. Even the tremendous energy of the rocks and the waves and the moon will not draw him back. He will walk from town to town flogging himself with shame and wearing a sandwich board that announces to everyone: I am the Hermanus Penitent. (210)

But, precisely because it is open-ended, there is really no hint where all this is leading to.

Moreover, Western aesthetics have changed. Like fiction writers across the world, South African writers today hold the images of 9/11 and the global impact of the aggression high in their creative consciousness. Could it be that the sight of the flames and smoke rising against the crystal blue Manhattan skyline as the jetliners impacted the World Trade Centre provided a glimpse of space-time sufficient to cause what Elleke Boehmer also called for, that is, a “manipulation of aesthetic form”? Could it be that an entire literary discourse<sup>9</sup> has been brought abruptly to a halt, not because apartheid has ended and not because, after thirteen years, post-apartheid has lost its impetus, but because, in September 2001, Westernity took a blow the consequences of which, even today, six years on, are not fully appreciated?

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<sup>9</sup> During the apartheid era, South African writers felt themselves to be under a moral obligation to act as interlocutors between what Lewis Nkosi termed “the defiant victims of apartheid” and “the many men and women of goodwill all over the world who may wish to express solidarity with them” (1983. 95). The fictionalised narratives of English- and Afrikaans-speaking White South Africans like André Brink, J.M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer and Alan Paton; Black South Africans such as Ez’kiel Mphahlele, Njabulo Ndebele, Lauretta Ngcobo, Lewis Nkosi, Sipho Sepamla, Mongane Wally Serote and Miriam Tlali; Coloured South Africans like Peter Abrahams, Dennis Brutus, Achmat Dangor, Alex la Guma, James Matthews and Zoë Wicomb; and Asian South Africans like Ahmed Essop, Farida Karodia and Essop Patel, amongst many others, amply fulfilled this obligation. The idiosyncrasies, absurdities and incongruities of apartheid became familiar to readerships across the world, especially with respect to the way it affected human relationships. The writings of these and other South Africans propagated awareness of the evils of apartheid across the world and fed an anti-apartheid discourse that played an important role in bringing about the end of apartheid, a demise marked by the holding of all-race elections in 1994.

It may well be argued that *The Whale Caller* is too contrived, too pat, and that it lacks the rawness – the rough, cutting edges – of a literary landmark. This has a lot to do with the style of the work – the vocabulary has an aphoristic feel to it and the expression seems overwritten at times. Nevertheless, *The Whale Caller* is a significant work. In her recent survey of South African literature *Apartheid and Beyond. South African Writers and the Politics of Place*, Rita Barnard writes:

Now that the sometimes suspicious moral frisson that apartheid provided is a thing of the past, South Africa should become even more important in the interrogation of this relationship [between colonizer and colonized], especially since it might suggest – in practice, rather than merely in theory – new possibilities of transcending the Manichean opposition of colonizer and colonized, and of moving toward a new culturally hybrid democracy. (2007:5)

True to form, *The Whale Caller* does transcend the colonizer-colonized, oppressor-victim dichotomies and it does avoid racial discrimination and interracial interactions and confrontations. More strikingly, variations of deviant and aberrant sexual attraction and interaction such as miscegenation, incest and rape, that have permeated South African fiction since pre-apartheid times as catalysts of action and forces of narrational dynamism,<sup>10</sup> have been replaced by desire and love; albeit, on the Whale Caller's part, a desire for a right whale in addition to a desire for his female companion. In these respects, therefore, *The Whale Caller* does seem to signal, finally, a break with the past and to constitute an attempt to explore different regions of human feelings and behaviour. *The Whale Caller* points to new topics for South African literary discourse, to the interaction of human beings with their natural environment, to social divisions marked by class instead of by racial or ethnic difference, to the status of women, to globalisation, and to the preservation of wild life. Following the events in New York in September 2001, the discourse topics have changed; but in *The Whale Caller*, do not the aesthetics remain essentially the same?

Furthermore, in some measure *The Whale Caller* does fulfil Rita Barnard's expectation that South African literature will grow increasingly "culturally-hybrid." It is significant that the Whale Caller himself – a tall, craggy-faced, bald-headed, silver-bearded man who is over sixty years old – remains nameless and skin-colourless. In the same way, the skin-colour of Saluni and the Bored Twins remains unspecified, and we learn of Lunga

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<sup>10</sup> Examples of pre-apartheid novels whose narratives centre on sexuality are Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), Sarah Gertrude Millin's *God's Stepchildren* (1924) and William Plomer's *Turbott Wolfe* (1926). Examples of post-apartheid novels that have miscegenation, incest and rape as the catalysts of their plots are J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), André Brink's *The Rights of Desire* (2000), Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* (2001), and Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002).



Tubu's skin-colour only because of his name and the fact that he comes from Zwelihle Township, qualifies for the "indigent tariff" (78) and, therefore, will not be White. But, in terms of the aesthetics of the narrative, the disturbing factor remains – the archetypes are *déjà-vu*, the symbolism stereotyped. What is the difference between Athol Fugard's Port Elizabeth setting and Zakes Mda's Hermanus setting, Fugard's strandlopers and Mda's strandlopers? Are not both settings endless beaches and rolling seascapes? Are not both sets of archetypes a colourless man and a colourless woman interacting on the edge of human existence?

*The Whale Caller* is clearly intended as a metaphor of the human condition in post-apartheid, post-9/11 South Africa. The interaction between the Whale Caller and Sharisha, the southern right whale, has clear ecological implications in that it presents the relationship between man and a creature of the natural world. The Whale Caller is saved from himself by his symbiosis with the natural world. The implication is that for post-9/11 South Africans to survive they must become aware of the natural world around them, the landscapes, the seascapes and the creatures that inhabit them. Zakes Mda implies that only by establishing a relationship of equanimity with his surroundings will humankind, and the South African man and woman specifically, be able to survive in peace and harmony for the foreseeable future. But what sets Zakes Mda's metaphor apart from similar ones used by Athol Fugard and J.M. Coetzee is that the oppression is not applied externally – a result of institutionalised racial discrimination –, but internally. The pseudo-democracy and racial inequality of apartheid have been replaced by guilt. Saluni feels guilty because "she believes that somehow she has brought about Sharisha's death" (205); the Whale Caller feels guilty because he believes he caused indirectly the right whale's death—"If he had not selfishly called her [Sharisha] with his horn to heal wounds inflicted on him by Saluni she would not have come to such a terrible end" (209). The whale *caller* has turned whale *killer*. Saluni is subsequently stoned to death by the Bored Twins who "cover her body with the petals of tulips" (209) and the guilt-ridden Whale Caller is destined to wander into the interior, "the Hermanus Penitent" (210). The burden of victimhood has been transformed into a burden of guilt – a state of mortification the only response to which is self-flagellation. Are guilt and mortification, then, to be the neuroses of the post-9/11 South African underclass?

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