

# De-scribing the Centre: Satiric and Postcolonial Strategies in *The Madonna of Excelsior*\*

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## **Summary**

In *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002) Zakes Mda makes use of both satiric and postcolonial strategies to create discursive fissures within colonial discourses, with a strong focus on issues of race and the Immorality Act in particular. This essay explores the nature of both satire and postcolonialism as dialogic, heteroglossic textual forms which serve to liberate the subject from the power of hegemonic language, contrasting satire and postcolonialism, and looking at the praxis and the ethics of both discourses in relation to Mda's novel. The essay also points to important contrasts between the two discourses, particularly in the way they deal with identity and language, each of them engaging with social and linguistic issues in ways that evoke differing narratives. It is suggested that postcolonial discourse differs from satiric discourse in the specificity of its commitment to ethical issues, while satire's stance is a less well-defined one, more detached because of the ironic weight which satire carries. Satiric theorists mirror this by showing a detachment which differentiates their narratives from the theoretical discourses of postcolonialism, which are often marked by differences and tensions between various theorists.

## **Opsomming**

In *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002) maak Zakes Mda gebruik van satiriese sowel as postkoloniale strategieë om diskursiewe breuke binne die koloniale diskoers te skep, met 'n sterk fokus op rassekwessies en spesifiek op die Ontugwet. Hierdie essay stel ondersoek in na die aard van beide satire en postkolonialisme as dialogiese, heteroglossiewe teksvorme wat die onderwerp wil bevry van die mag van hegemonese taalgebruik. Satire en postkolonialisme word teenoor mekaar gestel en die praktiese toepassing en etiek van beide diskoerse word ondersoek met betrekking tot Mda se roman. Die essay dui ook op belangrike verskille tussen die twee diskoerse, veral in die wyse waarop identiteit en taal hanteer word, en ook op die wyse waarop beide diskoerse sosiale en linguïstiese vraagstukke op maniere hanteer wat verskillende vertelwyses ontlok. Daar word te kenne gegee dat die postkoloniale diskoers van die satiriese diskoers verskil ten opsigte van die wyse waarop eersgenoemde hom spesifiek verbind tot etiese vraagstukke, terwyl die uitgangspunt van satire minder duidelik omskrywe en meer afstandig is, as gevolg van die ironiese gewig wat satire dra.

Satiriese teoretici weerspieël hierdie standpunt deur 'n afstand te toon wat hul vertelwyses onderskei van die diskoerse van postkolonialisme, wat weer dikwels gekenmerk word deur geskille en spanninge tussen onderskeie teoretici.

In *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002), Zakes Mda uses both postcolonial textual strategies and satire to “decentre” South African whites by historicising their dominance and then ridiculing it. The novel deconstructs the discourse of apartheid by focusing on the Immorality Act which forbade sexual acts across the colour line – miscegenation – on the grounds that the purported purity of the white race would be diminished and polluted by such contact. As the producer of a post-colonial text, Mda refuses to replace one set of binaries with another, but instead sets in motion a process of open-ended dialogue between the indignant patriarchalism of the South African state towards the existence of so-called mixed-race people on the one hand, and the subversive delight in creolisation taken by so many postcolonial texts on the other. As Helen Tiffin (1987: 17) remarks, “Decolonization is process, not arrival; it invokes an ongoing dialectic between hegemonic centrist systems and peripheral subversion of them”. Postcolonial practice aims to dismantle polarised constructions of alterity and disrupt the stereotypical structures within which colonial discourse flourishes.

“Bhaba has ... asserted that the colonized is constructed within a disabling master discourse of colonialism which specifies a degenerate native population to justify its conquest and subsequent rule” (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989: 178). The Immorality Act was an attempt at colonial eugenics, appearing to even-handedly prohibit any mingling of race, but covertly constructing black South Africans in particular as so degenerate that their genes had to be contained, lest they damage the fabric of society. The Immorality Act indicated how much whites projected their own felt inferiority onto black people and how crucial it was to the state to maintain the binary system it had established, attempting to naturalise it by labelling any breach of the system as abhorrent. The vigour (and ingenuity) with which these risibly permeable boundaries were policed were clear signs of the anxiety generated by any threat to the schizoid world which the apartheid regime inhabited. Caliban knew well how to strike fear into the colonial heart when he threatened to people the island with little Calibans.

Ania Loomba (2002: 163) speaks of *The Tempest* as offering a “sustained reflection upon the violence, the asymmetry, as well as the intimacy of the colonial encounter”. In *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002) Mda, as he unwrites and rewrites the colonial text of black degeneracy in apartheid South Africa, demonstrates the applicability of Loomba’s formulation, particularly with regard to the crushing intimacy of the colonial encounter. He makes apartheid the butt of his satire, enmeshing its creators in the web of their own discourse

as he depicts white responsibility for depriving black people of agency. Yet he does not become collusive with colonial binary paradigms by merely reversing them and, in effect, allowing the structure of his discourse to be defined by them. Instead he sets up a dialectic which does not allow for absolute categories of oppression or collusion. According to Tiffin, postcolonial discourses are characteristically subversive:

[They] offer fields of counter-discursive strategies to the dominant discourse. The operation of post-colonial counter-discourse is dynamic, not static: it does not seek to subvert the dominant with a view to taking its place, but to, in Wilson Harris's formulation, evolve textual strategies which continually "consume" their "own biases" at the same time as they expose and erode those of the dominant discourse.

(Tiffin 1987: 18)

Mda's use of satire reinforces some of these qualities, and this paper will suggest that postcolonial practice – as evidenced by Mda in this novel – is closely allied to satiric practice. Both postcolonialism and satire are counter-discursive and dynamic in the way they operate. Mda's satire exposes the embedded colonial discourses imposed by apartheid so that satire and postcolonial practice converge in their mutually subversive intent. Salman Rushdie is one of the textual practitioners of postcolonialism who advocates such subversion:

I hope that all of us share the view that we can't simply use the language [English] in the way the British did; that it needs remaking for our own purposes. To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free.

(Rushdie 1991: 17)

In terms of linguistic strategy, both satire and postcolonial practice can be seen as specific forms of what Bakhtin calls dialogic, heteroglossic and "parodic-travesty forms", to which he attributes particularly dynamic powers:

They liberate the object from the power of language in which it had become entangled as if in a net; they destroy the homogenizing power of the direct word, destroying the thick walls that have imprisoned consciousness within its own discourse .... Language is transformed from the absolute dogma it had been within the narrow framework of a sealed-off and impermeable monoglossia into a working hypothesis for comprehending and expressing reality.

(Bakhtin 1981: 60-61)

The effect of heteroglossia is the same as that of satire and postcolonialism: to create shifts in language, dissolve rigid categories and boundaries, and

establish alternative worlds which interact in a dialogic way.

The following passage exemplifies Mda's simultaneous use of both post-colonial and satiric discourse in *The Madonna of Excelsior* :

Sekatle – the rich businessman who had now purchased a big house in town only two houses from Adam de Vries's English bungalow – adopted the Baipehi [landless squatters] and made himself their spokesman. He drove around the new settlement in his new Mercedes-Benz, making fiery speeches through a hand-held megaphone. He assured those who gathered around his car that the Movement would stand with them. The Movement had fought for liberation so that people could have roofs over their heads and bread and butter on their tables. The Movement would see to it that they were given title to the land they had already allocated themselves. The Movement would give them water and electricity and paved streets. The Movement. The Movement.

(Mda 2002: 186)

Here Mda exploits ironies and contradictions, setting them off against one another in order to induce dialogism and liminal play into a previously static situation and thus foreground political exploitation. Mda focuses on Sekatle, using the disjunction between the intentions and the discourse of this former lackey of the apartheid system to satirise him. The passage exposes Sekatle as someone who has appropriated the discourse of the Movement for his own ends and is using it to increase his constituency and consolidate his political power. Sekatle's discourse here is in strong contrast to the unspoken discourse of the Baipehi, their powerlessness stressed by their silence: their plight is conveyed to us indirectly, only through the narrator. However, another level of interplay occurs between the apparently helpless position of the Baipehi and the fact that they are not entirely disempowered: as is clear from elsewhere in the text, they have managed to acquire a significant degree of agency by means of their indomitable spirit:

They had constructed a number of shacks, about fifty or so, establishing instant homes. Tonight more than a hundred men, women and children were celebrating with songs and dances around the winter fire. Singing and dancing to a lone guitar.

(Mda 2002: 185)

Their determination to seize the agency they have been denied is emphasised by the name they have adopted: "Baipehi" means "those who have placed themselves". Thus satire, traditionally a way of excoriating society for its evils, becomes in Mda's hands *also* a way of celebrating the particular strengths of marginalised communities.

But, however much satire and postcolonialism make common cause, they are

not identical in at least one important sense. Satire does not, in general, operate from a specific moral or political agenda, preferring instead to give itself the flexibility to criticise any party, group or class. Mda's satire operates firmly within this tradition, retaining the right to satirise both white and black people across the board, but he deviates from the satiric paradigm by also being committed to a single serious purpose – that of postcolonial narrative. For Goldberg and Quayson (2002: xii), the enabling pre-text of postcolonialism is “the idea that post-colonialism is itself an ethical enterprise, pressing its claims in ways that other theories such as those of postmodernism and poststructuralism do not”. For Emily Bauman (1998: 79-80) postcolonial practice consists of a tension between what she calls “an epistemological relativism” on the one hand, which exposes the discourses of colonialism, and on the other hand “a moral foundationalism” which justifies postcolonialism as “politically necessary and progressive work”.

In *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002), Mda reveals moral foundationalism by (inter alia) making use of a first-person plural voice which speaks sympathetically for black community values, though it is sometimes tinged with what seems to be an intrusion of Mda's own ironic vision. For example, in the following passage Viliki, a former freedom fighter and black politician in the new South Africa, has just emerged from a barbed interchange with an unlikely friend, Adam de Vries, a conservative Afrikaner Nationalist lawyer who claims the spurious honour of having tried to change the apartheid system from within. Mda's particular version of a Greek chorus then comments as follows:

We watched Viliki walk out of Adam de Vries's office. We knew that whenever he was bored ... he sauntered off to Adam de Vries's office in town. We wondered what it was that had drawn these two together ....

When the inquisitive quizzed him about it, Viliki would only say, “He is a nice, guy, although a white man will always be a white man.”

The likes of Tjaart Cronje and Johannes Smit said that Adam de Vries was Viliki's puppet .....Otherwise what would an Afrikaner lawyer have in common with an unschooled township boy? ....

We, on the other hand, were not bothered by these friendships. We put them down to the old love affair between black people and Afrikaners that the English found so irritating .... The English, common wisdom stated, were hypocrites. They laughed with you, but immediately you turned they stabbed you in the back .... The Afrikaner, on the other hand, was honest. When he hated you he showed you at once. He did not pretend to like you .... When he smiled, you knew it was genuine ....

We never questioned what informed these generalizations.

(Mda 2002: 222–223)

The complex texture of such interpolations offers information and commentary on events and attitudes, but also questions them. There is a strong sense of communal watchfulness and involvement, and there is also the airing of stock group attitudes, which are subjected to satire – or at least presented by Mda with an exaggerated air of innocence which immediately undermines itself and declares that its intentions are subversive. Yet, as Mda challenges communal generalisations he is simultaneously challenging the validity of his own narrative, by including himself in the “we” whose views he is interrogating, and by presenting a counter-discourse which insists on ontological slippages rather than certainties. His focus in this text is on the complexity of South African society, reflecting and challenging both current and past discourses. He creates new configurations of relationships which are renegotiable, rather than permanently fixed in colonial binary form. Mda does what Tiffin (1987: 27) speaks of in another context as offering a “post-colonial counter-discourse which is perpetually conscious of its own ideologically constructed subject position and speaks ironically from within it”.

In *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002) the slippages, counter-discourse and creolisation are constellated in Mda’s handling of the issues of race. He reveals how much of racial identity is socially constructed, but he also shows how the apparently certain outward signs of race can be equally unstable. Loomba, too, puts the word “race” under erasure:

Precisely those features which are most commonly taken as evidence of racial difference (such as skin colour), are the most fragile from an evolutionary standpoint, which is to say that they are the quickest to mutate as a result of any sexual mingling. Perhaps that is why skin colour produced so much anxiety in Shakespeare’s time: the assertion that it signified a deeper human essence was always challenged by its uncanny ability either to vanish or to show up in unwelcome ways.

(Loomba 2002: 3)

The way in which Mda sets out to create discursive fissures in the apartheid narrative of institutionalised racism is highlighted by the following commentary on a female character named Popi. She is one of many children born as a result of white and black people contravening the Immorality Act – a scenario which lies at the heart of the novel:

We had witnessed Popi’s emergence from the battering of two years before without a dent on her willowy body. We had watched her blossom into a woman of exceptional poise, with the dimples of Niki’s [her mother’s] maidenhood. Her beauty had even erased the thoughts that used to nag us about her being a boesman .... And we did not recall them every time we saw her. Perhaps our eyes were getting used to her. As they were getting used to others like her ....

Whenever we saw Popi, we praised her beauty and forgot our old gibes that she was a boesman. We lamented the fact that we never saw her smile. That a permanent frown marred her otherwise beautiful face. That her dimples were wasted without a smile. Perhaps we had forgotten that we had stolen her smiles.  
(Mda 2002: 168)

In comparison to the previous passage quoted, the African/Greek chorus is weaker and less certain of itself here, apparently because the communal consciousness is more self-conscious. Popi's beauty is praised, and the communal voice speaks of what was seen, but there is a lack of real involvement and a certain amount of discomfort about their past behaviour. Mda suggests how the community, having adopted aspects of colonial discourse, is unable to subvert or recuperate the term "boesman", which still remains embedded in apartheid structures. As a result, the strength of community involvement has turned to helpless witness, unable or even unwilling to offer help, and this is reflected in the self-doubt of the last sentence.

From a satirical perspective, Mda is interrogating the black community through the terms they use and the implicit judgements they make: the use of the word "boesman" is unthinking on their part, as is the demeaning talk of "getting used to" Popi "and others like her". A postcolonial view, by contrast, might focus instead on the fractured nature of the community that has been disempowered because it has been constructed, linguistically, in an oppressive way. According to Spivak (1985: 82-83), because of "the narrow epistemic violence of imperialism ... the subaltern has no history and cannot speak", meaning presumably, "cannot speak *with agency*". Shakespeare's Caliban *does* speak: "You taught me language [he says] and the good I have of it is that I know how to curse". However in so far as most of his energies – linguistic and otherwise – are directed towards cursing and plotting against Prospero, Caliban is prevented from developing his abilities in other directions.

Colonial epistemologies curtail agency, but they may also provoke unwitting collusion: the curse word "boesman" is perpetuated here by those who are also trapped in colonial discourse, but do not bear the outward configuration of miscegenation/creolisation as Popi does. Here, as elsewhere in Mda's novel, the postcolonial goal is to redefine identity as open-ended, denying the existence – and the discursive usefulness – of stable, unitary signification and offering instead a complex of ambivalent discourses.

Hall speaks of identity as follows:

Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a "production"

which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.

(Hall 1994: 392)

A major strategy in Mda's destabilisation of colonial discourse of identity is his use of magic realism, specifically the pattern of his novel which introduces each chapter with either a reference to or description of a Claerhout painting, or a passage written in Claerhout-type painterly prose, exploiting the non-realist, Chagall-like qualities of Claerhout to repeatedly pull the ontological rug out from under the reader. Related to this – and also occurring predominantly at the beginning of each chapter – is Mda's deliberate confusion of identity by, for example, often painting people in unusual colours such as blue or red, his showing a nun as pregnant or his painting a madonna and child with the same face. Mda's creolised, playful and satirical answer to the enforcement of racial categories in the past is to fragment and muddle as many human categories as possible, thus suggesting that identity is in fact complex, unpredictable, and not as the practice of apartheid suggested, related to mere surface appearances.

Earlier reference was made to Bakhtin's preference for dialogic, heteroglossic textual forms which serve to liberate the subject from the power of hegemonic language, destroying "the thick walls that ... imprison consciousness within its own discourse" and turning language into a "working hypothesis" for re-presentation. These elements of provisionality are shared by both satiric and postcolonial discourse. However, satire is relatively detached, with an agenda that is oblique – a marginalised form which capitalises on its marginality. Theoretical texts on satire reflect its lack of overt agendas: such texts are descriptive and analytic, but do not take firm positions over satire, its practice and purpose, since satiric practice is so idiosyncratic and evasive. Above all, there is in satiric theory very little of the overt commitment and, often, controversy which mark postcolonial theory.

Postcolonial strategies, on the other hand, are essentially ethically and politically driven, even when such goals are not openly stated: they strive to challenge attitudes and structures which perpetuate inequality within societies. Many postcolonial theorists continuously reflect on the nature of their targets and their strategies, resulting in the kind of robust interaction which satiric theory lacks. This reflects the difference between the embedded marginality of satire and the more flexible and complex stance of postcolonialism towards marginality.

Satire is useful to Mda on the occasions when he requires that kind of detachment, though his postcolonial practice is also akin to the most ferocious kind of satire in that it gives no quarter, but grapples relentlessly with the results of colonialism in South Africa. It does so without rancour but with a



serious commitment to both deconstruction and reconstruction, in line with Tiffin's view that good postcolonial practice works by "refusing, realigning, deconstructing the 'master narrative' of western history [while] recapturing notions of self from 'other' and investigating that destructive binarism itself" (Tiffin 1988: 179).

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