

# “Portmanteau biota” and Ecofeminist Interventions in Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness* \*

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## Summary

When Nobel Peace Prize laureate Wangari Maathai, the first African woman, and the first person ever to win the award for environmental activism, was asked by *Time* magazine’s Stephan Faris, “What’s the world’s biggest challenge?”, she replied: “The environment. We are sharing our resources in a very inequitable way .... And that is partly the reason why we have conflict” (Faris 2004: 4). Conflict over natural resources is very much at the centre of Mda’s novel *The Heart of Redness* (2000). The historical past, emblematised by the cattle-killings in the Eastern Cape during the 1850s, is linked to the present through the ecological consciousness of Qukezwa, whose character is conceived in mythopoeic terms. Positing the notion that Qukezwa is the quintessential ecofeminist in the novel, this paper foregrounds her role as a catalyst in the war of words between the “Believers” in the prophecies of Nongquwuse and the “Unbelievers”. Her seemingly reckless act of cutting down foreign trees may be viewed as a protest against what Alfred W. Crosby has termed “portmanteau biota” (1986: 270), a collective term for the organisms that Europeans took with them to the lands they colonised. Qukezwa’s actions register a strong message to those governments which exploit Planet Earth without regard for the deleterious consequences of their actions.

## Opsomming

Op die vraag “Wat is die wêreld se grootste uitdaging?”, gestel deur *Time Magazine* se Stephan Faris aan Nobel-vredespryswenner Wangari Maathai, die eerste vroulike Afrikaan en die eerste persoon ooit om die toekenning vir omgewingsaktivisme te ontvang, antwoord sy: “Die omgewing. Ons deel ons hulpbronne op ’n baie onregverdig manier .... En dit is deels waarom ons konflik het” (Faris 2004: 4, my vertaling). Konflik oor natuurlike hulpbronne is die spil waarom Mda se roman, *The Heart of Redness* (2000), draai. Die historiese verlede, versinnebeeld deur die grootskaalse beesslagting in die Oos-Kaap gedurende die 1850’s, sluit aan by die hede deur die ekologiese bewussyn van Qukezwa, wie se karakter in mitopoëtiese terme gestalte kry. Uit die hoek van die standpunt dat Qukezwa die kwintessensiële ekofeminis in die roman is, lig hierdie referaat haar rol uit as katalisator in die woordstryd tussen dié wat in die profesieë van Nongquwuse glo, en dié wat nie glo nie (die “Believers” en die “Unbelievers”). Haar skynbaar roekelose daad om uitheemse bome af te kap kan beskou word as ’n protes teen wat Alfred W. Crosby “portmanteau biota” (1986: 270) noem, ’n kollektiewe term vir die organismes wat Europeërs saam met hulle geneem het na die lande wat hulle gekoloniseer het. Qukezwa se handelinge stuur ’n sterk boodskap uit na dié regerings wat Planeet Aarde uitbuit sonder inagneming van die verwoestende gevolge van hulle dade.

Ecological awareness, then, will arise only when we combine our rational knowledge with an intuition for the nonlinear nature of our environment. Such intuitive wisdom is characteristic of traditional, nonliterate cultures, especially of American Indian cultures, in which life was organised around a highly refined awareness of the environment.

(Capra [1932]1983: 25)

There is no unmediated way of existing in harmony with nature, and there never has been. Once we make human decisions on how to exist in our surroundings, we are already involved in sociocultural (and again, theoretical) modes of thought.

(Bennet 2003: 300)

## 1 Introduction

*Time* magazine reporter, Donald Morrison, assessing the state of South African writing ten years after the country attained democracy, places Zakes Mda, a well-known dramaturge, among the vanguard of novelists such as Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee, Breyten Breytenbach and André Brink (*Time*, 14 November 2005, pp. 58-59). Mda spends his time between the United States, where he is a professor of creative writing at Ohio University, and South Africa, where he combines his interest in film-making and painting with beekeeping. *The Heart of Redness* (2000), his third work of fiction and by critical consensus the most ambitious of the three, is a historicist novel, juxtaposing the past and the present against a backdrop of realism and magic realism. It won the prestigious *Sunday Times* Fiction Award, as well as the Commonwealth Writers Prize, Africa region, in 2001.

In the opening paragraphs of *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Alan Paton sentimentiously proclaims of the land: "Stand unshod upon it, for the ground is holy, being even as it came from the Creator. Keep it, guard it, care for it, for it keeps men, guards men, cares for men. Destroy it and man is destroyed" (Paton [1944]1958: 7). The land as a primordial symbol in humankind's struggle for survival, finds a deep resonance in the South African literary imaginary. As a metaphor of possession and dispossession, colonisation and oppression, it has been explored in the works of writers as diverse from each other as Paton and Mda, and J.M. Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer. Mda's novel, *The Heart of Redness*, is very much about society and its relationship to the land. While the main theme of the novel derives its impetus from the plot involving the prophetess, Nongqawuse, and the tragic episode of the cattle-killings in the Eastern Cape in 1857, its

secondary theme is energised by the dialectic between the demands of metropolitan culture on the environment and the ecological injunction to “guard it [and] care for it” in the quasi-religious tone of Paton. Linked to the nineteenth-century catastrophic event which older history books refer to as the “national suicide of the Amakhosa”, is the modern-day debate of their descendants on the development of the pristine real estate of Qolorha-by-Sea. Just as the ancestors were locked in a self-destructive, ideological struggle with the British almost 150 years ago – a struggle emanating directly from the political issue of land possession – the post-apartheid generation is implacably split over the future of the seaside paradise. Focusing on the character of Qukezwa, this essay proposes to explore the tensions in the novel occasioned by the historical clash of ecological ideologies, juxtaposed with the exigencies of metropolitan life on the present generation. In presenting a revisionist reading of the nineteenth-century cattle-killings, Mda also recuperates the nature-culture dialectic to demonstrate how binaristic responses to this debate can be reconciled by the recognition of the need for a symbiotic balance between nature and culture on the one hand, and modernity and tradition on the other. This dynamic is enacted through the conflict between two sets of families, namely, the Believers, who are descendants of the followers of the prophetess Nongqawuse, and the Unbelievers, those who did not believe in her tragic prophecies. The Believers, not in favour of the modernisation of the seaside village of Qolorha-by-Sea, oppose the building of a casino and a holiday resort, whilst their old enemies, the Unbelievers, support the idea. Mediating between these two opposing groups, are Camagu, a modern-day intellectual, and his consort, Qukezwa, who may be viewed as the quintessential ecofeminist in the text.

In his poem, “God’s Grandeur”, composed in the latter part of the nineteenth century, Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote movingly about the depredations of Western society’s materialism on the resources of the earth. Lamenting that “[g]enerations have trod, have trod, have trod” upon this earth, to the extent that “all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil; /And wears man’s smudge”, Hopkins ends his poem on an optimistic note, affirming his undying faith in “the Holy Ghost” to regenerate the environment (Hopkins 1994: 2). More than a century after Hopkins’s assertion that “nature is never spent”, we, living at the dawn of the twenty-first century, cannot find easy solace in the grand narrative implicit in Hopkins’s reassuring theophany. As one newspaper caption proclaimed recently, we confront the frightening prospect of “using up the Earth faster than it can regenerate” (Fowler 2004: 2). According to a report by the World Wildlife Fund, on which Fowler bases his article, “[w]e are running up an ecological debt which we won’t be able to pay off unless governments restore the balance between consumption of natural resources and the Earth’s ability to renew them” (quoted in Fowler). The countries which leave huge ecological

footprints are those that are the biggest consumers of non-renewable natural resources, namely the US, Australia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Sweden, with China and India in tow.

## 2 The Land Question in South Africa

In 1992, the Association of University English teachers of Southern Africa themed its annual conference "Literature, nature and the Land: Ethics and Aesthetics of the Environment". At this milestone academic gathering at the University of Xululand, one of the delegates, Ivan Rabinowitz, stated:

In order to explore the intersections of literature, nature and the environment, we shall have to theorise a genuinely post-colonial version of cartographic semiosis, the study of the relation between the act of mapping and the negotiation of territory and identity. Our pure and timeless texts will have to be read as cultural signs which point to a narrative of possession, appropriation and epistemic aggression; our maps, including our maps of time and the material body, will have to be reinterpreted as hybrid texts and as forms of cultural inscription.

(Rabinowitz 1993: 23)

Whether Mda's *The Heart of Redness* will prove to be a timeless text, is for history to decide. But hybrid it certainly is, and it fits the bill as a post-colonial literary document which satirically explores, amongst other issues, the epistemic aggression of the early colonisation of South Africa, particularly the Eastern Cape region, and the ecological implications of this event on the present generation of protagonists in *The Heart of Redness*.

The history of the cattle-killings has been well documented in South African historical texts. This episode is attributed to the prophecy of the young girl Nongqawuse, which led to the Xhosa slaughtering their stock and destroying their cattle in "the expectation of the resurrection of ancestral spirits, accompanied by the provision of food from heaven" (Davenport & Saunders [1977]2000: 142). With the intervention of their ancestors, the Xhosa nation, according to the prophecy, would drive the white colonists into the sea. In recent times the story of Nongqawuse is viewed from alternative standpoints, both historically and fictionally. J.B. Peires, the South African academic who undertook the first book-length study of the Cattle-Killing, has attempted to answer why the Xhosas in the late nineteenth century were prepared to listen to a prophetess:

The Cattle-Killing cannot be divorced from the colonial situation which was imposed on the Xhosa in 1847 by Sir Harry Smith. Although it has been necessary in this history to examine the personal role of Sir George Grey in detail, it should be remembered that the essential objectives of Grey were identical to those of Smith and of colonial rule generally: to destroy the

political and economic independence of the Xhosa ... to make their land and labour available to the white settlers, and to reshape their religious and cultural institutions on European and Christian models.

(Peires 1989: 312-313)

Peires further draws attention to the fact that the idea of cattle-killing was widespread before Nongqawuse started to speak. The existent religious belief was a curious mix of Xhosa cosmology, according to which the dead do not die, and the Christian notion of resurrection, a belief popularised by the prophet Nxele before 1820. So, Nongqawuse's ideas were not original. The logical conclusion was therefore that the sick cattle, once destroyed, would be resurrected. In Mda's novel, "lungsickness" is thought to have originated in Europe: "It was brought to the land of the amaXhosa nation by Friesland bulls that came in a Dutch ship two years earlier, in 1853. Therefore even the best of the isiXhosa doctors did not know how to cure lungsickness" (Mda 2003: 55).<sup>1</sup> A decade before Peires's historical account of the cattle-killings, the narrator-protagonist of one of Mtutuzeli Matshoba's short fictional works presented a dialectical view of the Nongquase [sic] story in one of his reflections as he journeys to the Transkei, the newly created Bantustan of the apartheid government: "In order to understand my interpretation of past and present events in relation to each other, I think it is necessary to review the tale I heard from my instructional voices" (Matshoba 1979: 164). Matshoba depicts Nongqawuse as a young, idealistic maiden who dreams of the emancipation of her downtrodden people. In Matshoba's highly polemical rendering, the land policy of the British government was continued by the Nationalist Government's enactment of the Natives Land Act of 1913. According to Anne McClintock, through the Land Acts of 1913 and 1936, "a scant 13 percent of the most arid and broken land was allocated to black South Africans, though they comprise 75 percent of the people" (1995: 324). In a similar way, Zakes Mda's revisionist reading of this tragic event presents both sides of the story so that neither the Believers nor the Unbelievers are essentialised (Jacobs 2002: 232). In the novel, this double-voiced perspective is provided by the character of Camagu, "the hybrid, mimic man" (Sewlall 2003: 342) who has obtained a doctorate in communications in the United States and is neither a Believer nor an Unbeliever: "What I am saying is that it is wrong to dismiss those who believed in Nongqawuse as foolish ... [h]er prophecies arose out of the spiritual and material anguish of the amaXhosa nation" (*HR*: 283).

Bhonco, who is the link between his unbelieving ancestors and the new generation of Unbelievers like his daughter, Xoliswa, represents the forward push of modernisation in the village of Qolorha-by-Sea. Although Bhonco is pleased to hear Mr Smith, one of the white entrepreneurs, outline his

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1. Subsequent page references to Heart of Redness will be quoted preceded by *HR*.

wonderful vision of a resort with merry-go-rounds, jet-skiing and a roller coaster over the sea, he is not happy about one aspect: "But I am suspicious of this matter of riding the waves. The new people that were prophesied by the false prophet, Nongqawuse, were supposed to come riding on the waves too" (*HR*: 230). This reminder of the disastrous past when wondrous things were prophesied for the salvation of the Xhosa nation, resonates ironically with the promises of an equally wondrous future for Qolorha-by-Sea.

But not everyone is enamoured of the idea of a bustling seaside resort where people will ride waves the way "civilised people do in advanced countries and even here in South Africa, in cities like Durban and Cape Town" (*HR*: 231). Not least of all Camagu, who questions the benefit of such "wonderful things" (*HR*: 231) for the local people. He points out that the children of Qolorha-by-Sea are too poor to enjoy such facilities, which will be monopolised "only by rich people who will come here and pollute our rivers and our ocean" (*HR*: 231). To these reservations, Zim, a Believer and an inveterate enemy of the descendants of the Unbelievers, adds his voice: "This son of Cesane [Camagu] is right. They will destroy our trees and the plants of our forefathers for nothing" (*HR*: 231). Camagu, who is the mediating voice between the Believers and the Unbelievers, and who, to use a theoretical construct of Homi Bhabha, occupies the zone of the "liminal space, in-between the designations of identity" (1994: 4), is not totally opposed to the idea of developing the potential of Qolorha-by-Sea, but his vision is an ecocritically ethical one, "[the] promotion of the kind of tourism that will benefit the people, that will not destroy indigenous forests, that will not bring hordes of people who will pollute the rivers and drive away the birds" (*HR*: 232). Challenged by Bhonco's daughter, Xoliswa Ximiya, who asks how he would "stop civilisation" (*HR*: 233), Camagu shouts:

"How will I stop you? I will tell you how I will stop you! I will have this village declared a national heritage site. Then no one will touch it. The wonders of Nongqawuse that led to the cattle-killing movement of the amaXhosa happened here. On that basis, this can be declared a national heritage site!"

(*HR*: 233)

Xoliswa is the local school principal, whose intense desire to break away from backwardness, symbolised by the "redness" in the title of the book, takes her finally to the city of Pretoria where she lands the high-profile job of a deputy-director in the national Department of Education. Once fancied by the villagers as the lover of Camagu, she leaves Qolorha when Camagu turns his attention to the young and voluptuous Qukezwa. David Attwell suggests that in Camagu's quest for his cultural self, "the choices before him are modelled by Qukezwa and Xoliswa" (2004: 173). With Xoliswa now gone from the village, it is in and through Qukezwa that Camagu finds

his new interstitial identity, a condition which, according to Michael Titlestad and Mike Kissack, “embodies a persuasive postdialectical (post-*anti-apartheid*) mode of secular intellectual politics” (2003: 268). Qukezwa is the descendant of Twin, the Believer, who married a woman also named Qukezwa. When Xoliswa confronts Camagu about his relationship with the “child” Qukezwa, who is pregnant by Camagu through a miraculous, asexual conception, Camagu’s rejoinder is: “Where you see darkness, witchcraft, heathens and barbarians, she sees song and dance and laughter and beauty” (*HR*: 219). If Xoliswa in her person embodies the attributes of the modern feminist, or as one villager comments, “[she] is a man in a woman’s body” (*HR*: 302), then Qukezwa represents a feminist of a different mould – the ecofeminist.

### 3 Qukezwa, the Quintessential Ecofeminist

An enigmatic figure, who shaves her head in the manner of her father Zim, a Believer, Qukezwa thrusts herself into the gaze of the villagers (and ours) when she appears at the traditional court on the egregious charge of vandalising trees. Camagu, who attends the proceedings, is mystified by her alleged behaviour as she was also opposed to the destruction of the natural environment of Qolorha in order to make way for the casino resort. What adds to his puzzlement is that she simply cut down the trees and left them there, not even using them as fuel. By Xhosa tradition, her father ought to have been charged with his young daughter’s crime, but Qukezwa insists on answering the charges herself. Dressed in her red blanket, which is perceived by the Unbelievers as the mark of her backwardness and barbarism, Qukezwa demurely but defiantly proclaims her guilt: “I cut the trees, and I shall cut them again” (*HR*: 247). The court notes that this girl has in the past cut down the inkberry tree because it is poisonous. It is for this very reason that she has cut down the recent spate of trees, as she testifies in her defence:

The trees that I destroyed are as harmful as the inkberry. They are the lantana and wattle trees. They come from other countries ... from Central America, from Australia ... to suffocate our trees. They are dangerous trees that need to be destroyed .... Just like the umga, the seed of the wattle tree is helped by fire. The seed can lie there for ten years, but when fire comes it grows. And it uses all the water. Nothing can grow under the wattle tree. It is an enemy since we do not have enough water in this country.

(*HR*: 248-249)

She surprises the elders who nod in agreement, even if they do not condone what she has done. One of them muses on the source of her wisdom for such a slip of a girl who, at her age, should be focusing on “red ochre and other

matters of good grooming and beauty" (*HR*: 249). The hearing is interrupted when everybody rushes off to extinguish a house on fire.

What emerges at the village trial of Qukezwa is that the indigenous people of this land have always had their own laws to protect the environment. While Qukezwa's actions are considered criminal because there are no laws proscribing wattle trees, there are traditional laws in place which allow the destruction of noxious weeds and plants, such as the mimosa. Not only that, we also learn during the court deliberations that only the previous week some boys had been punished by the same court for killing the red-winged starling (*HR*: 249), or the isomi bird, regarded as being holy:

It is a sin to kill isomi. Yes, boys love its delicious meat that tastes like chicken. But from the time we were young we were taught never to kill isomi. We ate these birds only when they died on their own. We watched them living together in huge colonies in the forest or flying in big flocks of thousands .... These are sacred birds. If an isomi flies into your house your family will be blessed. Isomi is a living Christ on earth. If you kill isomi you will be followed by misfortune in every direction you go. When we punish boys for killing red-winged starlings, we are teaching them about life. We are saving them from future misfortune.

(*HR*: 249-250)

These traditional laws may be rooted in superstition, or even religious injunction, but they effectively legislate on matters of conservation. In the aforementioned extract, the preponderance of the plural pronoun "we" encodes a communal proprietorship over the ecology of the land. The purpose of punishing the boys is not to hurt but to educate them about their future. What is foregrounded in this extract is the imperative for an ecological education without which the future of any nation, no matter how sophisticated, would be doomed. William Beinart draws attention to the potential of humans to endanger their environment if left to their own devices: "All human societies, from metropolitan industrial Britain to the Easter Islands, have had the capacity to destroy the natural resources on which they depend" (2002: 223).

If metaphors are carriers of ideology, as C.A. Bowers (1993: 22-23) proposes, then the coding of religious and ecological metaphors in the language of the Xhosa reflects an epistemology that is at odds with established Western belief. The melding of Christian faith, as personified by the figure of Christ and symbolised by the anthropomorphised isomi bird, with what may be regarded as superstitious belief in luck and misfortune, suggests a syncretism that accommodates the timeless wisdom of the elders and the abiding faith of the colonisers. Such hybridity of faiths allows the Xhosas to accept ancestor worship along with the Christian notion of the Resurrection of Christ. The prophecy of Nongqawuse is accepted as an outcome of this chiliastic doctrine. Opposed to the syncretism of the



indigene Xhosa society, is the Western dialectical tendency to think in terms of binary categories of us/them, true/false, superiority/inferiority, salvation/perdition, right/wrong and culture/nature. Such categories of thinking, or “root metaphors” can be “traced directly back to Enlightenment thinkers” for their “fundamental legitimation”, according to Bowers (1993: 25). In such an anthropocentric universe where man’s rationality is the measure of all things, the environment is seen as instrumental to society’s need. The appropriation of the land, its conquest and taming to the needs of humans, is the predominant trope of Enlightenment thought that gives rise to the nature/culture dichotomy which posits culture as civilisation, and nature – usually personified as a woman – as unruly and primitive. As a corollary to this, the owners of uncultivated land were viewed as savages, a view thematised in the words of Sir George Grey in *The Heart of Redness* when he capitalises on the tragic consequences of Nongqawuse’s prophecy:

The advance of Christian civilisation will sweep away ancient races. Antique laws and customs will moulder into oblivion .... The strongholds of murder and superstition shall be cleansed ... as the gospel is preached among ignorant and savage men. The ruder languages shall disappear, and the tongue of England alone shall be heard all around. So you see, my friends, this cattle-killing nonsense augurs the dawn of a new era.

(HR: 237)

The novel abounds in the kind of rhetoric and irony invested in this extract. Western religious doctrine is constantly juxtaposed with indigenous beliefs to underscore the supernatural elements of both systems of cosmology. No one system is privileged over the other. Grey’s arrogant claim about “Christian civilisation” is satirically undercut by the refrain “they who have murdered the son of their own god!” (HR: 268) – something that the Xhosa find incredulous. As religion and language have always been strong semi-otic markers of the other, Grey’s aggressive policy of proselytising and Anglicising the Xhosa is in keeping with the colonial agenda. In this regard, Leon de Kock postulates that the policy of the colonisers in reducing the language of the Xhosa to “a written orthography” was to translate the Bible “into the semiology of a previous oral culture” (1996: 65).

Lance van Sittert, who describes the Cape Eastern frontier of the late nineteenth century as a “cultural transition zone”, populated by hunter-gatherers, pastoralists, farmers and European colonists, writes: “Scorched earth was an integral part of the military campaigns which levered Africans off their land, and pushed the colonial boundary steadily northwards. In their wake, the land was converted to private property and seeded with European settlers, stock and crops ...” (2002: 142). In Mda’s novel, the governor Sir George Cathcart, frustrated like his predecessor Sir Harry Smith in being unable to quell the Xhosa insurrection, “order[s] his soldiers to go on a rampage and burn amaXhosa fields and kill amaXhosa cattle

wherever they [come] across them" (*HR*: 25). His successor, Sir George Grey, whom the indigenes refer to not by name but by the mocking sobriquet "The Man Who Named Ten Rivers", completes the task begun by his predecessors. At the end of the novel, he is heard, filtered through the narrative voice, proclaiming his great achievement, "Finally I have pacified Xhosaland!" (*HR*: 312). While he perceives his land policy of penetrating Xhosa land to settle whites as a victory, the ecological and human toll on the region is incalculable:

Pacified homesteads are in ruins. Pacified men register themselves as pacified labourers in the emerging towns. Pacified men in their emaciated thousands. Pacified women remain to tend the soil and build pacified families. When pacified men return, their homesteads have been moved elsewhere, and crammed into tiny pacified villages. The pacified fields have become rich settler farmlands.

(*HR*: 312)

This stylised passage encapsulates, in rhetorical terms, the ambivalent nature of conquest in the name of progress. It would be true to say that such settlements ushered in the kind of progress that makes South Africa today the mighty engine of commerce and industry on the continent of Africa. It would also be true to say that the deleterious impact of such progress on the indigenes is felt even to this day in the Eastern Cape, which is rated the poorest and most underdeveloped province in the country, its political woes not least of all exacerbated by corrupt governance – a fact acknowledged by Mda in the novel. The extract cited above testifies to the destruction of the ecological relationship between the men of the region and their land, and the evils of the migrant labour system as a consequence of it.

#### **4 The Notion of Ecofeminism/ Ecocriticism Problematised**

In the foregoing section I proposed that Qukezwa may be viewed as the quintessential ecofeminist. Cheryll Glotfelty (1996: xxiv) defines "ecofeminism" as a hybrid label to describe a theoretical discourse whose theme is the link between the oppression of women and the domination of nature. But the term "ecofeminism" is itself in danger of becoming hierarchical and essentialised if one takes the feminist movement as being rooted in the Western psyche as anti-men and pro-nature. Michael M. Bell points out some of the problems associated with the term "ecofeminism". Apart from perpetuating the "dichotomy between men and women as well as the negative stereotypes of women as irrational, as controlled by their bodies, and as best suited for the domestic realm" (1998: 170), the term also suggests that Western societies are more patriarchal than Eastern ones, and

this is manifestly not true. Eastern societies, and even African ones – Zimbabwe being a good example – have demonstrated their patriarchal dominance over nature. Bell advocates a middle position, avoiding such dualisms and recognising “the gray areas and the interactiveness and interdependence of our categories” (p. 171).

The subcontinent of India has witnessed the most sustained struggles by women environmental activists who have opposed the male-dominated interests of commerce and trade in their country. Long before Arundhati Roy, the Booker Prize winner for her first-ever novel, made environmental issues a cause célèbre, Indian rural women have been at the forefront in protecting their natural resources from what Robert J.C. Young terms “men ... ideologically colonised by the short-term commercial values of the market place” (2003: 102). The earliest example of resistance by peasants to the deforestation of their land goes back to the 1940s, when Mira Behn, a devotee of Gandhi, established an ashram in the foothills of the Himalayas to focus on the problem of deforestation and the planting of non-indigenous cash crops such as the pine tree. Like the kind of intuitive ecological awareness shown by Qukezwa in Mda’s *The Heart of Redness*, the women “possessed repositories of intimate knowledge both of husbandry and of the medicinal and nutritional value of a wide variety of plants” (Young 2003: 102). A case in which both men and women were involved in protecting their environment, which finds a resonance in Mda’s novel, is that of the tree-hugging, or Chipko movement which began in 1972-1973 in northwest India when the local people successfully protested against the sale of three hundred ash trees to commerce. According to Young, men and women gave up their lives in the struggle (p. 102). The Chipko movement opposed the government’s forestation plan to plant non-indigenous trees such as the eucalyptus, which produces no water-conserving humus and destroys the food system.

Alfred W. Crosby proposes that European expansion was not only facilitated by military superiority but also by “a biological, an ecological, component” (1986: 7). Such colonisation of public land by an invading force or by the central government, acts to the detriment of the local people. In Mda’s novel, Qukezwa’s seemingly reckless act of cutting down “foreign trees ... not the trees of our forefathers” (*HR*: 248), is a protest against such invasion by what Crosby has termed “portmanteau biota” (1986: 270), a collective term for the organisms that Europeans took with them to the lands they colonised. Qukezwa’s actions, which stem from ancestral wisdom, register a strong message to those governments that exploit Planet Earth without regard to the consequences of their actions. Qukezwa’s stance is vindicated by the present-day situation in South Africa where the legacy of portmanteau biota is costing the country millions of rands. According to a recent newspaper report, “exotic plants and weeds are destroying our grazing and farming lands, forests, nature and game reserves. The

government spends half a billion rand a year on fighting this scourge, but it is far from winning the battle" (Makhaye 2005: 17). This exotic biota ranges from trees such as the black wattle and the red river gum, to shrubs such as bugweed, trifid and lantana. The Department of Water and Forestry claims that these alien plants are drying up rivers and streams and robbing indigenous plants of water and causing them to die.

The charge against Qukezwa for cutting down foreign trees eventually "fizzles out" because the elders of the village apparently "have more important things to deal with" (HR: 280). The battle over the immediate future of Qolorha-by-Sea is won by Camagu, Qukezwa and the Believers. Camagu's plan for a cooperative society which harvests the sea and manufactures isiXhosa attire and jewellery finally triumphs when a court order from the government department of arts, culture and heritage, puts a stop to the building of the casino and declares Qolorha-by-Sea a "national heritage" (HR: 311). But for how long? The answer to this question comes unequivocally towards the end of the novel when Camagu drives back to Qolorha-by-Sea after visiting Dalton at a hospital in East London. Dalton, incidentally, is recovering from a vicious attack by the frustrated Unbeliever, Bhonco, who still harbours a grudge against Dalton and his settler forebears for cutting off his ancestor's head during one of the many wars between the settlers and the Xhosas over natural resources in the Eastern Cape. That greed and the exigencies of survival will eventually impact on the ecology of the area, as it did during the time of Sir Harry Smith and Sir George Grey, is inevitable:

As he drives back home he sees wattle trees along the road. Qukezwa taught him that these are enemy trees. All along the way he cannot see any of the indigenous trees that grow in abundance in Qolorha. Those who want to preserve indigenous plants and birds have won the day there. At least for now. But for how long? The whole country is ruled by greed. Everyone wants to have his or her snout in the trough. Sooner or later the powers that be may decide, in the name of the people, that it is good for the people to have a gambling complex at Qolorha-by-Sea.

(HR: 319)

In a vigorous onslaught on the ecocritical approach to literature, Sven Birkerts has written: "I will speak as a literary purist and assert that literature cannot and should not be used as a pretext for examining man and nature, certainly not more than it is a pretext for examining any other thing or relation" (1996: 5). Birkerts's contention, arising from his review of Glotfelty and Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), is that literature should explore human nature, its avariciousness, rapacity, and the will to power (p. 6). Birkerts's broadside on ecocriticism serves as a timely critique on the trivialisation of literature in the interests of any agenda, not just ecocriticism. But if, as he suggests, literature's focus should be on the

human condition in its multifarious facets, then an ecocritical perspective serves literature all that better, for, as Glotfelty defines “ecocriticism”, it is a study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, taking an earth-centred approach to literary studies (1996: xviii). As a critical perspective, or approach, it problematises the literary encounter, whose main purpose, echoed by Birkerts, is the exploration of man’s relationship with the universe. Zakes Mda’s novel, in highlighting the present-day struggle over the future of Qolorha-by-Sea, articulates a postcolonial nexus that critiques the British occupation of indigenous Xhosa land and its ecological impact on the Eastern Cape today.

#### 4 Conclusion

In 2004, Wangari Maathai who started the Greenbelt Movement in Kenya in 1977 (Young 2003: 107), was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. This was the first time in the history of the Nobel Prize that this ultimate accolade for peace was awarded to an African woman, and an environmental campaigner to boot. When asked by *Time* magazine’s Stephan Faris, “What’s the world’s biggest challenge?”, Maathai, a PhD graduate in veterinary medicine from the University of Nairobi, replied: “The environment. We are sharing our resources in a very inequitable way .... And that is partly the reason why we have conflict” (Faris 2004: 4). Conflict over natural resources is very much at the centre of Mda’s novel *The Heart of Redness*, which spans several generations in the life of the Xhosas in the Eastern Cape, from the frontier wars between the British and the Xhosas in the late nineteenth century, to the present-day crisis over the fate of the fictional seaside resort of Qolorha-by-Sea. The historical past, which saw several frontier wars fought between the indigenous blacks and settler whites arising out of uneven ecological power relations, is linked to the present through the character of Qukezwa, a descendant of the prophetess Nongquwuse. The character of Qukezwa is conceived in mythopoeic terms. Whilst her pregnancy through an act of Immaculate Conception may be regarded as one of several instances of magic realism in the novel, its obvious allusion to the Virgin Mary is startling in its conceit. Just as the Biblical prototype is a challenge to the non-believing intellect, Mda’s fictional creation defies the boundaries of rationality, which insists on the authority of empirical evidence for ontological truth. The mythopoeic aura that Qukezwa’s character is invested with, challenges the reader to ponder the nature of arcane knowledge and ancestral wisdom regarding the ecology. As a descendant of the prophetess Nongquwuse, Qukezwa is a symbol of resistance to the colonial exploitation of the Eastern Cape. Her opposition to the presence of foreign biota, introduced by the colonialists, is staged not in militaristic terms, but in ecological terms.

Michael Bennet, echoing Murray Bookchin, endorses the view that "our basic ecological problems stem from social problems" (in Branch & Slovic 2003: 298). In reading Mda's *The Heart of Redness* from an ecofeminist perspective afforded by the character of Qukezwa, this essay has explored how the social, political and economic decisions taken by humans in South Africa's colonial past impact on the ecological dynamics of contemporary South Africa, especially the Eastern Cape region.

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