

Senses of Identity in *A Chain of Voices* and *The Madonna of Excelsior*

Tlhalo Sam Raditlhalo

Summary

Identity in recent South African fiction, much like the transformation of every aspect of the country's social, cultural, political and economic spheres, is under scrutiny. Nine years after the seminal year of 1994, South Africa is a country *reimagining* and *remaking* itself. This constant scrutiny as to what the possible futures of South Africa could be, with what possible moral values and mores, is a field ripe for the creative writer to exploit, to chart possible ways in which 350 years of contestations can be remade. To have a polity and a state to which one belongs is, in modern history, to be able to assert aspects of (cultural) identity that go beyond the tenuous bonds of "race".

The South African contestations with race, history and power have almost always determined the limits and limitations of much of its literary responses. Writers as diverse as Alan Paton (1953), J.M. Coetzee (1999),¹ André P. Brink (1982) and quite recently Zakes Mda (2002), have worked on this aspect. These writers attempt, with varying degrees of success, to point out the contentious aspect of South Africa with regard to two dominant "races" being able to accommodate and live harmoniously with one another. It is this theme that I highlight in this article with specific reference to Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002).

Opsomming

Die kwessie van identiteit in die onlangse Suid-Afrikaanse fiksie, nes die transformasie van feitlik elke aspek van die land se sosiale, kulturele, politieke en ekonomiese sferes, word onder die soeklig geplaas. Nege jaar sedert die seminale jaar 1994, is Suid-Afrika besig met sy eie herverbeelding ("reimagining") en hervorming ("remaking"). 'n Volgehoue ondersoek na wat die toekoms met watter

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1. See for instance John O. Jordan on Paton, who notes that this text is undervalued in literary studies (1996: 681). Ian Glenn rereads Coetzee's *Disgrace* as a dated variant of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century South African novels when the fascination of white males for young women of colour was a major social problem (2009: 87). Mda's *Madonna of Excelsior* acerbically revisits the same fascination and its aftermath in the new dispensation.

moontlike morele waardes en gewoontes ook al moontlik vir die land inhou, bied aan die kreatiewe skrywer heelwat geleenthede om die wyses waarop 350 jaar se geskille bygelê kan word, te ondersoek. Om 'n staatsbestel en 'n land te hê waaraan mens behoort, is, in die moderne tyd, die vermoë om sekere aspekte van kulturele identiteit te laat geld wat verder strek as die verbondenheid aan "ras". Die Suid-Afrikaanse worsteling met ras, geskiedenis en mag het feitlik nog altyd die beperkings van sy literêre response bepaal. Uiteenlopende skrywers soos Alan Paton (1953), J.M. Coetzee (1999), André P. Brink (1982) en meer onlangs Zakes Mda (2002) het hierdie kwessie ondersoek. Hierdie skrywers probeer, met 'n wisselende graad van sukses, om die kwessie in Suid-Afrika rakende die twee dominante "rasse" wat probeer om mekaar te akkommodeer en met mekaar saam te leef, te beskryf. Dit is hierdie tema wat in hierdie artikel toegelig word met spesifieke verwysing na Zakes Mda se *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002).

The Politics of Coloured Identity

A significant number of studies on the way in which South African academia theorised on aspects of identity have come to light since the 1980s. From van Ross's *Myths and Attitudes: An Inside Look at the Coloured People* (1979), Ian Goldin's *Making Race: The Politics and Economics of Coloured Identity in South Africa* (1987b), Gavin Lewis's *Between the Wire and the Wall: A History of South African "Coloured" Politics* (1987), leading up to, for instance, Idasa's *Now We Are Free: Coloured Communities in a Democratic South Africa* (1996), Zimitri Erasmus's *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place: New Perspectives on Coloured Identities in Cape Town* (2001), Mohamed Adhikari's *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough: Racial Identity in the South African Coloured Community* (2005) and Pumla Dineo Gqola's *What Is Slavery to Me?: Postcolonial/Slave Memory in Post-apartheid South Africa* (2010) the issue of what constitutes Coloured identity has preoccupied scholars from a diversity of disciplines.

Before the attainment of political freedom, however, the period between the early 1970s to the end of the 1980s was one in which theorisation about the nation-to-be was at the mercy of academic confusion. The theorisation of identity was driven by the political discourses of the time. Inveighed by a Marxist-Leninist understanding, aspects of identity, coupled with the volatile period of transition to constitutional talks around 1991 about the future of the country, were shrouded in academic stasis that regarded such theorisations as "bourgeois" mentality. Ran Greenstein, writing about this period, observes that

[t]he common wisdom of Marxism used to be that identity was no more than a form of false consciousness, a disguise for relations of exploitation that allowed the dominant class to entrench its rule over gullible subjects. Despite its crudity this view resonated well with the realities of apartheid The manipulations of race and ethnicity, backed up by a massive repressive

apparatus, and the use of notions of culture, self-determination and national homelands in the service of reprehensible policies of dispossession and violation of human rights, gave credibility to the case against identity as a positive force of analysis. Ultimately, however, the value of this approach proved limited as it failed to grant any role to people's own sense of self and collective being beyond colonial manipulations.

(Greenstein 1998: 4)

Greenstein's observations point to the manner in which, during the decade before political negotiations, scholarship in the country was still hamstrung by theorisations that had very little to do with how people felt. The nomenclature and theorisations of ethnicity subsumed by the generic term "black" (for Africans, Afro-Indians and Coloureds) were crucial as it was impossible to think beyond "white" as composed of multitudinous nationalities. Marxist theorisation placed academia in a cul-de-sac: the common view was then that "identity" was divisive and therefore not fertile ground ripe for debunking, inasmuch as ethnicity was shunned. The liberalisation of the country freed academia from these shackles, but also showed the contradictory impulses academics display in a society whose very constitution was based on the politics of difference.

According to Abebe Zegeye and Richard Harris, the concept of identity

is a primary concept for understanding the relationship between the personal and the social realms; the individual and the group; the cultural and the political, the relations between social groups, and the influence of the media on social relations. "Identity" refers to forms of individual personhood or self-image as well as to the collective self-image shared by the members of social groups and communities" (Rousse 1995). On the individual level, identity as a definition of personhood refers to uniqueness and differentiation from other people, as well as the sameness or continuity of the self across time and space (Baumeister 1986; Erikson 1969; Murguía, Padilla and Pavel 1991). Identity incorporates the emotional attachments or bonds that individuals often have as a result of their shared membership in social groups (Tajfel 1978). Group membership influences the way in which individuals see themselves, especially if the group is reviled or esteemed.

(Zegeye & Harris 2002: 242)

Given the above, it is crucial to think of identity in the manner in which Stuart Hall's intervention has problematised perceptions regarding the concept. According to Hall, "[i]dentity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in the process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (1994: 392). If apartheid's *raison d'être* was to assign, foist and maintain identities, it is no wonder that the Marxist critical perspective was wary of such a concept and the manner in which Zegeye and Harris see its deployment in society. Hall suggests that

identities are consistently in flux rather than being primordial essences. With respect to identity then as a crucial aspect of representation, it makes sense that in societies that underwent brutal slavery and colonisation, the issue of identity should be an acute and abiding one. And how does a disputed identity then make the transition into a literary one? A useful comparison, from a South African perspective, might be drawn from the Caribbean region, where plantation slavery and later schemes of indenture-ship left in their wake diverse groups of people who were cut off from their communities of origin (Dash 2004: 785-796).

In South Africa, the creolised community that arose given similar circumstances was, in Mohamed Adhikari's assessment, three broad historical paradigms which account for the construction of Coloured identities: the essentialist, instrumentalist and the social constructionism schools of thought. With the first, it was assumed that Coloured identity was a result of miscegenation and that such racial hybridity was the very essence of Colouredness, while the second school posited that Coloured identity was an imposition from white supremacists on a weak and vulnerable group. Positions in this respect ranged from seeing Coloured identity as a device for excluding people of mixed race from the dominant society to viewing it as a product of deliberate divide-and-rule strategies by the ruling white minority to prevent black South Africans from forming a united front against racism and exploitation. The third paradigm emerged in the latter half of the 1980s in response to the inadequacies of both the essentialist and instrumentalist approaches. It criticises both these approaches for their tendency to accept Coloured identity as given and to portray it as fixed. It berates both approaches, denying Coloured people a significant role in the making of their own identity and strives to demonstrate the complexity of Coloured identity. Most importantly, as in the Caribbean case, the social constructionism school stresses the agency of Coloured people in the making of their own identity, adhering to Hall's assertion that identity is constructed within, rather than outside, representation and is in constant flux (Adhikari 2004: 33-26).

By contrast, Dash provides a historicist approach to Caribbean identities, beginning with the examination of the concept immediately following Haiti's independence after 1804, noting the ambivalences engendered by Cesairean Negritude, Fanon's critical interventions, Derek Walcott's celebration of the creolised identity leading up to the crucial intervention of Eduard Glissant. Glissant, much like Hall, focuses on an identity that arises out of the Caribbean Sea as a zone of submarine rooting, thereby insisting on the need for a model of belonging that transcends the polarising alterity of ethnocentric thought and conceives of the Caribbean in terms of "a multiple series of relationships". Glissant's problematisation of identity politics in the region is based on the key theoretical construct of "relation" or interrelating, thereby achieving a radical redefinition of the concept of the

subject and the process of subjectification since the subject is always unstable, in flux, and hybrid. It is the interrogation of essentialist theories of identity that has led Glissant, much like the social constructionism school in South Africa, to use models of chaos theory and the Deleuzian rhizome in order to describe an unstable system of identity formation (Dash 2004: 792-794).

The literary identity of a Coloured person has had a checkered history in South African literature, and Vernon February's study, *Mind Your Colour: The "Coloured" Stereotype in South African Literature* (1981), is still a landmark text in how it charts the various ways by which Coloured people have been textually misrepresented over the years. This literary identity emanates from the social identity that has, over the years, accrued negative associations although recently there have been obvious shifts in perspectives as witnessed by the portrayal of the protagonists in Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* (2001) and Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* (2001), for instance. In her own study of the stereotypical and negative associations attached to the Coloured identity, Zimitri Erasmus, in line with February, lists the following associations: immorality, sexual promiscuity, illegitimacy, impunity and untrustworthiness. Adhukari further adds attributes such as criminality, gangsterism, drug and alcohol abuse, and vulgar behaviour (Adhukari 2004: 14). The furore occasioned by the insensitive article "Jou ma se kinders" in the *Sunday World* of February 28th 2011 by Kuli Roberts painfully brought to the fore the myriad stereotypes that the Coloured people engender even as a social identity.

If the above theorising is taken to the literary field, it is apparent that writers in South Africa have been prodding and probing aspects of identity and miscegenation for a considerable period, as witnessed in André P. Brink's *A Chain of Voices* (1982). *A Chain of Voices* addresses and interrogates aspects of identity as far back as 18th-century South Africa, when the slave trade was still normative in economic relations between settlers and the natives, together with those imported from Asia, Mozambique and as far as Angola. The text looks retrospectively at the history of white-black confrontations on the farms that produced much of the wealth of the English Empire without the rights that had to go with such production of wealth. It is a precursor of Mda's *Madonna* in the manner that it keenly observes the often excruciating white-black relationships at a time when the liberal Cape Colony's laws on slavery and the behaviour expected of the slave-owners were nothing but window dressing. As Brink observes, most of his writings have been an attempt to accept responsibility for his society and his time (1983: 29).²

2. Brink's engagement with South African history as against Coetzee's strident disavowal of it as impetus for his writings remains an intriguing divide between these writers. See for instance Florence Stratton's article, "Imperial Fictions: J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*" (Brink 2002: 83-104).

For Brink, the slave period remains crucial in our apprehension of contemporary issues of black-white relationships on the farms. Much has been made of attempts to ameliorate the lot of the slaves, but it proved to be a case of trying to make do with the bad business rather than eradicating the evil it engendered (p. 155). Thus in his text Brink writes about a shameful period of South African history where local inhabitants, their progeny and foreigners had to bend to the will of the coloniser, often dying in the process of making the livelihood of the master race a reality. But far from pamphletting, Brink observes in minute detail the excesses visited on the colonised. In this instance, slave women were not the preserve of male slaves as they were shared between masters and the slaves, and the children so produced were not anyone's, but property of the master and future employees. Slave women, in particular, bore the brunt of miscegenation and illegitimate children whose paternity remained clouded in mystery and created Coloured identity in the Cape.

In *A Chain of Voices*, Galant, the main character, remains fatherless because of the numerous visitations his mother, a young girl of 15, had to endure before his conception: "But he might have been anyone else's too, anyone of the many who'd come from far and wide to lie with Lys, some of them faceless in the night and gone before daybreak. Galant had many fathers. No one is his father and everybody is" (1982: 2).³ It is with such misgivings about his paternity, therefore, that Galant's identity is controversial. His own mother disowns him while her sexual abuse continues unabated with the "master" in the lead:

Lys refused to take him (Galant). She was all set against the child, refusing even to look at him, lay there crying day and night. She remained ill for a long time. One night Piet came in demanding: "How's the slave girl? It's getting time." Lys turned her back, drawing her knees to her chest and started whimpering, not like a woman but like a dog. Piet forced his way to her.

(CV 28)

Galant grows up with a warped sense of identity, resentful of the master class and yet aware that they are no better than he is. Crucially, he grows up interacting with the next generation of the master class, Hester, Barend and Nicolaas. *Oubaas* Piet parcels him out to *Baas* Nicolaas, the same son with whom he grew up and whom he outsmarted (CV 126). His relationship with Hester, Piet's stepdaughter, creates further tension in the text whose resolution is left to a future we are not privy to, since, when they copulate,

3. Subsequent references to *Chain of Voices* are indicated by CV followed by page number(s) only.

we are made to understand that she might be with child.⁴ And yet it would seem as though he and Hester perpetuate miscegenation even as he dies for having led the rebellion against her brother-in-law, Nicolaas. His is the ultimate revenge for a life of being deemed a “nothing”.

The novel is permeated by violence in all forms, and Rosemary Jolly’s observations concerning this part of the text are well founded:

[O]ne of the most disturbing aspects of *A Chain of Voices* for its most observant of reviewers is its portrayal of violence as intimate, and therefore, in some sense, desirable. The depiction of violent relationships as intimate is particularly evident in the beating scenes.

(Jolly 1996: 36)

The observation by Jolly can be explained by the fact that Brink has been writing for a long time as an Afrikaner dissident whose first-hand observations about farm life can be explained by the fact that his father, a magistrate, was re-posted every couple of years, so André grew up and went to school in several different villages and towns in South Africa: Vrede, Jagersfontein, Brits, Douglas, Sabie and Lydenburg. His mother, a teacher, inspired his love of literature, especially the English classics (<http://andre-brink.book.co.za/about>).

Brink therefore has intimate knowledge of such relationships. Thus he would not wish to subtract from the narrative aspects of excruciating South African material history. His novel, *A Dry White Season*, looks more at the visitations of a son’s activism on his family and how his father’s employer’s involvement draws the mildly apolitical Afrikaner to a tragic confrontation with the state. Thus the “disturbing aspects” that reviewers struggle with are not because of the veracity of Brink’s imagination but rather with their own discomfort.

Coloured people were almost always concentrated in the now Western Cape Province, where Africans in general were in the minority (though this might have been changing and will continue to do so post-1996 with an unprecedented internal and external migration of black South Africans and others from outside the South African borders). It cannot come as a surprise that for the then National Party, Coloureds were seen as kith and kin since the beginning of the twentieth century. As Adhukari observes, it is the Coloured people’s assimilationism, together with the insecurities engendered by their intermediate status, that meant that in daily life the most consistent – and insistent – element in the expression of Coloured identity was an association with whiteness and a concomitant distancing from African-ness, whether in the value placed on fair skin and straight hair, in the prizing of white ancestors in the family lineage, or in taking pride in the degree to which they were able to conform to standards of Western bourgeois culture.

4. See Margaret Lenta on this same point (2010: 103).

But, the paradox has been that, in doing so, Coloured people were then encumbered with the stigma of racial hybridity. The import of white supremacist discourse about the origins of the Coloured people was that they were an unwanted and unfortunate consequence of the colonisation of southern Africa and a source of embarrassment to the supremacist establishment as reminders of past lapses in morality (Adhukari 2004: 11). This close need to identify with whites has played a significant political role in how “Coloured” identity was constituted and understood. As Afrikaner identity was created and manipulated through language, so the Coloured constituency came to play a major role as this community was seen as “brown” Afrikaners (cf. Hofmeyer 1987: 95-123). The term Coloureds used to mean all inhabitants of the Cape Colony who were designated “non-Europeans”, and only changed after the Anglo-Boer War as the country was being remade to accommodate the Afrikaners in the new dispensation leading up to the Union of South Africa. Ian Goldin observes how the term kept changing over time:

The term “Coloured”, until the turn of the twentieth century, generally referred to all non-European people. The use of the term was thus not unlike that in current use in North America. The official Cape census of 1875 included in the category of “Coloured” all “non-European” people, including “Kafir proper”. The 1891 census maintained the same distinctions, declaring that the Cape population “falls naturally into two main classes, the European or White and Coloured” In the latter half of the nineteenth century the term “Coloured” referred chiefly to all “non-European people”. Yet, by 1904 this wide definition was no longer acceptable. In marked contrast to the census of 1890, the Cape census of 1904 distinguished between three “clearly defined race groups in this colony: White, Bantu and Coloured”. Included in the last category were “all intermediate shades between the first two”.

(Goldin 1987a: 158)

Goldin’s observations thus give the lie to the accepted fact that Coloured identity was used initially for people of “mixed race”. With identity being such an area of contestation, it is clear that the term was progressively used to include and exclude. Significantly, by 1904 a new term was brought to bear on “Kafirs”, and from then on the term “Bantu” was used. Such reconstitution of “Coloured” identity gave a keen sense of identity that was tenaciously held on to. This holding onto an identity was given political weight and entrenchment, in its formative stage of development, by pronouncements such as those given by Lord Selborne, the then High Commissioner of South Africa, who felt that

[our] objective should be to teach the Coloured people to give their loyalty to the White population. It seems to me sheer folly to classify them with the

Natives, and by treating them as Natives to force them away from their natural allegiance to the Whites and making common cause with the Natives.
(Goldin 1987a: 164)

From such beginnings Coloured identity was always going to be putty in the hands of politicians. As early as 1924, the then Prime Minister of South Africa, Barry Hertzog, sought to entrench Coloured identity and privilege by enfranchising “Coloured” men through his “Coloured Persons” Bill, which failed to secure the necessary two-thirds majority in Parliament. The Bill sought to enfranchise the “Coloured” males and totally disenfranchise and segregate Africans (p. 165) so that when the Nationalist Party (NP) came to power in 1948 the need to divide and rule the Coloured constituency was still a germane political ploy. The notion of *volk* woven by language and race made it impossible for the Coloured community to be included in its folds. Nor could the Party agree on the necessity of a Coloured homeland, then a central plank of the NP. To forestall Coloured people from “passing as white”, the Population Registration Act, the Immorality Amendment Act, The Mixed Marriages Act and the Group Areas Act closed the minor avenues open for those Coloureds wishing to exploit these fissures in the apartheid edifice. To placate sections of the Coloured community, the Coloured Labour Preference Policy was implemented in 1949. This policy sought to achieve two objectives: enforce apartheid through the denial of African residence and employment rights in the Western Cape, and incorporate “Coloureds” through giving them labour preference. The initial concerns that Lord Selborne raised, it may be observed, were partially fulfilled by such an employment policy. The architect of apartheid, Hendrik Verwoerd, recognised the dilemma that the Coloured community faced in South Africa. He acknowledged the “impracticality of a Coloured homeland”, but explained that preference should be seen in these terms:

If the minority group becomes the tail that wags the dog ... surely it is much better to give such a minority limited opportunities ... ensuring at the same time by means of an entrenched section in the constitution that the white man retains absolute supremacy.

(Cited in Goldin 1987a: 175)

The Madonna of Excelsior

Zakes Mda’s *The Madonna of Excelsior* converges and diverges significantly from the concerns of *A Chain of Voices*. The central concern remains white-black (sexual) relationships in the hinterland. The other ways in which both texts are intricately linked is the manner in which the material history of South Africa is seen as fertile ground for literary production: Brink uses court proceedings of an actual 18th-century slave insurrection to

portray a vivid account of the episode (much like the narrative of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (Styron 1968), while Mda revisits the scandal of the early 1970s in the Free State involving a case of miscegenation in a small rural town. In both texts we are confronted with the brutalities, the absurdities and the incomprehensible limitations of racial identities. The one difference remains the periods depicted by each text; yet it would seem that while Mda depicts an enduring, historically traumatic memory particularly for Excelsior but South Africa in general, he wonders how much has necessarily changed for farm workers and farming communities linked by blood, history and locality. Of course, not much has really changed for farming communities in South Africa, and it is still possible to find white farmers brutally raping African women, with seeming impunity.⁵

In *The Madonna of Excelsior*, the central concern is with the miscegenation that resulted from the copulation of African women and Afrikaner farmers and members of the community of Excelsior. Given that apartheid based itself on the separation of the races, this case came as a major embarrassment for the ruling Nationalist Party, for whom miscegenation was an anathema. According to Goldin, the survival of the white race, Nationalists insisted, was threatened by the smallest trace of non-white

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5. The *Sowetan Sunday World* carried a report whose lead reads as follows: “A Limpopo farmer appeared in court last week in connection with raping and pistol-whipping two women after he offered them a lift”. And yet a member of the *Blanke Bevrydingsbeweging*, interviewed on television, had the following to say about people living in South Africa:

There are basically two groups of people in South Africa: the white race and the non-white mud races. In order to protect its purity, the white race should have no contact with the mud races. God created the[m] superior to the mud races and it is consequently the white race’s duty to avoid being contaminated by the mud races. For this reason, whites should not send their children to schools where there are African, Indian and Coloured children. Whites should guard against intimate relations with the lesser races. To sleep with a black is like sleeping with an animal; and we know that it is against God’s law. It is God’s will that the superior race should never mix with the inferior mud races.

(20 April 2003)

While this reference might seem dated, in South Africa it remains important to observe that the farming community is intractable to change. The human rights of farm workers are trampled on daily, and in 2003 in its report on the Inquiry into the Human Rights Violation in Farming Communities the South African Human Rights Commission stated: “Very often those who live within rural and farming communities are vulnerable. There is a sense that the Constitution and Bill of Rights have yet to impact on the day to day lives of people living in these communities” (<http://www.spp.org.za/resources/-A%20Directory%20of%20Support%20Organisations.pdf>).

blood, and thus Coloureds were singled out for particular attention (Goldin 1987b: 170).

In the text we are introduced to the lives of three main female characters, Niki, Mmampe and Maria, who stay in a shanty town outside the main town of Excelsior. While they are all in their late teens, Mmampe and Maria are more knowledgeable of the ways of the world than Niki. One Sunday afternoon, while foraging for dry cow dung to use as fuel for cooking and warming their homes, they come across Johannes Smit, the quintessential stereotype of the white farmer (“boer”) with the characteristic whip (called “sjambok” in South Africa) in hand. He offers the girls money as an incentive to “play a game” with them. Niki’s naivety is apparent when she recognises the outlines of the game without knowing its intricacies:

Niki only knew of the game from fireside stories. She was not looking forward to it. She had heard of white farmers whose great sport was to waylay black girls in the fields. They chased them around and played harrowing games with them. She had never experienced the games herself. And now it seemed it was her turn. Hairy Buttocks was standing in front of her brandishing a whip.

(Mda 2002: 15)⁶

Thus, as Mda records, “From the sins of our mothers all these things flow” (*ME* 268). Not only is Smit infatuated with Niki, but he also feels an irresistible urge to dominate, subdue and conquer her. The scene of her initial rape makes for grim reading:

Deep in the sunflower field, Johannes Smit pulled off Niki’s Terylene skirt. She tried to hold on to it, but he had the strength of ten demons. He threw her on the damp ground. Then he pulled down her panties and took them off ... he slapped her and ordered her to shut up. Her screams were now muffled with his hand on her mouth.

(*ME* 16)

Niki is thus marked with a spot that, like her *chubabas* (painful caked growth on the face marred by hydroquinone used in skin-lightening creams) later on, she cannot erase, cure or administer. Smit exerts a relentless pressure on her until she relents, only to stop later after multiple copulations with him when she realises the folly of her ways. But the stage is set for her seeming destiny in life.

Mda’s charting of Niki’s brief flirtation with interracial sex reveals the extent to which small towns and their inhabitants are held hostage by their close proximity to one another. There is little offered, in such an environment, by way of escape. As soon as she is able to, Niki has to start working

6. Subsequent references to *The Madonna of Excelsior* are indicated by *ME* followed by the page number(s) only.

in the town of Excelsior, either as domestic worker or unskilled labourer, and it is thus that we later find her working in a local butchery owned by the town's mayor. The shanty town's name itself is instructive in its lack of originality: Mahlatswetsa means "place of washing", implying the largely domestic vocation needed by whites from Excelsior and the surrounding farms, and foisted on the shanty town's inhabitants. As beautiful as she is, she is seen and framed as a temptress, even when she marries Pule, a man from the same shanty town of Mahlatswetsa, who works in the goldfields of Welkom and is thus away for long stretches of time. Smit cries himself silly on Niki's wedding day and nurses a grudge against Niki. His rage makes of him a constant irritant.

At this stage of her married life, with a young son named Viliki, Niki works for Stephanus Cronje who, we read, is the secretary of the local branch of the ruling National Party and the mayor of Excelsior (*ME* 22). Her marriage to Pule is tumultuous since he is very insecure because of his periodic absences. Pule decides to deprive Niki of his company but continues to support his family financially. Smit, for his part, still pursues Niki, whose working relationship with Cronje's wife is fraught with difficulties laced by Cornelia Cronje's deep-seated racism. One fateful day Cornelia forces Niki to undress in full view of all the co-workers in her butchery on suspicion of having stolen meat, and thereby plants seeds of revenge in Niki:

She stood there like the day she was born. Except that when she was born, there was no shame in her. No hurt. No embarrassment. She raised her eyes and saw among the oglers Stephanus Cronje in his khaki suit and brown sandals. And little Tjaart. Little Tjaart in his neat school uniform of grey shorts, white shirt, green tie and grey blazer with green stripes.

(*ME* 41)

Cornelia's humiliation of Niki is particularly striking, but not unimaginable as she cannot conceive of the workers as being exactly human. She makes light of the incident, while, for Niki, the incident provides "dark motives of vengeance" (*ME* 42). From such an unreflected, crass act Cornelia makes it easy for Niki to accept Stephanus's overtures after Smit blurts out the secret they share: that at some point Niki was his "padkos" [(food) provisions for a journey, ed.] (*ME* 49). As they copulate in some field that night of the disclosure, for Niki the wheel has turned full circle:

She did not see Stephanus Cronje, owner of Excelsior Slaghuis. She saw Madam Cornelia's husband. And he was inside her. She was gobbling up Madam Cornelia's husband, with the emphasis on Madam. And she had him entirely in her power. Chewing him to pieces Ag shame, Madam Cornelia's husband. She had the power of life and death over her.

(*ME* 50)

Thus the opening sentence, “All these things flow from the sins of our mothers” (*ME* 3), assumes resonance, incorporating Cornelia’s stupidity, Niki’s vengeful spirit and loneliness and Pule’s desertion. Having been marked as an irredeemable temptress by Smit’s lust, Niki willingly uses her sexuality to inflict a more humiliating hurt on Cornelia Cronje, even once boasting of their lovemaking on Cornelia’s metal antique bed: “Niki’s greatest triumph!” (*ME* 53). Afrikaner nationalism, built as it was on racial purity, had also framed Afrikaner women as the epitome of purity, sexual desire, and correct values, a practice which is hardly original considering the same operative mentality of the southern communities in the United States of America at one point in history. It would therefore not do for Cornelia and Niki to be equal as sexual beings.

Having started this trend of illicit sex, the party is expanded to include Niki’s initial group partners in crime, Mmampe and Maria. For their part, Smit and Cronje expand their circle to include Reverend François Bornman and Groot-Jan Lombard, pillars of Excelsior’s civic community. The reverend, as the representative of the Dutch Reformed Church, was the spiritual leader of the community while Lombard had taken part in the enactment of the 1838 Great Trek as part of its centennial anniversary, itself a powerful myth feeding Afrikaner nationalism. The Great Trek took place when Cape free burghers migrated from the then Cape Colony to escape what they saw as British oppression. This august group copulates in Smit’s barn, and from this “Coloured” children are born, who plunge the town into a scandal that threatens to topple the National Party government (*ME* 100-103). Niki and Cronje’s porcelain-like daughter, Popi, is born with blue eyes and flowing locks of hair showing her to be of “mixed” race. Pertinently, she is a female version of Tjaart, Cronje’s son with Cornelia.

Mda’s intricate text begins to question the morality of the Immorality Act itself. As the case of the Excelsior adulterers – now expanded to nineteen suspects – explodes, it soon becomes apparent that all over the *platteland* one can find living symbols of the absurdities of the act, and by extension, apartheid itself. In one scene, just before she is arrested, Niki attempts to “brown” Popi over a brazier, a truly bizarre act of desperation. In this manner, Niki does produce “a truly coloured baby ... with red and blue blotches all over”:

She held a naked Popi above the fire, smoking the pinkness out of her. Both heat and smoke would surely brown her and no one would say she was a light-skinned child again. The baby whooped, then yelled, as the heat of the brazier roasted her little body and the smoke stung her nose and nostrils. Cow-dung is gentle in reasonable doses. But this was an overdose.

(*ME* 66)

For the actors, the case of miscegenation brings with it mixed results. Cronje kills himself in disgrace (confirming Niki’s power of death and life

over Cornelia). Reverend Bornman attempts to do the same while all he accomplishes is losing one of his eyes (surely a gesture at the wilful self-blinding of his great church teachings), and Niki and Pule's marriage falls apart. Only Mmampe, Smit and Maria, as the original and incorrigible indulgers, find the whole episode hilarious. The society mocks the black women for being temptresses, while the white males come across as "innocents" who were lured into a trap. For Reverend Bornman, the easiest way out is to seek solace in the Good Book, arguing that

[i]t was the work of the devil, he said. The devil sent black women to tempt him and move him away from the path of righteousness. The devil had always used the black female to tempt the Afrikaner. It was the battle that was raging within individual Afrikaner men. A battle between lust and loathing. The devil made the Afrikaner to covertly covet the black woman while publicly detesting her. It was his fault that he had not been strong enough to resist the temptation. The devil made him do it.

(ME 87)

In this exculpation of guilt, Mda makes it patently clear that the mythology of the above-average sexuality of the black woman is now used for casting blame. And it is in this way that this constant theme of South African inter-sexuality becomes stereotypical, for then it is used to frame (black) women in ahistorical and utterly ignoble terms, and shades of Alan Paton's *Too Late the Phalarope*, where the black "temptress" is given no voice at all, in a novel replete with church, state functionaries and the police. The future and its challenges thus belong to the products of these sexual unions.

Confronting "Race" and Identity

When *The Madonna of Excelsior* opens, we meet Popi as a very young child of five years, whose mesmerising presence in this small town serves as a reminder of what had transpired previously with what was then dubbed the "Excelsior 19". With Pule having abandoned his family, Niki is reduced to the status of forager at the gates of white people's garden parties (ME 5-10). Though most of the white inhabitants know her, the animus between herself and Cornelia Cronje is still very strong:

She was face-to-face with Cornelia Cronje, Tjaart's mother. Five years had changed her. She looked old and tired. Cornelia recognised Niki too. And glared at her. Niki did not cringe. She did not cast her eyes down as was expected of her. Cornelia laughed. It was hollow and crude.

(ME 9)

Popi, in this episode, also meets with Tjaart for the first time, who accuses Niki of having stolen Popi since she could not possibly be her daughter,

being, as he puts it, a “boesman” (a derogatory term for “Coloured” people taken from English “bushman” and Dutch “bosjesman”). Reduced to this level, Niki has no choice but to pose naked for Father Frans Claerhout of the Roman Catholic Church and thus manages to place food on the table.⁷ Popi thus grows up with Viliki in Niki’s shack, knowing very little of the details surrounding her coming into being. She accepts, for want of any other knowledge basis, the fact that she is Popi Pule, though the taunts of children her own age set her apart even as she wonders at her own features, particularly her hair. One can imagine the confusion the child feels as she is rejected by other children her own age. Moving from Niki’s own observations, we learn that Popi never really laughs:

It was good to hear Popi laugh. Just as she rarely cried, she rarely laughed. Very few things made her laugh. Yet she was the source of other people’s laughter. When other children saw her in the street, they shouted, “Boesman! Boesman!” And then they ran away laughing. At first she used to cry. Then she decided that she would not play in the street again. She would play alone in her mother’s yard. She was only good for her mother’s ashy yard. She did not deserve to play with other children in the street.

(*ME* 110-111)

Ralph Goodman posits that what Mda conscientiously does with the derogatory term is to undercut the smugness of those who persist in the mindset of racial purity occasioned as far back as the colonial era. He notes that

[c]olonial 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 to not bear the brunt the outward configuration of miscegenation/creolisation as Popi does. Here, as elsewhere in Mda’s novel, the post-colonial goal is to redefine identity as open-ended, denying the existence – and discursive usefulness – of a stable, unitary signification and offering instead a complex of ambivalent discourses. Above all, *The Madonna of Excelsior* is an exposé of the evils that arise in a society in which “race” is used as the primary and official marker of identity.

(Goodman 2009: 309-310)

Popi thus experiences social ostracism at a very young age, hating her hair that is an instant marker of who she is. In such a small community, there are no avenues of escape, and she grows up in near isolation. Her mother compounds her isolation; Niki withdraws almost totally from the community of Mahlatswetsa (*ME* 119). Mda plots the events surrounding the children’s divergent lives that would soon culminate in a confrontation of its own, with

7. Frans Claerhout, a Belgian-born artist (1919-2006), resided in South Africa from 1946 till his passing away in Bloemfontein. He ministered to the people of the Free State well over half a century.

unexpected results. Viliki, when not at home and protecting his sister, joins the underground movement that seeks political change and emancipation. While Popi stays at home, Tjaart joins the army as conscript to fight for, and protect, white rule in South Africa, being the older one of the two. From this tiny hamlet the broader strokes of the South African polity are expertly drawn out, and all the children react to the massive societal changes in their different ways.

With political freedom for all definitely about to happen, the last throes of apartheid begin to claim many victims as the defenders of the system doggedly fight on. Even in small hamlets such as Excelsior, Viliki's Movement makes its presence felt, and succeeds in drawing more recruits. An unlikely recruit is Popi, who is injured during a demonstration that has a national profile – the demand for the release of all political prisoners – but has little to do with the essential day-to-day life of Excelsior and Mahlatswetsa (*ME* 158). She becomes an enthusiastic recruit, campaigning for the Movement amongst farm-workers shortly before the first democratic elections, and her just reward is to be elected as councillor, while her brother, Viliki, becomes the first black mayor of Excelsior. Tjaart has, in the meantime, been elected as the representative for the Freedom Front, “an alliance of right-wing groupings who had decided to fight for the homeland for the Afrikaner within the system” (*ME* 166). Tjaart's embitterment at the resolution of the South African conundrum, together with Popi's enthusiasm for politics of the downtrodden, sets up the battle lines for what the newly constituted council will fight about. While Tjaart may suspect who she is, Popi at this point has no inkling as to who he is in relation to herself, and their vicious fights are Mda's laboratory experiment of those whose umbilical cords are buried in the country. From the very onset, and with the issue about which language would be used to record the minutes of the council's deliberations, Popi and Tjaart serve to epitomise a sibling rivalry that bespeaks the rivalry within greater South Africa (*ME* 188). The Mahlatswetsa community had long accepted Popi, together with the children of Mmampe and Maria, as outright Basotho and has forgotten the epithet “boesman”. Tjaart, while he never calls her “boesman” again, manages to inflict on Popi serious psychological blows at her physiognomy, beginning with her “unshaven” legs (*ME* 194), a sensitive point to Popi, who grew up hiding her hair and never knew what depilation was. Popi in this instance confronts her body and what it means to her, what her identity is, and how to resolve it. She is given advice and succour by Lizette de Vries, the representative of the New National Party, who entreats her to love herself and be proud of her beauty.

De Vries gradually draws Popi out of her identity shell, out of her social isolation and as she does so, she blossoms. She immerses herself in community development issues, and educates herself in the local library. She realises the shallowness of political involvement in a situation where rapa-

ciousness and greed become the norm. Most importantly, she realises that her anger at Tjaart stems from their being so alike that their anger is really deflected anger (*ME* 231). Popi is able to say about herself, “My shame went away with my anger” (*ME* 260), and liberates herself from the confines of race and identity crises. The same cannot be said of Tjaart, whose bitterness wells up in him; he becomes bedridden and requests Popi to visit him. A reconciliation of sorts is worked out between them as they acknowledge Stephanus Cronje as “their father”. As Tjaart offers her shaving cream, it is Popi who articulates her identity and (new) persona: “I’ll take the cream, Tjaart, because in my culture they say it is rude to refuse a present. But I will never use it. I love my body the way it is” (*ME* 263). In an instructive reading of the incident that may be quoted at length, Ralph Goodman posits that

Popi is fighting to remain compassionate and patient, while asserting her won value, in contradiction of apartheid values. Tjaart, in the midst of his apparently kind and flattering gift, persists in defining her in terms of both gendered and racial power relations. His kindness is flawed by his deeply seated obliviousness: he fails to appreciate the inherent humanity of both women and black people and he is unaware of the assumptions that have led to this. Like every other white person in the novel, he lacks the courage to acknowledge that the way in which he defines himself is dependent on defining black people as inferior – an effect of “the deep-seated nature of racist socialization” (Tuckwell 2002: 123). Mda here creates the painful irony of a reconciliation scene that fails to create reconciliation between Tjaart and Popi, even though they are united because they share a father and look so much alike ... facts which, under other circumstances, might have made for real reconciliation. Their inability, even on Tjaart’s deathbed, to acknowledge and exploit their common parentage for mutual healing dramatizes the damage of apartheid, gathering the sadness of the text to a head. Here, as elsewhere in the text, racist exclusionary practices and structures focus the reader on the power relations on which institutionalised racism depends. Mda’s analysis of this problem highlights the axiom expressed by Kenan Malik: “We do not define races because biological data compels us to do so. Rather, society begins with an a priori division of humanity into different races for which it subsequently finds a rationale in certain physical characteristics The clue to the importance of race in Western thought, therefore, lies not in biology but in society”.

(Goodman 1996: 95)

I believe what Mda seeks to do is to break the ingrained lack of “Coloured” identity with its “black half”. Yet it is a rather irritating aspect of the text that the character, Popi, remains so unconcerned with her genealogy until the very last moments in the text. She is also trapped in an unlikely asexuality that is slightly overdone, for at the close of the novel she is thirty years old and a neophyte. It might be that Mda does not wish to paint Popi with the “temptress” brush of her mother and her friends, but her hermit-

like approach to life borders on the unbelievable. It is only at the very close of the novel that she is seen in miniskirts, with her hair down and looking gloriously beautiful. But these are minor observations in a novel of lyrical beauty that highlights the possibilities of the future South Africa. It is a significant addition to the literature of race and identity from one of the country's impressive writers.

Conclusion

The ongoing engagements with identity in South Africa point to the multiple ways in which further interrogations of the concept can be undertaken. South African identities are interlaced with ethnicity, regionalism, religion, tribalism and "race". For creative writers, who should be the conscience of their society, this represents a major challenge to speak "the truth" of the locality, showing its unique features while never succumbing to triumphalism, nihilism and despair. While there remain many unsettled issues, it is germane, at least, that the society is attempting to look for ways towards possible futures that do not point to the past (cf. Duncan 2002). Coloured people's sense of identity is an ongoing discourse that cannot be wished away by the politics of non-racialism.

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Tihalo Sam Radithalo
 raditsi@unisa.ac.za
 University of South Africa