

SHIFTING BOUNDARIES AND ALTERITY IN POSTCOLONIAL FICTION: *THE MADONNA OF EXCELSIOR* BY ZAKES MDA

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Abstract: The initial objective of this paper is to investigate the state of the art of postcolonial literature today, discussing some of its definitions and subsequent broadenings of meaning, so as to understand the contemporary postcolonial condition as the experience of living permanently in a shifting boundary. The subsequent analysis of *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002), authored by South-African Zakes Mda, seeks to reveal how otherness is constructed and interrogated in this novel, written in the context of reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa, where one must slip between past and present.

Resumo: O objetivo inicial deste artigo é investigar a situação da literatura pós-colonial na atualidade, discutindo algumas de suas definições e alargamentos de sentido posteriores, até se chegar à percepção de uma condição pós-colonial/contemporânea como a experiência de viver permanentemente numa fronteira deslizando. Em seguida, é realizada a análise de *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002) do sul-africano Zakes Mda, buscando revelar como a alteridade é construída e desconstruída nesse romance, escrito num contexto de conciliação na África do Sul pós-apartheid, em que o deslizamento entre passado e presente precisa ser efetuado.

Keywords: Postcolonial literature. South Africa. Zakes Mda. Shifting boundary.

Palavras-chave: Literatura pós-colonial. África do Sul. Zakes Mda. Fronteira deslizando.

Living in the shifting boundary: the postcolonial condition

Postcolonialism has undergone important conceptual changes in the past decades. One of its first definitions in literary criticism was given by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (1989) as follows:

[W]e use the term ‘post-colonial’, however, to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression. We also suggest that it is most appropriate as the term for the new cross-cultural criticism which has emerged in recent years and for the discourse through which this is constituted. [...] What each of these literatures [produced by these post-colonial cultures] has in common beyond their special and distinctive regional characteristics is that they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre. (ASHCROFT; GRIFFITHS; TIFFIN; 1989, p. 2)

Such conceptualization was still too grounded in the reality of the nation-state, which emerged in many once-colonized areas. From about the late 1990s, postcolonial studies began to question the effectiveness of an investigative strategy that insisted exclusively on conflicting relations between metropolises and colonies and their outcomes and consequences. At that moment a change in the critical paradigm was taking place, with the diminishing crystallization around the experience of the nation-state and the substitution by a broader, more fluid, more transitive and, therefore, more complex configuration. Diasporic cartographies began to take shape as a significant approach to postcolonial issues, focusing not on theories and portrayals of fixed origins, but on the numerous displacements, forced or not, of oppressed people across different parts of the world. Thus, the national basis that had thus far given support to postcolonial criticism melted away in the face of a load of successive and increasingly intense interrogation, and was then replaced by a transnational substrate to connect diverse territories, cultures and languages.

Ordinarily people tend to think of diaspora as forced collective displacements, although this is but one kind of diaspora perpetuated by biblical and/ or historical tradition. There are many other types of diasporas, however, and not all of them collectively organized (in the sense that not all of them move a block of people in the same direction at the same time) or forced. In fact, diaspora has to do with movement rather than force. According to Avtar Brah (1996),

[...][a]t the heart of the notion of diaspora is the image of a journey. Yet not every journey can be understood as diaspora. Diasporas are clearly not the same as casual travel. Nor do they normatively refer to temporary sojourns. Paradoxically, diasporic journeys are essentially about settling down, about putting roots “elsewhere”. (BRAH, 1996, p. 182)

In this view, diasporas are related to journeys, both collective or individual, forced or voluntary, but primarily linked to the experience of establishing a permanent dwelling in a strange place. ‘Home’, in this sense, has several implications, meaning both the place of departure or origin and the host territory, which can be felt as a place of relief for the woes that led to the departure, as well as an imaginary formation that hardly corresponds to the situation experienced in reality. ‘Home’ can be either what was left behind, what is found anew, both or neither of them. Thus, diasporas weaken solid crystallizations about locations and belongings, throwing travelers into a shifting and unstable space.

The concepts and metaphors connected to the processes of diaspora began to be used from the 1990s onwards to translate the developments and movements associated with ethnic, social and political minorities in distinct contexts, which brought new breath to postcolonial studies, enabling them to produce effective analyses even though so much time has elapsed since the historical period of decolonization.

One of these metaphors is the Black Atlantic, defined by Paul Gilroy (1998, 2001) as a transnational alternative to think about the cultural history of numerous black populations around the world. It is a formation that has been shaped by these peoples’ displacements across the continents bordering the Atlantic Ocean. The Black Atlantic was configured by the big black diaspora caused by slavery, but also by other numerous crossings in every direction and for personal, cultural, economic or political reasons. It

is such an important configuration because it transcends the structures of the nation-state and the limits of ethnic and national particularity. In Gilroy's own words, the Black Atlantic is "a deterritorialized, multiplex and anti-national basis for the affinity or 'identity of passions' between diverse black populations" (GILROY, 1998, p. 18).

However, in no way can this identity of passions be understood as a homogenous mode of experiencing oppression. The suffering shared by different black populations does not prevent the creation of specificities in the dynamic space that is the Black Atlantic. Although the fate of those who remained, say, in Africa and those who have moved to Europe or America is inextricably linked, their experiences, trajectories and strategies of survival ought to be quite different. Postcolonialism is then concerned with what they have in common, but also more importantly with what makes them distinct.

Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan (1996), a relevant theoretician of diasporic cartographies, proposes an important extension to the denotation of the term 'postcolonial':

[...] I am in favor of the allegorization of the 'postcolonial condition': that the allegory be made available as that relational space to be spoken for heterogeneously but relationally by diverse subaltern/oppressed/minority subject positions in their attempts to seek justice and reparation for centuries of unevenness and inequality. (RADHAKHRISHNAN, 1996, p. 177)

So, according to this extension, the term 'postcolonial' may be employed to cover all conditions of subalternity and oppression, as well as to emphasize the resistance to such conditions and the struggle to reach a fairer situation. There is a shift from the colonial situation to a situation of oppression, not necessarily linked with the colonial encounter. For Radhakrishnan, the postcolonial condition functions as a relational space where a politics of solidarity and coalitional transformations can occur amid diverse minorities. In this sense, it is possible to understand postcolonial literatures at large as those produced by oppressed groups within hegemonic societies throughout the world, foregrounding the ways to subvert dominance and reverse its damages.

Putting together these definitions and conceptual broadenings, I will borrow Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of shiftiness to translate the current situation of the contemporary/postcolonial world:

[o]ur existence today is marked by a tenebrous sense of survival, living on the borderlines of the 'present', for which there seems to be no proper name other than the current and controversial shiftiness of the prefix 'post': postmodernism, postcolonialism, postfeminism.... [...] If the jargon of our times — postmodernity, postcoloniality, postfeminism — has any meaning at all, it does not lie in the popular use of the 'post' to indicate sequentiality — *after*-feminism; or polarity - *anti*-modernism. These terms that insistently gesture to the beyond, only embody its restless and revisionary energy if they transform the present into an expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment. (BHABHA, 1994, p. 1-4)

The feeling that we are living in the 'beyond' of a condition, in a shifting boundary between something that has already happened and something that is still to come, something that is not yet given, is perhaps the main characteristic of much of the fiction that today is still called postcolonial. Postcolonial writers establish individual alternatives to represent this phenomenon, but what all of them seem to share is the portrait of a situation that moves from a past-present oppression to a present-future expectation of more equality and balance, though often seen as utter impossibility. Thus, let us understand the postcolonial or postcolonialism as the act of occupying a present time susceptible to transformation and empowerment of historically oppressed groups, a present time marked by the condition of living in the 'beyond', in a shifting boundary.

Bhabha states further that "the boundary becomes the place from which *something begins its presencing* in a movement not dissimilar to the ambivalent articulation of the beyond" (1994, p. 5, emphasis in the original). Then, locating oneself at this boundary zone means inhabiting the interstitial, liminal, in-between space, which is given by the tension, ambivalence, negotiation, and translation of values and meanings between a familiar system and one that is still unknown. It is such difficult, continuous, tense, and unsteady translation that creates new possibilities and experiences. So, the condition of the boundary enriches rather than impoverishes literature:

The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize each other through their projections of ‘otherness’. Where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees — these border and frontier conditions — may be the terrains of world literature. The centre of such a study would neither be the ‘sovereignty’ of natural cultures, nor the universalism of human culture, but a focus on those ‘freak and cultural displacements’ [...] (BHABHA, 1994, p. 12)

In this sense, it seems necessary to address the study of literature in a way that systematically questions any notions of universalism and hierarchy. The literature of the ‘other’, their conceptions of the literary phenomenon, their narrative or lyrical strategies cannot be assessed as deficient or inferior in relation to one’s own literary manifestations and productions. Alterity or ‘otherness’ expressed in literature should not be considered a failure, a mistake, an absence. Literary difference is a consequence of cultural difference and should not be seen as something that diminishes the value of any work. Literary works produced in the border conditions mentioned by Bhabha may be those that have the most to teach us about our time, our world. Literature, seen as a shifting boundary, can help us to liquefy our crystallized assumptions, our solid and often unfair truths about others. Thus, it is under the sign of the shifting boundary that I will next proceed to the analysis of a contemporary African novel, in which otherness plays a fundamental role and the reconciliation of differences is seen as a necessary step in the process of national healing.

Shifting boundaries between past and present

In *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002) South-African Zakes Mda revisits a dark episode in the history of his country that occurred in 1971, when nineteen residents of Excelsior were tried for violating the Immorality Act, which made it a crime sexual intercourse between whites and blacks. In this framework, two important aspects can be immediately observed: 1) the choice to represent an important and grim moment in the history of South Africa, not from its center, its major cities and agents, but choosing as the

main focus a small town in its rural area, inhabited by anonymous Afrikaner farmers and black workers; 2) the portrayal of a fact that really happened, reshaping it with fictional characters and events. Aside from the occasional mention of political leaders like Frederik Willem de Klerk and Nelson Mandela, the only flesh and blood person to be transformed into character in the novel is the Belgian-born priest Frans Claerhout, who is a painter of large canvases influenced by the Flemish expressionists' style of the early twentieth century.

No trace of doubt is left about the priest's existence, since the very dedication of the book is made to him:

On 10 May 2000, together with a phalanx of my daughters, I visited Father Frans Claerhout at his studio in Tweespruit, Free State. I had always wanted to meet him. He had mentored some artist friends of mine, James Dorothy in particular. Claerhout presented me with a book on his work written by Dirk and Dominique Schwager. But first he painted a golden bird on its black flyleaf and signed his name. I dedicate this novel to the bird (MDA, 2007, dedication).

Thus, it is clear that Father Claerhout is not only a real person, but also someone admirable for Mda, who is also a visual artist. Meeting Claerhout has not meant merely getting to know the man responsible for training other fellow artists, but it also seems to have opened the doors for Mda's historiographic metafiction.. The priest-artist's importance, in Mda's narrative universe, corresponds to a transition between a certain kind of reality, for lack of a better term, given by the description of some of Claerhout's well-known paintings, made at the beginning of each chapter, and the representation of the following fictional events. More than that, Claerhout is called Trinity in the novel, being at the same time man, priest, and artist. Then, the creation of this fictional world is triggered by his paintings, and when the protagonist Niki and her daughter pose for him they feel they are "melted into God's own canvas" (MDA, 2007, p. 4).

The Priest's paintings are recurrently described throughout the novel in short present tense sentences, and with a pronounced emphasis on color rather than on any other characteristic. It is as if the multicolored space on the canvases, with its static figures, stuck at an eternal present time, constituted a particular chronotope whose function was to take the reader from the

actuality of reading to the past, to the time of the events that are being (re)told. Therefore, the configuration of the canvases works as a shifting boundary, not only between spaces (pictorial space, narrative space), but also among different times (the reader's time, the time of the events, South Africa's past and present). The translation of the pictorial language into the language of narrative takes place, and in the continuously tense negotiation between them the possibility of a new configuration is created:

A man in blue pants, blue shirt and red beret stands on the black roof of a skewed house one blue night. [...] Wide-eyed heads appear in the blue and white and yellow sky. Milky-white eyes with pitch-black pupils staring at the man. Penetrating the house with their amazed gaze. [...] Bright eyes in the sky see everything. They see a newly-born baby wrapped in white linen. An intrusive star of Bethlehem has sneaked in through one of the two skewed windows and shines on the baby's body. It fills the room with light and yellowness. Two humans kneel on either side of the sleeping baby, hands clasped in prayer. One is a man in blue suit and blue beret. The other is a woman in a blue nun's habit. The big star of Bethlehem suspends itself above her buttocks. It had not been easy for Niki, although this was a second childbearing. The water had broken. The contractions had flooded her body. [...] It should have been smoother. But the baby had other ideas. It gave the midwives its back, and remained stuck in the passage of life. (MDA, 2007, p. 57)

The theme of birth connects the two scenes. In the painting it is possible to see the reworking of the pictorial motif of Christ's birth; in the fictional scene, Niki is giving birth to her second child, a *colored* girl in the designation of her community, i.e., a mestizo offspring of the sexual union between a white Afrikaner and a black woman. The fact that the baby is colored gains more relevance if we consider the fundamental role of color connecting the pictorial world to that of the narrative. It is also the element of alterity because the baby and other people like her are the only ones that are assigned color in a society populated mainly by blacks and whites. Whereas the two groups see one another as "other", the minority bunch of colored people is seen as a third kind of otherness, so to speak. And this is more evident when Niki's mixed child is named Popi, which means 'doll' in Sesotho, her mother's language. She is given this name surely because of her singular

beauty, as the “midwives said the baby looked like a porcelain doll” (MDA, 2007, p. 58). However, the name also points to her status as a ‘non-person’, as she is too white to belong to the black community and too black to be part of the Afrikaner society. Popi is the third element, a frontier traveler par excellence, someone who is between one thing and another, someone whose very existence is inextricably linked to the condition of the beyond described by Homi Bhabha. Bhabha himself refers to the South-African colored as an individual who “represents a hybridity, a difference ‘within’, a subject that inhabits the rim of an ‘in-between’ reality” (BHABHA, 1994, p. 13).

Besides, Popi was not conceived as the result of a loving relationship between her mother and a white man. In fact, Niki’s relations with Afrikaner men follow the pattern of the power relations drawn up by the inequality among genders, ethnicities and social classes in South Africa in the apartheid era. In the first of these connections, the young and poor black woman was trapped and raped by the rich white man, after a series of acts meant to naturalize racial and gender violence, in the inevitability of subjugation before the more powerful, and even in the acceptance of humiliation in exchange for certain facilities that mitigate misery, though but temporarily:

Johannes Smit gave Niki another one rand note.

“This is for your mother,” he said in Sesotho.

Niki took it, even though she expected Johannes Smith to know that her mother had died many years ago. Surely her father must have told him when working for him.

He gave her yet another one rand note.

“This is for your father.”

The two naïve girls gave Niki knowing winks.

“He wants you,” whispered Mmampe.

Johannes Smit cracked the whip in Niki’s direction.

“Follow me”, he commanded.

Niki just froze.

“Don’t be foolish, Niki”, said Maria. “He will give you more money.”

“Then why don’t you go with him yourself?” asked Niki.

“He wants you, not me,” said Maria.

“He chose you,” added Mmampe.

Johannes Smit grabbed Niki by the arm and dragged her into the sunflower field. (MDA, 2007, p. 15-16)

All the involved in this scene seem to obey a certain protocol or script, in which roles and lines have been predetermined. The white man offers the black girl what certainly are small sums of money for him, mentioning the girl's parents, although her mother's death was surely known throughout such a small community. Offering money to her parents seems to reflect old traditional customs of dowry payment. The fact that Johannes Smit talks to Niki in Sesotho reinforces this idea. However, it is obviously a fake situation, something performed in order to achieve other goals. Speaking in the language of the other is a strategy to force him/her to perform a certain task.

Actually, money seems to serve as a kind of facilitator of violence. It is by no means essential, since the violation is made possible, in fact, by the imposition of power, but it seems to contribute to the naturalization and inevitability of the situation. After the abuse, Niki has impulses of rebellion and tells her friends she will report him. But Mmampe's reply shows how money turns any attempt of resistance even more useless: "Do you think the police will believe you had nothing to do with it? You took his money, didn't you? They will arrest you and charge you with the Immorality Act" (MDA, 2007, p. 17). Niki's companions also seem to be fundamental in her entanglement. Actually, the use of the adjective 'naïve' to qualify them is deeply ironic. The girls are certainly not innocent as they have probably helped Johannes Smit to fulfill his plan. At a certain moment the narrator even calls them his accomplices. Niki herself realizes it: "At first Niki did not want to speak to them. She accused them of being traitors. They must have knowingly led her into a trap" (MDA, 2007, p. 17).

It is the first, but not the last, time the roles of victim and villain will be played by the same characters. Mmampe and Maria are "traitors", but also victims, as they have certainly been in Niki's shoes before. As real connoisseurs, they explain to Niki the dynamics of the relationship with Johannes Smit:

"It never enters", said Mmampe.

"His desire is only in the heart," explained Maria, "but his manhood always fails him."

"It happens like that with all the girls he has seduced with money," said Maria.

(MDA, (2007, p. 17)

Actually, the girls act as the voice of local common sense, although it is clearly common sense corrupted by repeated violence and humiliation. They try to make Niki understand she is now ‘the chosen one’, and it is her turn to go through the grim ritual of initiation. The only option left is to surrender and try to make the most of it. Their vileness is obvious in their lack of solidarity, which could have saved Niki from the same fate as theirs. However, solidarity is not to be expected in the context where the paths to the awareness of class, race and gender rights are still blocked. Niki soon forgets her urge to rebel and complies with the inevitable: “On every occasion in the yellow fields, she just lay there and became a masturbation gadget. [...] To his utter amazement one day he entered her, rupturing and hemorrhaging her maidenhood” (MDA, 2007, p. 18-19).

However, Johannes Smit will not be the father of her mixed daughter. In fact, he only opens the way for someone who considers himself the true possessor of rights over Niki’s body, her boss, Stephanus Cronje: “Dammit, Niki,’ he said frantically, ‘it is me you should be doing things with, not that Johannes Smit” (MDA, 2007, p. 50). It is through her relationship with Stephanus that Niki herself tries to subvert the role of victim, taking revenge on his wife, Cornelia, who had humiliated her in a most vicious way, forcing her to undress completely in front of the employees at the butcher’s shop, under the accusation of stealing a piece of meat. When Niki is with Stephanus she thinks about Cornelia:

She did not see Stephanus Cronje, owner of Excelsior Slaghuis. She did not see a boss or a lover. She saw Madam Cornelia’s husband. 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. She felt him inside her, pumping in and out. Raising a sweat. Squealing like a pig being slaughtered. Heaving like a dying pig. (MDA, 2007, p. 50)

This is a sign of the aforementioned naiveté, however. Niki’s revenge is actually mere fantasy. It is not really possible for her to have Stephanus entirely in her power. Although sexual intercourse between blacks and whites is forbidden by law, it does not interfere with power structures. In fact, there is nothing more appropriate for maintaining the status quo in apartheid South Africa than the unequal relations between rich white men and poor

black women. Thus, Mda lays bare the naturalization of such uneven relations in his country during and before the apartheid era, showing how the Immorality Act was hypocritical and ineffective. In fact, the empty character of that regulation would come out with the running of its own self-eating mechanism:

It was the Golden Age of Immorality in the Free State. Immorality was a pastime. It had always been popular even before laws were enacted in Parliament to curb it. It became a pastime the very first day explorer's ships weighted anchor at the Cape Peninsula centuries ago, and saw the yellow body parts of the Khoikhoi women. But what we were seeing during this Golden Age was like a plague. In various platteland towns Afrikaner magistrates were sitting at their benches, listening to salacious details, and concealing painful erections under their black magisterial gowns. Afrikaners prosecuting fellow Afrikaners with cannibalistic zeal. Afrikaners sending fellow Afrikaners to serve terms of imprisonment. All because of black body parts. (MDA, 2007, p. 93-94)

Again, it is possible to perceive the ironic tone of Mda's style. Through his fictional narrative voice, he employs the word 'immorality' to refer to sexual intercourse between whites and blacks, as if he agreed with Afrikaner legislators. However, the narrator informs it has been a pastime from the very beginning of South African history, and is inextricably linked to national sexual behavior. As it is such a widespread custom, does it make any sense condemning as immoral sexual relations among different groups of human beings? Furthermore, the ironic tone is enhanced by the use of color. The reference to the "yellow body parts of Khoikhoi women" highlights its significance. Khoikhoi women were renowned for their broad hips and protruding buttocks, which made them freak show attractions in nineteenth-century Europe. In this sense, color is another symbol of difference, of otherness, as well as of desire. Thus, for Victorian Europeans Khoikhoi women were both freak exhibits and sexual fetishes. In Mda's twentieth-century South Africa, the black woman continues to be the object of lubric desire, as shown by the uncontrollable and painful/pleasurable reactions of the magistrates who theoretically should penalize sexual transgressions.

The ‘cannibalistic zeal’ in the punishment of offenders reveals it is indeed a self-devouring mechanism, causing allegedly respectable Afrikaners to prosecute their peers. Obviously, that would soon be over since no privileged group wilfully brings havoc upon itself. By employing these terms, the narrator also equates Afrikaners’ attitudes to African customs they used to label barbarian. Who is the cannibal anyway? And which is worse, cannibalism for sacred purposes or performed with hypocritical scrutiny? Actually, the Afrikaner cannibalistic zeal is not really intense since there are significant differences in the way they and their black lovers are treated after being charged.

As is common in historiographic metafiction, Mda employs discourses taken from historical reality interspersed with his fictional narrative. Fictional events are narrated alongside apparently factual news reports:

The Friend, 7 January 1971:

The first three of a number of persons who will be charged in the Regional Court, Bloemfontein, for offences under the Immorality Act appeared in court yesterday, Anna Tsomela, a 36-year-old African woman with a light-skinned, fair-haired baby of three months in her arms who, she said, was the child of the White man arrested with her, was found guilty under the Act and sentenced to nine months’ imprisonment suspended for three years. (MDA, 2007, p. 89-90)

The Friend, 17 November 1970:

The son of an Excelsior farmer has been arrested on charges under the Immorality Act. He is to appear with an African woman in the Excelsior Magistrate’s Court shortly. He has been released in the custody of his parents. (MDA, 2007, p. 94)

In the first of these excerpts, the black woman has her full name and age revealed. The baby she has in her arms is described as light-skinned and fair-haired, which is surely taken as evidence of her contravention. The “White man arrested with her” is not named, and there is no mention whether he was found guilty and sentenced to imprisonment as she was. It seems this is no relevant information for the journalist. In the second passage, the accused is just described as “the son of an Excelsior farmer” and, despite being arrested on the same charges as the woman in the first example, he

was “released in the custody of his parents”. So, he gets a milder treatment, as if he were just a naughty boy (though his age is never revealed).

Thus, it is not surprising that, after all the hoopla, the case against the nineteen citizens of Excelsior, among whom were Niki and Stephanus, was shelved, reportedly for lack of evidence, but in fact for its inconsistency in relation to the entrenched sexual customs of the country. But Mda also lays bare the complacency of the black community in the face of facts, by giving voice to the black inhabitants of Excelsior, the people who live in Mahlatswetsa Location, by means of the use of “we”.

First to arrive [in court] was Johannes Smit, punishing his grey suit by stretching it almost to bursting point. We really were not surprised that he was one of the accused. Among all the Afrikaners of Excelsior, we knew him as an openly lecherous man. [...] He was the only white man we had seen actually doing this. (MDA, 2007, p. 74)

How could the community not have been aware of what was happening between Afrikaner men and black women? Was it really possible that Johannes Smit was the only man they knew to be involved in this? Actually, collective blindness seems to have been a choice in the face of the extreme difficulty to change the state of affairs: “These sins of our mothers happened in front of our eyes. Hence some of us became blind. And have remained so to this day” (MDA, 2007, p. 74). The use of the first person plural furnishes the reflective element necessary for the characterization of historiographic metafiction. This kind of collective consciousness situated in the present looks to the past, the time of the “sins of our mothers”, to evaluate its own actions. Self-evaluation in the novel continues throughout the period of struggle against apartheid and also after its eradication, when the Movement finally comes to power and black people can take command posts. Popi’s development into adulthood is accompanied by the reader. She starts as a child bullied because of her different appearance, which she herself does not accept:

When other children saw her in the street, they shouted, “Boesman! Boesman!” And they ran away laughing. At first she used to cry. Then she decided that she would not go to play in the street again. She would play

alone in her mother's yard. [...] She blamed her flowing locks for all her troubles. Perhaps it would be better if her mother shaved her bald again. Then no one would know that she was different. Although her blue eyes would continue to betray her. The blue eyes and the fair hair were the main culprits. Not so much the light complexion. Many normal black people had light complexions. And no one complained about that. (MDA, 2007, p. 110-111)

Boesman is the Afrikaner word for Bushman, a traditional ethnic group in Southern Africa related to the Khoikhoi. Compared with other native groups in the same region, they usually have lighter skin. They were also generally considered more primitive and backward than other groups, by European imperialist discourses due to their frugal lifestyle. Thus, when other children call Popi a *Boesman* they imply she is light-skinned, but also inferior. In the attitude of Popi's bullies, we can identify a retroflex reflection of those practices that Edward Said (1978) described as Orientalism. Said classified as such the series of discourses and representations that Westerners made of eastern territories between eighteenth and twentieth centuries, a period when European colonization of other lands peaked. According to Said one common stereotype in this whole set of narratives is the notion that the East (representing the oldest image of Europe's other) is retrograde and regressive (therefore inferior). By extension, we can call orientalist every attitude and judgment based on the inferiority of others. In the episode involving Popi, the stereotype is completely internalized, and the black community uses it to harass one of its own members because of superficial differences in appearance. Popi is as oppressed by the whites as are the other hybrid or black dwellers of Mahlatswetsa Location, who, ironically, share the Afrikaners' view about her:

Even though on one hand we praised her for being beautiful, and for having a wonderful voice, we continued to laugh at her for being a boesman. As we laughed at other men and women, and boys and girls, who looked like her, and were brave enough to walk the streets of Excelsior. We laughed. Until she lost hope that we would ever accept her. Until she was filled with thoughts of revenge. No one told her that vengeance had a habit of bouncing against the wall, like a ricocheting bullet, and hitting the originator. Look what had happened to Niki when she filled her loins with vengeance!

It was because of that vengeance that Popi was now a prisoner of the perpetual doek on her head, of blue eyes and hairy legs. (MDA, 2007, p. 142-143)

However, Popi finally becomes a member of the black community, and not only that: she becomes, together with her brother Viliki, one of its first representatives at the town council, after apartheid is over: “For the first time in the history of Excelsior, the town council had black members. And they were in the majority!” (MDA, 2007, p. 164). One of her first acts as counselor is to propose the adoption of another language for the proceedings:

Popi had moved that the council’s minutes and agenda should no longer be in Afrikaans, but in English. The three National Party members and Tjaart Cronje of the Freedom Front had objected in the strongest terms.[...] “No one speaks English in Excelsior,” Tjaart Cronje had observed quietly, as he resumed his seat. [...] We’ll just have to learn English then,” Popi had said with finality. (MDA, 2007, p. 178-179)

Popi, as a true in-between, establishes a language of negotiation at the council. Continuing to employ Afrikaans or replacing it by Sesotho would favor one party over the other. Popi is aware that this is a moment of reconciliation in South Africa and it is important not to insist on radicalism. Although English, the colonizer’s language to both groups, is a stranger in Excelsior, they must make the necessary effort to learn it in order to effect the transition into a time when everyone has a voice. In this sense, English is the language of the shifting boundary in South Africa, and it is not surprising that Mda has chosen it as the medium for his work. Finally, after much trial and error at the town council, Popi herself is reconciled to her past, her white half-brother Tjaart and even to her appearance:

We knew that the bees had succeeded in filling the gaping hole in Popi’s heart. Popi, who had been ruled by anger, had finally been calmed by the bees. The bees had finally completed the healing work that had been begun by the creations of the trinity. Yet the trinity never knew all these things. His work was to paint the subjects, and not to poke his nose into their lives beyond the canvas. (MDA, 2007, p. 268)

Bees are the ancestral animist element that completes Popi's healing process. Thus, the cure passes through the reactivation of ancient traditions in a contemporary context where the future is being built. In the same way that honey sweetens bitterness, bees perform the task of alleviating anger, and arousing a state of mind in which reconciliation is possible. Their incredible speed points to the need of connecting lightly but precisely points far removed in time and space. The priest-artist is the element of primary relevance. His work initiates the healing process and triggers the development of events in the narrative. Bees, paintings, and colors mark the experience of transition, the occupation of the shifting boundary in Niki's and Popi's stories.

Final considerations

By exploding the limits between history and fiction, Mda reaffirms the urgent need to reconcile present and past in the current reality of South Africa, in order to overcome past differences and build a new society. *The Madonna of Exxelsior* is a story of reconciliation, written on the border between past and present, in the hope of translating past events into a comprehensible version that may breach divisions.

To conclude, I quote Bhabha one last time:

The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living. (BHABHA, 1994, p. 10)

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