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## **Marital Conflict in Zakes Mda's Select Novels: *The Madonna of Excelsior* and *Black Diamond***

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### **Abstract:**

The present paper attempt to analyses the impact marital conflict in Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior*. Zakes Mda treats marital relationship of husband-wife in different way. Zakes Mda is one of the well known South African novelist. Mda places himself in a rich tradition rightly. He deserves his place alongside Gordimer, Coetzee, Brink, Van Harden, and others. Mda often uses paradigm of man-woman relationship across the race for the reconciliation between blacks and whites. Relationship between marriage partners is revealed in some of the novels of Zakes Mda.

**Keywords:** *The Madonna of Excelsior*, *Pule*, *Niki*, *Black Diamond*, *Kristin Uys*, *Barend*.

The conflicts and crises emerge from a plurality of role played by human beings as husband, father, mother, wife, daughter, son etc of a family relationship. Protest reaches its greatest intensity at two opposite extremes, in conditions of close intimacy. It becomes cold, impersonal, stranger to stranger situations. There is a close co-relation between intimacy and a violent behaviour. Thus, the family within which the two great biological differentiations of culture interact is often a place where the origin and form of aggression are found. Males have been the dominant aggressors in society. Violence begets violence and permanent good can never be the outcome of violence. Domestic protest is created due to marital demands and expectations. The institution of marriage is central to the idea of family in society. It may cause fatal violence unless one is prepared for the responsibilities of married life. If the expected demands are not fulfilled, it brings disillusionment. Basic conflicts between marital partners arise

due to financial and extra-marital love affairs and illegal sexual relationships too may cause of protest in the family. Factors contributing to these unequal power relations include: socio-economic forces, the family institution where power is controlled by a man. Religious and historical traditions in the past have sanctioned the chasing and beating of wives. As Harris C.C. aptly points out: "The marital relationship, like all other social relationships, is based on shared expectations. It is maintained however by exchange between the partner, and has therefore within it elements of a contractual relationship" (Harris 160).

The most important aspect of family structure is the power positions of the members. The power may be divided equally between the husband and wife or wielded predominantly by one partner over the other. The aspect of structure is the division of labour. It involves a pattern of roles in which the husband does some tasks, the wife others, they do some together. Husband-wife relationship is essential for family development. In a family structure, marriage binds man and woman and such relationship acquires great complexity. Husband-wife relationship is a universal issue and it has attracted the attention of writers and readers world-wide. The roles of husband and wife in a marriage are complementary because it is only with the support and help from each other that they can fulfill the duties and obligations of married life. As David Knox points out, "Marriage is a social relationship in which two adults of the opposite sex make an emotional and legal commitment to live together" (Knox 5). Historically, marriage is not just a mutual contract between two individuals but a social contract and a moral expediency in which husband and wife agree to live together and share their lives, doing their respective duties and keep the social and religious order intact. Marriage itself may be thought of as an institution designed to meet certain vital needs of the participants. People get married because they believe that they will find sexual fulfilment, emotional response, companionship and the new experience of parenthood, in living together. Both partners hope to attain these goals through the same marriage. Marriages and families are composed of individuals with different personalities, ideas, values, tastes and goals. Each person is not always in harmony with every other person in the family. Conflict theorists do not believe that conflict is bad; instead they think it is a natural part of family life. Families always have disagreement and they differ in the number of underlying conflicts of interest, the nature and extent of the expression of conflict.

Here, while dealing with husband-wife relationship, one can trace the socio-cultural causes responsible for marital conflicts in the novels. The male and female dichotomy of being

opposites with the former oppressing the later leads to strife, because the woman now rebels against the traditional roles and tries to move out of the claustrophobic existence of male-ordained families. All married couples experience conflict in their relationships. Some disagreement crop up when two individual live together on day-to-day basis. The couples deal with these conflicts by making adjustments through certain methods.

Zakes Mda describes the relationship between Pule and Niki in *The Madonna of Excelsior*. Pule, who had been already a married person, marries Niki. Pule is portrayed as a hard-working miner and provides money for his family, so that Niki can lead a comfortable life. He comes home hardly two times within a year. Niki visits church every Sunday. Once when she comes late from church, Pule shows his irritation. Pule always comments on her and suspects her behavior. When she returns home late from Stephen Cronje's unpaid overtime, Pule thinks that she had been sleeping with the white man. She pleads her innocence, she tries to hold him in her arms to assure him that she would never do such a filthy thing, but he violently pushes her away and slaps her, shouting: "Get away from me! You smell of white men!"(34). He is so irritated that she leaves his shack with Viliki to live with relatives in Thaba Nachu. But Pule loves Niki and begins to miss her. When Pule comes back from Welkom, he sends his relatives to Thaba Nachu for compromise. He makes promises that he will never hit her again. Niki finally comes back to her husband's shack. She opens the door with her own key. She finds Pule in an illegal act with a drunken woman. She says "I am leaving you, Pule, and this time it is going to be forever"(35). Upon this threatening Pule slaps Niki in the shack. Similar attacks are repeated in cycle of domestic violence even though everytime Pule shows some remorse. He promises Niki that he would stop blaming her for everything. Still, he sends money every month to Niki. Niki is happy that unlike other men, Pule supports her family. He not only sends money but also clothes for Niki and Viliki along with different types of things, even when she works as a nurse of Tjarrt Cronje, son of Stephen Cronje.

Stephen Cronje is a white butcher and mayor of Excelsior. He develops his sexual relationship with Niki. The sexual encounters between Niki, a black woman and Stephens Cronje, the white man have a direct impact on her marriage with Pule. Niki and Stephen Cronje break Immorality Act. As a result, she gives birth to Popi, white-coloured baby girl. Pule comes back after a year. In Welkom, he hears rumors of his wife's pregnancy. He has written a letter to Niki to find out the truth, but she does not respond. When he comes to Excelsior, he asks Niki

“Who is the father of this child?” (59). She realizes her sin and she weeps in front of him. The narrator remarks: “Pule exiling himself into a “world of silence” (60). Pule is a black worker in gold mine, and he is exploited by the white men. The white men benefits abundantly from the hard labour of the unskilled black men. As a result, the black men leave their wives ‘unguarded’ against sexual predation of white men. Pule realizes that he is unable to do any harm to the white man who impregnated his wife and he has to find peace instead of becoming angry and troubled in mind. Pule forgives her. He, at first, refuses to give his name as the father of her coloured child. But after a few months’ silence, he gives his name to the coloured baby child. After that, he doesn’t come back home for the next seventeen years.

Pule re-enters into the life of his family with his fleshless body that coughed blood. Popi welcomes him with open arms, but Viliki cannot prepare himself to forgive his father for deserting them for the long period of seventeen years. His illness represents the exploitation of cheap black labours in the mines and shows how generations of black South African men are robbed of their humanity by making them do demeaning work in the gold mines, and that too only to enrich a few white capitalists. Pule dies due to bad health. But when Viliki comes back and sees Niki in widowhood uniform, he says loudly: “Why was she mourning for a man who, according to him, had died seventeen years ago when he disappeared from their lives?”(132). It means, in their relationship, conflict is created due to misunderstanding.

Tjaart is a son of Stephen Crojne. Johannes Smit comes to invite Niki and Popi to Tjaart’s house for reconciliation as Tjaart also wants to speak to Popi on his death bed, to accept Popi is his half sister and make peace between them. During final enlarger in the novel, Johannes Smit, who has seduced Niki, wants forgiveness in front of Niki. Johannes, being aware of this situation, uses the opportunity to “declare a truce” (252) and in a non-chalet manner asks for forgiveness. Niki gives reply to him that she should forget about their sexual encounters of the past. Niki points out that “he stole (her) girlhood” (252). Thus, at the end of novel, Tjaart realizes that Popi is his half sister. They meet to reconcile with each other. 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 have to share a father and as they look so much alike. As a result, Popi finally accepts her identity as “a coloured person”. Even Tjaart’s reference to her being “a lady” and “(a) beautiful lady” (263) reinforce her acceptance of her identity and helps her to accept it completely. It reveals the real situation of South African people’s marital life.

Thus, The family is the most important unit of social organization. Relationship between marriage partners is revealed in some of his novels. The wife's activities are defined strictly in terms of the husband's convenience and pleasure. The role of mother is quite different. Through the domestic protest, Mda explores the psychological effect on women's lives due to the problems arising out of the relationship in personal as well as marital lives. Mda describes the relationship between husband and wife in his novels like *The Madonna of Excelsior*. He wants reconciliation between the people which is his vision reflected through his writing.

In *Black Diamond*, Kristin Uys, a graduate in law, has great faith on God. She belongs to a well-cultured family. As Barend is her first love, Kristin marries him. He is fond of pimps and likes similiar behaviour. Barend, husband of Kristin, wants her to look like a whore. It is the sexual exploitation of Kristin. So, he forces her to wear whore-like clothes and dance like a whore. She dislikes his open pornography. She feels shame of such entire incident because she is born and brought up in Old Testament values. So, she prays in the church for forgiving herself. Although she hates this entire thing, still she is submissive towards her husband as he is her first love, and she can sacrifice herself for him even if it kills her upside. It is her humiliation. She wants to whip him, but she controls herself. At last, Kristin's husband, Barend is caught by the police in the brothel. Kristin has a shock to see her husband on television who is handcuffed with a prostitute. She gets relief, but their relation is spoiled and later she takes divorce. After the divorce she becomes empty and angry. She wears the whore like costume that Barend brought her. It is a way of punishing herself. Her body desperately needs the humiliation that comes with the costume. It becomes her habit to humiliate her body whenever she was stressed, but she feels shame of all this at the same time. So the narrator says, "As part of redressing the white male dominated apartheid past, black men and women of all races and people of every sexual orientation are appointed to the judiciary and she is one of the beneficiaries. Yet she is still empty and angry" (212).

Hence, In *The Madonna of Excelsior*, the relationship between Pule and Niki is based on doubts. She has faced many difficulties in her life in the context of sexual harrasment, insults, abusing words, etc. She has brought up her children at her own capacity. In *Black Diamond* Mda describes the conflict between Barend and Kristin which depends on sexual and psychological harassment of wife (Kristin). She has lost control on herself and she behaves like a prostitute. In

the novel, *Black Diamond*, Kristin rebels against her husband's violence. She takes divorce from her husband. She finds that an outside world is quite comfortable and lives lonely with a cat. She also breaks the tradition in search of identity and protests against society through eradicating prostitution from society. She wants to reform the social situation through her action against prostitution.

Zakes Mda shows that the relationship between husband-wife should be based on faith, attachment and adjustment. But sometimes it creates a conflict in their relation. Through marital conflict, Mda shows protest against the traditional values.

Zakes Mda wants to show new South Africa. Being South African, he provides a voice to the voiceless. Black men found their voices for the need of protest and demand. He is a true painter who has painted a vast gallery of major and minor characters with the same ability. Sometimes, his characters show their protest through silence or violence. Through his characters, Mda represents the real domestic, social and political condition of South Africa. He has given new turn to South African literature. Many conflicts between marital partners' are found to be based on financial and extra-marital love affair, conflict and illegal sexual relationships with other. Their relationship is not too good.

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