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Demonstration of Race Relation in Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior*

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Abstract:

Race is a classified system used to categorize to human beings into large and distinct population or groups by heritable phenotypic characteristic, geographic, ancestry, culture, history, language, physical appearance, ethnicity and social status. Zakes Mda is one of the prolific black South African novelists. The present paper attempts to study reflection of race relation in Zakes Mda's novel, *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002). *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2004) was selected as 'one of the Top Ten South African Books published in the Decade of Democracy'. The novel reveals various themes like miscegenation, rape, reconciliation, misalliances, corruption, violence, jealousies, and protest. Race is major notion in the novel, *The Madonna of Excelsior*. Mda focuses on race conflict in South African Society through his major characters in the novel.

This study attempts to discuss reflection of race relation in Mda's novel, *The Madonna of Excelsior*. Race relation explores injustice, exploitation, discrimination and struggle for survival, political inequality in South African Society. This novel mostly discusses about black and white people's social reform.

Keywords: Zakes Mda, South Africa, *The Madonna of Excelsior*, race.

Race is a classified system used to categorize human being into large and distinct population or groups by heritable phenotypic characteristic, geographic, ancestry, culture, history, language, physical appearance, ethnicity and social status. The word 'race' means descendants of common ancestor. In Oxford Dictionary of English defines, "race is each of the major divisions of human kind, having distant physical characteristic: people of all races, colours and creeds" (Soanes 1448). Race is major issue in South African Society. Before apartheid there was colonialism, as well as there was colour Bar. In post 1948, South Africa's Apartheid laws

separated the officially defined races in all sectors of the society. These laws controlled marriages, labour, unions, job reservation, public, amenities and residential segregation.

Racial relations have almost invariably been conducted in term of conflict. Race prejudice means in disguised form, culture prejudice, colour prejudice and physique prejudice. In South Africa, the white is in a superior position and black (Negro) is in a subordinate social position. Zakes Mda is one of the prolific black South African novelists. *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002) was selected as 'one of the Top Ten South African Books published in the Decade of Democracy'. In first critical collection of essays on Mda, *Ways of Writing*, Faye Harrison in attention to the dynamics occurring within racist societies, foregrounds the term 'race' as primarily a constructed one 'From the vantage points of the subordinate segments of racially stratified societies, the orderliness, lawfulness and "natural" guise of structured racial inequalities are often experienced as profoundly problematic assaults against their dignity, life chances and human rights. For them "race" is frequently experienced as form of symbolic as well as materialized violence'(Bell 305).

In this novel, *The Madonna of Excelsior*, Niki, black protagonist, suffers due to race. She faces many difficulties. When she was in her eighteen years age, Johannes Smit, white farmer raped her forcefully. Maria and Mmampe was his black fellows. He had played game with Maria and Mmampe. He offers them money, for amusement. The power of white male landowner is depicted as being of such unfathomable proportion that he is able to abuse these young girls as a form of sexual object to gratify his desire.

Niki marries with Pule. Pule is a black worker in gold mine of the white man. Pule is an excellent example of exploitation of black man. The white men benefits abundantly from the hard labour of the unskilled black men. As the result black men leaves their wives 'unguarded' against sexual exploitation by white people's society. The black women's desire for domestic help reinforce the relation of equal interdependence between them. The black women who face poverty and loneliness due to the absence of their husbands doing their duties as migrant workers far from home are bound to seek employment in domestic labours. Pule came back to his family, in the last days of his life is as a result of his illness. His illness represents the exploitation of cheap black labour in the mines and shows how generations of black South African men robbed of their humanity by doing demeaning work in the gold mines, and that too only to enrich a few white capitalists.

Niki worked in butchery shop of Stephen Cronje, a white owner. She was one of five women who used to keep the butchery clean, cut the meat, weighed it and generally served the customers. This shop was run by Stephen Cronje or his wife Cornelia. Niki's special assignment also involved herself acting as a nanny to young Cronje, in addition to her work at the butchery.

Cornelia Cronje starts a new custom of weighing workers twice a day to make sure that they are not stealing any of her meat. The morning clock in weight had to tally with the afternoon clock of weight. On one day, as it was a very busy day for Niki as well as for the other workers. On that day, she could only eat her lunch at four o'clock in the afternoon, an hour before knocking off, she was very hungry. So, she ate lot of meat and pap; generally supplied by Cronje's to all their workers at lunchtime. As usual she stepped on the scale while Cornelia Cronje recorded her weight. It was increased by one kilogram. Cornelia Cronje ask begins to Niki: "You are hiding something"(39). Niki protested: "It is not true Cornelia'... 'I am not hiding anything.'" (39). Again and again Niki protested that she was not hiding any meat on her person. But Cornelia deliberately neglected her words. She felt that she must have been hiding meat under her dress. Cornelia determined to teach a lesson to Niki and to teach the other workers with this example. So, Cronje forcefully began to remove every cloth from the body of Niki. Niki's situation worsens, and she suffered lot from this humiliating incident. When Cornelia falsely accused her of stealing meat from the butchery and Cornelia tries to laugh as if it was a game for her and at last realised her mistake. But Niki, who was insulted by this incident decided to take revenge. She is aware about sexual and psychological harassment. She decided to use the very instrument of her humiliation, her nudity-to extract a carnal vengeance on her tormentor: She thinks that all workers raping her with their eyes. The Writer says about Stephens Cronje Niki's pubes, with the short entangled hair became the stuff of fantasies. From that day he saw Niki only as body parts that on as one whole person. He saw her breasts; pubes, lips and buttocks The workers wonder why she does not resign from Excelsior behind this decision her hid dark motives of vengeance. She does works as nurse of Tjaart Cronje. (p.41)

Niki takes revenge against Cornelia by agreeing to Stephen's relentless demands that she to have sex with him. In a context where she has no power, Niki decides to use her body as a weapon for revenge against Cornelia. Narrator describes, "She looked into his eyes in the light of the moon. She did not see a boss or a lover. She saw Cornelia's husband, with the emphasis on". (p.49) Niki breaks immorality act which declares to have sex between black and white people illegal even purpose of for revenge against Cornelia but thereby falls she also victim of immorality act and as a result of this deed, she gave birth to baby girl named Popi: "colored baby" (58). Popi is a hybrid creation. She is mixture of black and white. Mmampe says to Niki: "White man we always loved us they say we are more beautiful than their own wives" (p.60-61).

The immorality Act of 1927, which prohibited sex between Blacks and Whites, was amended in 1950 to prohibit sex between White and non-Whites. Zakes Mda bases his novel, *The Madonna of Excelsior*, on the 1971 case in which 19 people from Excelsior were charged under the Immorality Act. One day, the man with the umbrella walked hesitantly towards Niki's shack. He was talking about the police. They had uncovered twelve light skinned children who they claimed had mixed blood. They were already in jail with their black skinned mothers. There was a doctor too all the way from Bloemfontein his work was to take blood tests and to confirm

that the blood was indeed mixed. (p.63). It is difficult for Niki to take this whole matter seriously, especially as the news came from a stranger. It was officially illegal and therefore not something to advertise in Afrikaans circles. The so called “immorality” represented by interracial sexual relations was actually a pastime (p.91).

The apartheid system used to deny black people any rights such as freedom of movements, the right to own or occupy land where they chose, the right to marry across the colour bar and many more things like white and black could not share the same facilities such as toilets train coaches, hotels, restaurant, buses, schools, parks, or escalators’. To the majority of these black people, the first democratic elections signified the end of all the evils that had come with apartheid and made reports that in the elections “the movement had won an overwhelming majority in parliament and in most of the provinces”(170) an event that the South African citizens witnessed in 1994,1999,2004 and 2009.

Mda relates that when the local municipal elections are held the following year, “... for the first time in the history of Excelsior, the town council had black members and they were in the majority” (164). In these elections both Popi and Viliki become council members. In 1994, the first democratic elections in South Africa, Viliki becomes the first black mayor of Excelsior (171).

Mda represents both black and white masculinity in the novel and shows that both is flawed and can be implicated in one another’s flows. He suggests that despite past harm there is the possibility for the “next generation to progress beyond the flaws of the past and reconcile as members of a new society. It was uncommon for black people to be found in significant management posts, let alone women. Ever since 1994, after the first democratic elections in South Africa, it is significant that black people occupied high positions in politics and management. Afterward Black women are gradually being deployed in higher positions, afterward and black women also begin to makes their significant positions in politics and management. Mda becomes a recorder and preserver of his people’s struggles and aspirations but oppositional parties as evinced by Tjaart who is against this practice: “with draw? Asked Tjaart Cronje with a scoffing chuckle. Have I spoken a lie? I resigned and came back to Excelsior to run my mother’s butchery” (172).

Thus, in the novel, *The Madonna of Excelsior*, black people faced many difficulties. In apartheid era, black people were victims of poverty and exploitation of white patriarchal society. They struggle for survival. They also silently helped to reform political and social situation in South Africa. After liberation, they take revenge against white people’s society. The white people at last reconciled with black in the end of reconciliation.

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