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Reflection of Exploitation in Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*

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Abstract:

The Heart of Redness by Zakes Mda explores not only the complexities of identity in post-apartheid South Africa but also reflects on the deep scars left by centuries of exploitation, colonialism, and apartheid. Exploitation has been a central theme in South African history, with its roots in colonial conquest, land dispossession, and economic marginalization. Through a dual timeline and a series of well-crafted characters, Mda critiques how exploitation manifests in various forms- economic, political, social, and cultural. Central to this reflection is the character of Camagu, whose journey to rediscover his roots serves as both a personal and collective narrative of resistance against historical exploitation. struggle to resist or adapt to colonial domination. This paper examines how Mda's novel reflects the legacy of exploitation through the experiences of Camagu, Nomad, Xoliswa, and the elders of Qolorha, Mda paints a vivid picture of how the past and present are interwoven, and how exploitation, both personal and collective, continues to shape the South African experience.

Keywords: Zakes Mda, Camagu, *The Heart of Redness*, Exploitation, Post-apartheid, South Africa.

Introduction

Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* offers a nuanced exploration of South Africa's post-apartheid landscape, while also delving into the exploitation that continues to shape the lives of many South Africans. The novel is set in the village of Qolorha, a small Xhosa community in the Eastern Cape, where the effects of apartheid and colonial history are still deeply felt. Through the lens of Camagu, a mixed-race urban intellectual who returns to his ancestral home, Mda reflects on the pervasive exploitation that characterizes South Africa's past and present. The novel does not only examine the socio-economic forms of exploitation but also the psychological and cultural violence that underpins systemic inequalities.

Irele asserts that this can be accomplished if African literature rejects its status as a derivative of western literature and works toward becoming a distinct literary form that asserts its legitimate position within contemporary African and global cultures. In light of this context, Irele points out the essence of social criticism:

The impact of our writers' efforts will only come across if we, as critics, can relate their works to the whole state and condition of our people's existence, draw out their excellence, at least where the best ones are concerned but also their relevance and significance(Irele 22).

Racism represents a skewed view of social reality, particularly the uneven social relations that result from capitalism exploitation and production. The term "apartheid" is merely a new term for a long-standing practice of racism in South Africa. According to Ghorpade Pradnya "In South Africa, racial discrimination and apartheid have provided Negro writers with the setting

for a large number of novels. Exploitation of African peasant or worker under the colonial system has also provided the subject for several novels” (Ghorpade 27).

This paper aims to examine how exploitation is reflected in the novel through the experiences of Camagu and other characters, and how Mda uses their stories to highlight the enduring legacies of colonialism, apartheid, and economic injustice. The reflection of exploitation in *The Heart of Redness* is not merely an exploration of the past but a critique of how these exploitative systems continue to affect individual lives and shape social structures.

The Legacy of Colonial Exploitation: Historical Context

The theme of exploitation in *The Heart of Redness* is closely tied to the historical context of colonialism and apartheid. During the colonial period, the indigenous people of South Africa were subjected to land dispossession, forced labor, and systemic economic exploitation. The Xhosa, in particular, were often portrayed as a "conquered" people whose land was seized by colonial powers. This exploitation took many forms: from the taking of land for settler farming to the imposition of labor on native populations, the colonial system sought to undermine indigenous economic systems and cultures.

Apartheid, which institutionalized racial segregation and discrimination, further exacerbated these forms of exploitation, creating a rigid racial hierarchy that subordinated non-white South Africans to white economic and social interests. This socio-political system perpetuated the exploitation of black and "Coloured" South Africans, particularly in terms of access to land, education, healthcare, and employment. The consequences of these policies

continue to haunt contemporary South Africa, where the legacies of economic inequality, disenfranchisement, and exploitation remain deeply embedded in society.

In *The Heart of Redness*, Mda highlights these continuing legacies of exploitation through his characters' interactions with their environment and their understanding of the nation's history. Through the experiences of Camagu, Nomad, Xoliswa, and the elders of Qolorha, Mda paints a vivid picture of how the past and present are interwoven, and how exploitation, both personal and collective, continues to shape the South African experience. Mda uses the historical Xhosa cattle-killing movement of 1856–57 as a metaphor for colonial exploitation. The British colonizers used this moment of social upheaval to weaken Xhosa resistance and assert greater control over their land and resources. The novel shows how indigenous leaders, divided between the "Believers" and "Unbelievers," struggle to resist or adapt to colonial domination. Land dispossession is a major theme, reflecting how colonial and apartheid policies systematically deprived black South Africans of economic autonomy. The elders in Qolorha, particularly Bhonco and Zim, symbolize the historical suffering caused by these exploitative practices. Their ancestors' loss of land and economic independence is mirrored in the present-day struggles of their village.

Camagu: The Struggle Against Socio-Economic Exploitation

Mda demonstrates how societal reflections of identities can still exist. Mda disagrees with the outdated biological notion of race from the nineteenth century that served as the foundation for apartheid. He challenges the antiquated notion of racial difference. According to Bell, the text is able to storytell every historical event. "Interrogating (historical) silences . . . a new understanding of South Africa is possible" (Bell and Jacobs 63). Though Dalton is white, he

supports the black villagers. Dalton's role in society yet is not clear. He also has an allegiance to 'liberal' white people as well as his wife's (Afrikaners) people.

The novel's black protagonist is Camagu. Despite being a Black South African, he receives more qualifications—a doctoral degree in communication. Still after a repeated effort is able to get a part-time job as a teacher. He finds that he is unable to find employment in four years, except for part-time teaching job because it was felt that he “... never learnt the freedom dance” (28). It makes Camagu feel resentful and frustrated. He has conducted more than twenty interviews at various locations, but in the last four years, he has been unable to secure employment of any type. Additionally, Camagu is able to convey that these organizations act in a very negative way, which speaks poorly of them. He discovers that there is no place for him even in the parastatals and the private sector. He stands in for the educated African who is eager to support the growth of the continent, only to feel irritated and alienated by a system based on favouritism and corruption: “He discovered that the corporate world did not want qualified blacks. They preferred the inexperienced ones who were only too happy to be placed in some. . . Expanse accounts” (33).

As Camagu is Black, his existence is forgotten in the so-called democratic society. Some interviewers use networks or lobby areas to convey hints during the interview process. The idea that a person's race determines their social standing is incredibly ironic. The determining element of status and advancement in society is destructive snobbery linked to one's alleged dedication to the cause. Representing the predicament of exiles who have returned, Camagu is essentially involved in an identity fight in the new South Africa in order to obtain employment. He asserts, “I will not allow anyone to lobby for me to get a job. Are we not all South African who should be allowed to serve our country on merit?” (32). Camagu found that lobbying and networking were

essential aspects of South African life. He understands that posting job openings is still merely a formality and a legal requirement. Someone is already chosen for a position when it is posted. Camagu found that lobbying and networking were essential aspects of South African life. He understands that posting job openings is still merely a formality and a legal requirement. Someone is already chosen for a position when it is posted. Someone, who has lobbied or had influential individuals lobby on their behalf, even if they are not the greatest choice. The narrator tells the story: "He did not qualify for any important position because he was not a member of Aristocrats of the Revolution, an exclusive club that is composed of the ruling elites, their families and close friends" (33).

Camagu had been looking for employment, but all of them had gone to persons whose only qualification was that they were descendants of the Revolutionary Aristocrats. Finally, he is hired as a teacher on a part-time basis. The development concept that Camagu himself endorses is one that backs the notion of a casino and water sports. In summary, protests are frequently sparked by unemployment and poverty. The imbalance that arises from a difference in social standing and educational attainment gives rise to dissatisfaction and unrest.

At the same time, Camagu is also confronted with the emotional and psychological forms of exploitation that have shaped his understanding of self. As a "Coloured" man, he is trapped in a racial category created by colonial and apartheid systems, and he struggles to reconcile his mixed heritage with his place in a society that still operates along racial lines. This racial exploitation, a form of cultural and psychological marginalization, is something that Camagu must reckon with in order to reclaim his identity.

Nomad: The Exploitation of Spiritual and Cultural Capital

Nomad, a central figure in the novel, represents another facet of exploitation-the exploitation of cultural and spiritual capital. As a spiritual leader and healer, Nomad embodies a deep connection to the land and the traditions of the Xhosa people. However, his role as a cultural intermediary is constantly under threat by forces that seek to commodify and exploit indigenous practices for their own gain.

Nomad's character reflects the broader tension between cultural preservation and exploitation. In a post-apartheid South Africa, indigenous practices and knowledge are often commodified, appropriated, or dismissed in the pursuit of modernity and economic development. Nomad's spiritual guidance, which is rooted in the collective memory of his people, is at odds with the commercialization of culture, where the sacred becomes a marketable product.

Mda uses Nomad to highlight how exploitation extends beyond economic and political realms into the cultural and spiritual domains. In a country where the past is continually appropriated and distorted for the benefit of those in power, Nomad's attempt to maintain cultural purity and spiritual authenticity is a form of resistance against the exploitation of indigenous knowledge and practices. His struggle is emblematic of the broader fight to preserve and protect cultural heritage in a world that often reduces it to a commodity or cultural tourism attraction.

Xoliswa: Gendered Exploitation in a Patriarchal Society

Xoliswa, a key character in the novel, highlights another aspect of exploitation: the gendered exploitation that exists within both traditional and modern South African society. As a

woman in the patriarchal structures of Qolorha, Xoliswa experiences exploitation not only in terms of her limited economic opportunities but also in terms of the social expectations placed on her. Women like Xoliswa are often relegated to traditional roles and their voices and aspirations are often silenced or marginalized.

Her relationship with Camagu is a crucial point of tension in the novel. As a woman seeking her own agency, Xoliswa grapples with the societal expectations placed on her to conform to traditional gender roles. She is expected to serve her community and family, and her struggle for personal independence and identity is further complicated by the exploitation she faces as a woman in a patriarchal society.

Xoliswa's story illustrates how exploitation in South Africa is not solely based on race or class but is also deeply gendered. Women, particularly in rural communities, experience exploitation through their roles as caregivers, mothers, and wives, roles that are often undervalued and unpaid. Through Xoliswa, Mda reflects on the intersectionality of oppression, where race, gender, and class intersect to create systems of exploitation that are complex and deeply ingrained in the social fabric of the nation.

The Elders of Qolorha: Cultural and Economic Exploitation in Rural Communities

The elders of Qolorha represent a traditionalist view of identity and culture, deeply invested in preserving the community's heritage. However, their authority and the cultural capital they hold are themselves rooted in a history of exploitation. While the elders seek to maintain cultural practices and spiritual traditions, they also represent a community that has been economically exploited by both colonial and apartheid regimes. Their efforts to keep the

traditions alive are often undermined by the social and economic forces that continue to marginalize their community.

The exploitation of rural communities in South Africa is reflected in the experiences of the elders, who are unable to prevent the slow erosion of their culture due to the economic exploitation that keeps their village impoverished and isolated. The elders are faced with the challenge of preserving their cultural identity while also dealing with the realities of a modernizing world that often sees traditional practices as outdated or irrelevant. This generational conflict is a reflection of how exploitation, particularly in rural areas, is often intertwined with the loss of cultural heritage, which is itself a form of exploitation.

Conclusion

Thus impacts of exploitation in South Africa following apartheid are profoundly explored in Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*. Through the experiences of individuals such as Camagu, Nomad, Xoliswa, and the elders of Qolorha, Mda highlights the complex ways in which exploitation manifests-economically, socially, culturally, and psychologically. While South Africa may have achieved political freedom from apartheid, the exploitation of its people, particularly in rural and marginalized communities, continues to shape the nation's identity. Both historical and modern exploitation have profoundly personal effects on people, as demonstrated by Camagu's identity crisis and his interactions with the other characters. Mda's book finally implies that genuine freedom in South Africa after apartheid necessitates not just political emancipation but also a continuous fight against the exploitation structures that still shape the lives of a large number of South Africans. Through *The Heart of Redness*, Mda

challenges readers to address the persistent injustices that are still ingrained in the nation's social, economic, and cultural structures, calling for a reexamination of both the past and the present.

Exploitation has been a central theme in South African history, with its roots in colonial conquest, land dispossession, and economic marginalization. Mda's, *The Heart of Redness* presents a dual narrative-one set in the 19th century during the Xhosa cattle-killing movement and the other in contemporary post-apartheid South Africa. Through this structure, Mda highlights how exploitation is a continuous force that shapes both the past and present.

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