

Pathos And Ethos of The Protagonists in Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller*

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ABSTRACT

Literature enlightens and empowers human beings and adds colours to life by infusing emotions and feelings. In this regard, Zakes Mda published his fifth novel *The Whale Caller* in 2005 relentlessly focussing on the disparities and demarcation of the human and non-human world. The novel highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the protagonists wherein their strength becomes their weakness too. This paper chiefly analyses the sea of turbulent incident that changed the life and livelihood of the characters upside down. The despair and sorrow eventually lead to the cold-blooded survival of the characters, The Whale Caller and Saluni. The plot is quite appalling and pertinent to the themes of the contemporary and post-apartheid eras as well.

Keywords: fiction, The Whale Caller, apartheid, post-apartheid, colonialism, nature and civilization.

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Set against the background of coastal town of Hermanus in the Western Cape of South Africa, Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller* was rendered with post-apartheid South African setting which was foregrounded in the principal characters. *Entertainment Weekly* reviews the novel as "Lyrical... earthy, and bizarrely charming... [A] thoroughly original love story"; whereas, *Baltimore Sun* claims: "A tour de force... Not only does Mda make his premise work, but we genuinely are moved by the fates of his oddball trio – testament to his considerable gifts as a storyteller... He creates a world that operates accordingly to the fluid of a dream." *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* acclaims that "Long after you put this book down, you will be haunted by the two lovers and the beautiful, dancing whale who should never have come to town.... Truly magical", on the other hand, *Kirkus Reviews* apprises "Dreamlike... A beguiling amalgam of realistic fiction, religious parable, animal parable, and moral argument. Mda goes from strength to strength." (*A Melancholy Comedy of Interspecies Love*)

Mda draws a location that attracts people because it offers fantastic whale watching. The unknown main character, known only as the Whale Caller, uses a kelp horn to converse with whales. The Whale Caller does not enjoy or seek to get attention, in contrast to the "real-life" professional whale crier like William Salakuzi who led people to the whales. The purpose of his life is to commune musically with whales and spend time alone with them. Similarly, the Whale Caller comes back to his birthplace of Hermanus after thirty-five years of travelling the coastlines and discovers that it has been turned into a posh tourist destination. The Whale Caller is a representation

of an eccentric character who draws attention to himself because of his unusual interactions with whales. His weird behaviour and peculiar look, as he spends much of the time meditatively standing on the rocks and playing his kelp horn, reinforce his outside position. In the novel, he was identified as a young man who he could use a kelp horn to communicate with whales by making underwater vibrations that attracted whales. Since then, he has spent his days near the seaside tending to whales rather than people.

The Whale Caller moves into a Wendy house directly on the coast, lives alone, and avoids interacting with other people. In reality, the inhabitants of Hermanus are equally weird to the Whale Caller as he is to them. A whale in particular, Sharisha, with whom the Whale Caller becomes very affectionate. He wears a tuxedo that he has purchased for her to greet her ceremoniously when she returns for her annual visit. The Whale Caller initially interacts only with Mr. Yodd, a reclusive vicar who lives in a grotto with rock bunnies, aside from the whales. The story never explicitly states if Mr. Yodd is a person, an animal, or just a creation of the Whale Caller. The Whale Caller worships Mr. Yodd as his personal counsellor and worship him as deity. The Whale Caller's confessions allow the reader to gain insight into his thoughts and emotions, including his enthusiasm for the ecosystem and his memories of earlier times when he did not view the human and non-human worlds as being directly opposed to one another. However, Mr. Yodd only sometimes laughs in response to the Whale Caller's admissions, which is the protagonist's chosen method of mortification.

In contrast, the village drunkard Saluni continuously chases the Whale Caller but his focus gradually switches to her from Sharisha. The two diametrically opposed personalities begin a passionate yet have troubled relationship. Saluni develops healing abilities through her meetings with the Bored Twins, two abandoned young girls who reside in an ancient desolate mansion, while the Whale Caller seeks spiritual gifts and rejuvenation in the whales and Mr. Yodd. The heavenly vocals of the twins as identified in the fiction "the voices seemed to connect her to an angelical realm" (WC, 22) enchant people at large and Saluni in particular, reinforce their angelic beauty. The Whale Caller and Saluni, the two marginalised human characters, finally have a troubled sexual relationship that is full of conflict and envy since Sharisha exists. For example, Saluni deceives the Whale Caller into travelling with her after Saluni purposefully went blind during an eclipse in order to distract him from the whales, especially from Sharisha, her competitor. The Whale Caller is imprisoned between the two – the whale and the woman. In this context, for the Whale Caller, the two female figures stand for two different universes which are the human world and the animal world. The human world encompasses "civilised living" and the delights of sexual and worldly pleasures, whereas the whale's world indicates an existence with and in nature. In contrast, Sharisha, the southern right whale, inhabits the realm of nature, where the Whale Caller joins realm on spirituality.

In general, Sharisha represents a link to bygone eras when nature and animals were still valued and treated with care, whereas Saluni represents development and economy. The traditional divisions between nature and civilization, people and non-people, and reason and irrationality do not exist for the Whale Caller, who continuously and mysteriously crosses these lines. Finally, the Whale Caller breaks his kelp horn and embarks on a voyage of self-flagellation while holding a sandwich board that reads, "I am the Hermanus Penitent" (WC, 210). The novel concludes with him having lost everything. Thus, Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller*, published in 2005, dealt with issues

comparable to those in *The Heart of Redness*, including intrusive tourism, ecological preservation, and the conflict between capitalism and environmental principles.

The omniscient narrator shifts back and forth between the present and the past in numerous analepsis viewed either of the two human characters as focalizers, despite the fact that the work is set in the narrative of present modern South Africa. Nostalgia is a technique used to generate social and environmental critique by comparing the past with the present. Mda provides alternatives for an eco-aware lifestyle in the long-standing customs of transcultural indigenous African community. Particularly, the protagonist's nostalgic trips serve as critique to modern abuses of environment, to rediscover the significance of the idea of a landscape, and to offer environmental substitutes discovered in precolonial society.

The novel also portrays how mass manufacturing has aided in the plundering of the natural world and the isolation of both humans and their environment from the tools of production. Black South Africans were racially alienated from the natural world by colonialism and apartheid. Black urban South Africans in particular have been affected by the enduring duality created by colonialism and apartheid's separation of Black people from the natural world along racial lines reflected in the fiction as: "[t]hey [the citizens of Hermanus] dare not even whisper the name of the war, for they died on the border defending apartheid" (WC, 44). The non-human world began to be viewed solely as a resource with no spiritual significance to urban, modern living, and rural settings as outdated. Hence, the recollection of life before colonization are juxtaposed with these harmful and disastrous results of modernization and colonialism in order to refute the unreasoned dominance and exploitation of nature.

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