

Acta Academica 2003 35(1): 154-166

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The development of dramatic symbolism and satire in the plays of Zakes Mda on the realities of South Africa's political situation

First submission: May 2001

This article examines Mda's artistic development, specifically in his use of symbolism and satire, while considering reasons why he chose to use these devices. The analysis will cover the period from the seventies, when he wrote some of his earlier plays, to the nineties, when some of his unpublished plays were produced. This will be done with a view to establishing the continuity or otherwise of his use of these dramatic devices from his early days to the present.

Die ontwikkeling van dramatiese simboliek en satire in die toneelstukke van Zakes Mda oor die realiteite van Suid-Afrika se politieke situasie

In die artikel word Mda se artistieke ontwikkeling van nader bekyk, spesifiek wat betref sy gebruik van simboliek en satire asook die moontlike redes waarom die dramaturg hom tot die gebruik van hierdie middele gewend het. Die ontleding dek die tydperk vanaf die sewentigerjare toe hy van sy vroeëre dramas geskryf het tot die negentigerjare toe van sy ongepubliseerde stukke opgevoer is. Dit word gedoen ten einde die kontinuïteit, al dan nie, in sy gebruik van hierdie dramatiese middele in die vroeër tot die onlangse dramas te bepaal.

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Mda's uniqueness as a playwright became evident in the 1970s when, against the norms of the Theatre of Resistance, he chose to transcend the clarion call for political independence and instead focused on the problems likely to confront the ordinary masses of South Africa in a post-apartheid society. In his introduction to *The Girls in their Sunday Dresses*, Bhekisizwe Peterson (1993: vii) says:

In as much as Mda's creative and theatrical roles are part of the Black Theatre movement, which crystallized in the seventies, there is no mistaking the many ways in which his work goes against the grain of performance traditions and politics of the same movement.

Mda's preference for symbolism and satire goes back to the seventies when, under the then apartheid government, writers who were perceived as anti-establishment were either banned or imprisoned. For instance, radical groups like Workshop 71 had to face censorship and intimidation by police and township officials. The group's production of *Survival*, a play about prison life for black people in South Africa, was banned in 1978. Years earlier in 1972, Mthuli Shezi, the author of the play *Shanti*, who had recently been elected Vice-President of the Black Peoples' Convention, died in a rather questionable manner. He was pushed in front of an oncoming train at the Germiston railway station during a scuffle with Germiston railway employees with whom he had quarrelled some days earlier concerning the unacceptable treatment of a black woman at the station by a white policeman. The play *Shanti* was banned and when Sadacque Varava, Solly Ismael and Nomisisi Kraai, members of the group, were arrested and charged under the Terrorism Act in 1975, *Shanti* was appended to the charge sheet as an example of an anti-white, racist, subversive and/or revolutionary drama. Thus Mda's decision to apply symbolism and satire was in part designed to protect himself. His choice of symbolism lies in the fact that this dramatic device is often open to various interpretations and was thus a safe option. This explains the subtlety of his use of symbolism in plays such as *We shall sing for the fatherland*. For instance, the character of Mafutha is presented as contesting the chairmanship of the Stock Exchange. The diverse possible interpretations of this symbol mean that the audience may interpret it in whatever way they see fit. For instance, the Stock Exchange could represent the

presidency of the nation, for the simple reason that the Stock Exchange is regarded as the heartbeat of any modern economy. Or it could just be what it is presented as — the Stock Exchange. Mafutha himself represents the new elite contesting the position of president of the country. This ambiguity in symbolic interpretation served to protect Mda both from the wrath of the then apartheid government, which would have seen his plays as inciting the public to violence, and from the resentment of the practitioners of the Theatre for Resistance, who could have seen him as a sell-out.

Mda's theatre is directed at the audience with the sole aim of stimulating a desire for change. That is why he situates many of his plays in historical contexts and allows the audience's perception of the political situation in their society to be shaped by the symbolism in the plays. Writing in *African Theatre in Development*, Carolyn Dugan (1999: 3) remarks that Mda's plays solicit from his audience a certain type of reaction to the issues he presents:

Because he wishes to spur people to action, Mda requires a reasoned response from his audience. Whatever attitude, policy or ideology he is promulgating, he demands a concomitant reaction. His audience must differentiate between reality and illusion; they must observe, think and then take agency in their lives.

How successfully Mda managed to change his audience's mindset in the charged political atmosphere of the seventies remains debatable. The audience cannot sit passively and absorb the plays as entertainment, however. Luckily for Mda the audiences of the seventies, especially black audiences, cannot be accused of being passive observers of the issues presented on stage. Mda himself always insisted that he wanted theatre to act as a "vehicle for critical analysis of our situation" (Holloway 1989: 83).

Satire forms the bedrock on which Mda builds his symbolism. Like all famous satirists, he discovered that making fun of something is a powerful method of reform. In *We shall sing for the fatherland*, as in most of his plays, Mda (1980a: 9) employs a combination of symbolism and satire to express his condemnation of the level of corruption in post-independence police service:

Uwah & Muller/Development of dramatic symbolism and satire

- Janahari: But there is a stain down there — it looks like beer — sqo.
Ofisiri: A stain? (He looks at the stain on his trousers). You are right. It must have been caused by some drunkards I was arresting in a shebeen house early this morning. Dammit.
Sergeant: I say, Janabari, why don't we give Ofisiri twenty cents to buy a bottle of stain remover?
Ofisiri: Stain remover costs fifty cents.
Sergeant: Only last week it was twenty cents, Ofisiri.
Ofisiri: Things have gone up, my friends. I suppose you haven't heard of inflation.

We note the interplay between satire and symbolism. While Mda has succeeded in delivering a death-blow condemnation of the police service with the symbolic presentation of the stain, the humour of Ofisiri's lame excuse about an early morning shebeen arrest is used to soften the criticism of an otherwise grim presentation of the state of the nation. The audience watching this play will laugh at the incident onstage and still register the full symbolic implication. In the apartheid era, a combination of symbolism and satire such as the example above was useful in protecting Mda from the wrath of the apartheid authorities, who would not see his presentation as serious enough to incite the audience, while Resistance Theatre practitioners would find the ambiguity in the symbolic presentation a little too confusing to label him a sell-out.

The ambiguous nature of Mda's symbols is worth a closer look. The very nature of symbolism opens it to various interpretations. In *We shall sing for the fatherland*, one is confronted with extensive ambiguity. The setting of the play is South Africa — everything points to it: street names, food, etc, but the time is wrong. This is ten years into independence. Does that make it another African country? Either way the audience is made to work out that if this is South Africa, then the events described in the play suggest what will happen to the country after independence if care is not taken to avoid them. If it is not South Africa, then this is what has happened in other African countries and we should learn from their mistakes. This series of ambiguities made it difficult for the former apartheid authorities to accuse Mda of any violation of the law, as far as inciting the public was concerned and also prevented the practitioners of Resistance Theatre

Acta Academica 2003: 35(1)

from openly accusing Mda of being a sell-out. As Jan Gorak (1989: 491) pointed out:

Despite their rehearsal of the gestures of Resistance Theatre, Mda's plays never subscribed to Resistance Theatre's central dogma, the vision of a revolution that will transform totally the lives of those audacious [enough] to prosecute it.

Dark voices ring is another play in which the symbolic nature of the protagonists and the situation, while effective, are not foregrounded. Like *We shall sing for the fatherland*, the play is set in a post-revolution period. Through the use of flashback and mime, the audience is told the story leading up to the revolution. It is a play in which Mda portrays the second revolution, by the poor masses against the oppressive black regimes that assumed power after the end of colonial rule. This is a point that he alludes to in *We shall sing for the fatherland*. We are presented with an old, paralysed man and an old woman who displays signs of mental problems resulting from the stress of losing everything — from her only daughter to their position of authority as indunas on a farm. It is a play in which Mda displays a high level of theatrical artistry, one that comes close to resembling resistance drama, but that contains so much ambiguity that it is ultimately open to various interpretations. At the start of the play the dictatorial rule of the central character, the induna, is already over. We are only presented with the retributive aspect, where the old man is paying for his cruelty — he is mute and paralysed and dependant on his wife for everything from eating to defecating:

Woman: The excrement comes out of its own accord. I just collect it and throw it out at night (Mda 1980a: 37).

The wife, it seems, cannot relinquish the past. She nostalgically recalls the glorious years of their rule and one notices the pride in her voice when she speaks of their days of power and glory as the heads of the farm labourers on a white-owned farm, which Mda presents as symbolic of a state. She describes the fringe benefits that went with their exalted position:

Woman: Many fathers like their sons to follow in their footsteps. The old man was no different. He was a baas boy on Jan Van Wyk's farm. Van Wyk was giving him a bag of mealy meal every month. We had our own vegetable

Uwah & Muller/Development of dramatic symbolism and satire

patch, out own hut, and our own milk cow. Besides, all the other farm labourers were under the old man's command — "Kaptein" they called him. When he called them they all rose to answer: "Yebo Nkosi" [...] "ewe nkosi" [...] "morena". The master of the farm called him "my faithful induna" (Mda 1980a: 33).

The symbolic significance here should not be overlooked. It is no secret that most African leaders are "baas boys" of Western neo-colonial structures. In *We shall sing for the fatherland*, Mda presents Mafutha as a "baas boy" of the banker and his associates. In this play, the old man is presented as a "baas boy", ready to do his master's bidding for the meagre gratification outlined by his wife in the above excerpt. As the play progresses, the audience gets to see through the flashback exactly what he does to his own people to merit the "glorious position" he occupied. Mda creates a neo-colonial scenario in which black leadership, symbolised by the old man, remains a puppet of the Western capitalist interests which create a black elitist leadership to oppress its own people:

Woman: Throughout that morning, the convicts worked without any rest. The Boer wardens sat on the verandah of the huis drinking liquor. From time to time, they came to the field to egg the old man on. Everytime he wielded his whip, they cheered; when the prisoners winced with pain they went into a great frenzy, and pride swelled in the chest of the old man. He had the prisoners in his hands — more power that he had ever had before — and he was enjoying it because the wardens were enjoying themselves because they had someone they could trust, someone who could do what even they couldn't do (Mda 1980a: 41).

Using what could easily be considered an aspect of Resistance Theatre, Mda manipulates the characters (prisoners) to match their militancy with action. But he creates a series of ambiguities surrounding the actions of these characters. The prisoners' revolt against the dictatorial rule of the induna could be interpreted as a revolt against oppressive post-independence black leadership. On the other hand, it could be addressing a debatable issue of that time, which Mda highlighted in this play, namely the use of prisoners as farm labourers.

In his other plays written in the 1970s and 1980s, Mda manipulates satire and symbolism in a way that creates ambiguity when it

comes to interpretation. The symbolic presentation of the old man is another example. On one level, one could easily interpret him as symbolic of the oppressive black elite that emerged after independence, only to become more oppressive than the former colonial masters. How do we arrive at this interpretation? In the first place, Mda attributes authority to the old man by bestowing the position of induna on him. This is symbolic of leadership. The farm setting is also symbolic of a state, while the labourers and prisoners are citizens of the state. The fact that the labourers and prisoners refer to the old man as “morena”, or king, is also symbolic of his authority. The fact that he wields the whip on the workers, suggests his dictatorial tendencies:

Woman: The old man has always been firm with the workers, and he was no different with the prisoners. In fact, his arm was even stronger when it came to them [...] he was now armed with a whip and whenever they tasted with their sneering tricks, they would feel his wrath on their backs (Mda 1980b: 62).

To the audience watching this play, the symbolic dimensions of the old man become clearer as events unfold in the flashback. His dictatorial tendencies become comparable with those of many African leaders: Idi Amin, Mobutu Sese Seko, and Sanni Abacha, to mention but a few.

On another level, one can interpret the old man as a symbolic representation of a victim of the divide-and-rule policy of the apartheid system that encouraged black-on-black violence. The fact that the wardens gave him a whip to subdue the insubordinate attitude of the prisoners reminds one of the “Third Force” involvement in the black-on-black violence in the country in the years preceding independence. The fact that these wardens are Boers makes the symbolism more realistic.

To exemplify the degree of ambiguity in Mda’s use of symbolism, a very interesting incident needs to be recalled. When *Dark voices ring* was included in the Ravan edition of Mda’s plays, the then Publications Committee declared the volume undesirable in terms of Section 47(2)(e) of the Publications Act of 1974, judging this to be prejudicial to the safety of the state, the general welfare or the peace and

Uwah & Muller/Development of dramatic symbolism and satire

good order. The Directorate of Publications appealed to the Publications Appeal Board against this decision, and a panel of literary experts was appointed. After careful consideration, the panel of experts came to the conclusion that “the form and intent of *Dark voices ring* detracted from its effectiveness as a medium of propaganda or as a rallying call”. Not only did the brevity of the one-act play limit any convincing character development (the assumption being that only realistically depicted people can convey real experience), but much of the disparagement was directed at the old black man — the villain of the piece — and therefore the work was considered unlikely to be harmful to relationships between sections of the population. Furthermore, the committee considered that the absence of an immediate and specific social, ethnic and geographical context severely circumscribed the influence which the play might exert as a call to arms. For these and other reasons, the committee allowed the inclusion of *Dark voices ring* in the volume of plays published in 1980. I pointed out earlier that Mda’s peculiar combination of symbolism and satire was meant to protect him from the wrath of the apartheid government and this is an example of such an incident.

In the new dispensation, specifically in plays written after 1994, Mda continued to use symbolism and satire but made a slight departure from his original ambiguities, opting for a more direct symbolism. There are two reasons for this shift. The first is that South Africa is now democratically constituted and so he has nothing to fear from the authorities. The second is that corruption, which he predicted would be the order of the day in a post-independence South Africa in plays like *We shall sing for the fatherland*, has reached such alarming proportions that an aggressive approach in his criticism of the evil in the new dispensation is necessary.

You fool, how can the sky fall? (unpublished but produced in 1995) mirrors the psychology and illusion of a petty dictatorship in a country that has just achieved political independence. It exposes the extent of nepotism, corruption and petty power struggles within the nation’s cabinet. The play centres on a small band of cabinet ministers confined in what looks like a cell. They spend all their time displaying sycophantic deference to the benevolent, dictatorial “President”, lusting after the female minister in their midst, and suspect-

ing each other of betraying “the cause”. In the course of the play the ministers are spirited away one after the other to be interrogated and tortured by some unnamed power referred to simply as “them”. At the end the traitor is revealed as the benevolent, dictatorial President and he receives his due punishment.

Presented in the form of a comedy, this play bears a close resemblance to *We shall sing for the fatherland* and *Dark voices ring*, for it makes far-reaching criticisms of the ugly state of affairs in a post-independence state. Issues like corruption and the power struggle which forms the major preoccupation of the new government are highlighted. Structurally, too, the use of symbolism is very pronounced, as in the previous plays.

Mda continues to use symbolism in the same ambiguous manner as in *We shall sing for the fatherland* and *Dark voices ring*. The element of comedy also persists in his presentation of events. In what could be described as Theatre of the Absurd, Mda presents the cabinet members as being confined in a cell, yet with a woman among them. It is not clear why they are being held there. Finally, even in confinement, the president seems to run affairs of state, as he would in a normal situation:

President: And General, see to it that the Ministry of Works paves the road to our colleague's house. Make sure it's properly tarred. The road to the groom's house too.

General: I don't know if the Works people will take instructions from me, since I am not their Minister.

President: You have the Army behind you, General, don't be afraid to use it (Mda 1995a: 10).

This presents the audience with a number of options as far as interpreting the symbolic aspects of the play are concerned, the same situation that faced the audiences watching *We shall sing for the fatherland* and *Dark voices ring*.

The play deals extensively with this Cabinet's preoccupation with trivial issues to the detriment of the real issues affecting the lives of the majority of the people. Consequently Mda makes use of collective symbolism, a departure from the individual symbolism found in most of his pre-independence plays. Again, the play is presented in a light-hearted manner suggestive of the triviality that dominates the

Uwah & Muller/Development of dramatic symbolism and satire

minds of members of the Cabinet. Mda presents a Cabinet on whose shoulders the welfare of the people rests, but who chose to bicker and accuse each other of betraying the cause. While the Ministers of Agriculture and Culture struggle for the affections of the Minister of Health (the only female member of the Cabinet), the others glorify the Minister of Works for his ingenuity in bringing numerous money-spinning contracts their way. Mda satirises the efforts and dedication of the cabinet members:

President: You have served this government well. You have served your people well, in fact since the days of our glorious revolution until our victory when we marched into the capital and took over government, you did not falter (Mda 1995a: 8).

One of Mda's recent plays which marked a clear departure from his earlier plays as far the use of symbolism and satire is concerned is *Mother of all eating*. Produced in 1995, this play highlights the extent of corruption in a particular African state. Using Lesotho as a symbolic setting, Mda examines corruption in post-independence South Africa on a much larger scale than in any of his previous plays.

The play centres on the activities of a Principal Secretary in one of the government ministries, referred to in the play as "The Man". Through the actions and dialogue of this character, Mda exposes the chaos in the post-independence civil service.

Mda's use of symbolism here is vastly different from that in his other plays, in being more direct. Corruption is presented as blatantly as it occurs in the civil service. The identities of the characters are not kept vague as they are in *We shall sing for the fatherland* and *Dark voices ring*, but linked directly to specific posts in the civil service. We have the Minister presented as "The Minister"; the Principal Secretary as "The Principal Secretary". The dialogue is also direct. Corrupt deals are discussed openly and blatantly, unlike the situation found in other plays where they are more implicit:

The Man: Oh, it is you Mr. Director of Tenders ... Ah, so you have received the five thou that I left in your pigeonhole at the club. That's very nice, isn't it? ... Well, it is true that we chose that particular tender because the contractor promised to pay us a ten percent kickback if we gave him the contract ... Yes, the contract was tendered

at 10 million Rand [...] Yes, of course, ten percent of 10 million is one million ... Let's not kill the goose yet. We are going to get lots and lots of golden eggs from it (Mda 1995b: 7).

The element of subtlety, the hallmark of the symbolism found in other plays, especially those written in the seventies, is missing here. Previously subtlety was necessary as it enabled Mda to avoid negative interpretation from both the apartheid authorities and the practitioners of Resistance Theatre. But the audience in this play is presented with situations as blatantly as they occur in society:

The Man: You see, in government, where they discover your corruption, they promote you. There are two reasons for that. The first is that they want to shut your mouth so that you won't reveal what you know, which may expose some of the top dogs in government. The next reason, which is more important, is that they appreciate your brains and want to bring you up to them there, so that they may benefit from your expertise in corruption — learn new techniques from you (Mda 1995b: 14).

Mda's use of one character and several unseen characters is another departure from his usual artistic format. In using one character and presenting the play in a form of a narrative, Mda has borrowed from the rich repertoire of the African oral tradition in which one character becomes narrator and actor at the same time. The single-character technique means that during role-playing, which is used extensively in this play, the main character embodies a multi-dimensional symbolic representation. Character-audience involvement is another feature that differentiates this play from Mda's previous plays. Again, this is borrowed from the African oral tradition:

The Man: I hear your whispers and snide remarks. Who of you here can claim to have clean hands? Now, tell me! Did you buy those BM's and Benzes that you drive with your meager salaries? I am no different from any one of you. The word that we use here at home is that "We eat". Our culture today is that of eating. *Re ne re ja soft*. Everybody eats, from the most junior civil servant to the most senior guy (Mda 1995: 9).

By means of collective symbolism, Mda makes the point that corruption has permeated the fabric of society and that no one is guiltless. Thus, the audience watching this play becomes part of the sym-

Uwah & Muller/Development of dramatic symbolism and satirical dimension. They are made to understand that they, too, form part of the corruption in society.

In conclusion, *You fool how can the sky fall?* and *Mother of all eating* are plays in which Mda truly comes of age in his criticism of the post-independence state and the extent of mismanagement. He displays a greater variety of techniques and more freedom of expression than in his other plays. There is a sense of anger in his criticism. This explains why his satire is so biting and his symbolism so blatant. His direct attack can be attributed to his frustration at observing the way in which the fears that he expressed in earlier plays like *We shall sing for the fatherland* and *Dark voices ring* were manifesting themselves in the new dispensation.

Acta Academica 2003: 35(1)

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