‘That Mountain cannot be Beautiful for Nothing’: Zakes Mda’s Aesthetics of Liberation

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

at

Rhodes University

by

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February 2018

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Acknowledgements

The wise king Solomon said that the end of a matter is better than its beginning. There are many people to whom I owe a debt of gratitude for their contribution towards me finally reaching the end of this study. I would like to thank my supervisor Professor Dirk Klopper for all his help. Thank you also to him and his wife Dr Lynda Spencer for their generosity when they invited me to stay in their home for a few weeks as I worked on my thesis. I'm grateful to Prof Ntintili who encouraged me to do a Masters degree and who has remained interested in my progress, offering advice, support and prayer. My friends in Grahamstown have been wonderful – listening to me, feeding me, opening their homes to me. Thank you Shemeen Schmidke, Nosisa Manyakanyaka, and Camilla and Bryan Marx. I'm thankful to my friends in the English department at Rhodes University who made the journey just a little more bearable: thank you Sis Thandi and Carol Booth. Your kindness and generous smiles were a wonderful comfort. I'm also appreciative to my fellow postgrads for their encouragements. Professor Paul Walters has been a well of wisdom and a truly wonderful friend to me. In the words of our shared saint, "There are far, far better things ahead, than any we leave behind." Thank you for your kindness and prayers. Thank you Dr Jamie McGregor for hosting the Thursday 4pm 'sherry sessions' for the English postgrads; they were a delightful respite. The staff at the RU library have been incredible – ever courteous and efficient. Thank you! Thank you also to the head of the English department, Dr Sue Marais, for her belief. I'm grateful to my aunt Pumla Dilinga for always offering reassurance and great getaways for refreshment; I cannot overstate how much her kindness has helped me to 'keep at it'. During this whole journey, my family has been my greatest support: thank you mzi wa kwaDilinga. Finally, thank you to my mother, Nokonwabisa Dilinga, whose unwavering support, belief, patience, gentleness and encouragement have carried and comforted me my whole life, and which became invaluable to me as I worked to finish this thesis. Ndiyabulela Sukude elihle MaRhasi Khondwana! The financial assistance from the Rhodes University Prestigious Scholarship towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to Rhodes University or the donor. The financial assistance of the Melon Focus Area and NRF support are also hereby acknowledged.

Abstract

Zakes Mda is a prominent post-apartheid black South African novelist whose style has been described as experimental. He also wrote plays intended to 'rally people to action' during the apartheid years. The changes in the political and social situation in South Africa since 1994 have had significant implications for those writers and artists who produced protest literature and art. The changes in Mda's own practice and approach to art are themselves quite telling. His experimental novels place him among those African artists pioneering a new chapter for black South African art and the self-reflexive nature of his novels suggest that he is aware of the fact and is consciously forming and reforming his ideas about what it means to be an artist in post-apartheid South Africa. This study will unpack the role of the artist and the function of art in the becoming new South Africa as represented in Zakes Mda's novels, thereby hypothesizing Mda's aesthetic philosophy, as may be deduced from his practice, for what an African artist and art should be. This will be done first by locating Mda in the debates around art and literature within the sociopolitical context of a South Africa in transition. Despite the fact that when it comes to public action in the post-apartheid situation, Mda distinguishes between his own role in society as an artist who is a social activist and the role intended for his work, his own novels reveal a desire for the artefact (or artwork) to have a developmental, educational or conscientizing function. This is evident in representations of the effects of art in what this study proposes to be his extended South African black *Kunstlerroman*, which spans three novels. It is also demonstrated in his *ekphrastic* novel, *The Madonna of Excelsior*, in which visual art is interpreted in the process of description, thereby educating the reader. Not only that, but the reader is made into an 'almost viewer' and taught how to 'see' art. What emerges in the process of this study is Mda's aesthetic philosophy or what may be termed his 'aesthetics of liberation' concerning the role of the artist in post-apartheid South Africa, a suitable African audience and how art works theoretically, as expressed through his fiction.

Contents

Introduction

In his Nobel Lecture (1970), Alexander Solzhenitsyn quotes Dostoevsky's oft cited "beauty will save the world" to argue that there is a "conviction carried by a genuine work of art [which] is absolute and subdues even a resistant heart". The power of art, he believes, lies in its epiphanic capacity; lengthy and strenuous exposition may be able to articulate a moral position that is persuasive, but art is able to create an immediate epiphany that can so deeply move a person that it alters him/her. Solzhenitsyn's view on art is not unique, but one held by many philosophers, classical and modern, about art and, more broadly, about aesthetics, and one imagines that it is a notion that has inspired and perhaps still inspires many artists. Zakes Mda, a prominent South African playwright, novelist, painter, composer and philanthropist has also expressed a thought similar to the sentiment found in Dostoevsky's saying. Finding himself before a mountain covered with aloes in bloom, Mda is struck by the sight and says to himself, "That mountain cannot be beautiful for nothing" ("The Pink Mountain" 67). Mda uses the story of "the pink mountain" (66), as he calls it, to explain his artistic compulsion and his process of creating literature.

The title of this study, "'That mountain cannot be beautiful for nothing': Mda's Aesthetics of Liberation", is taken from Mda's reaction to the pink mountain, because that phrase expresses succinctly what may be taken to be the aesthetic worldview of this well-known and prolific post-apartheid South African black writer. His literary career goes back to the turbulent apartheid times when he wrote plays meant to rally people to action. As the imminent demise of apartheid was becoming more and more apparent, the conversation about the type of literature and art created by South African black writers became increasingly tense as scholars such as Njabulo Ndebele and Lewis Nkosi were vocal about their challenge to writers of protest literature to create work that was nuanced, instead of affirming stereotypes for the sake of arousing emotions. Ndebele's criticism in the 1980s of the sloganeering and spectacular representations in protest literature and Albie Sachs's call in 1990 to no longer use art as a weapon of the struggle would have directly impacted on Mda as a writer of protest literature.

In 1990, as the country entered a new democratic era, Sachs issued a challenge to writers to create a new kind of art for a new situation. His call for a reformation in artistic practice was deeply significant and contentious, as evidenced by the huge reaction to it recorded in *Spring is*

Rebellious (1991). There was a huge backlash from writers, activists and freedom fighters who felt offended by the insinuation that the work of fellow comrades was now considered not good enough for the new South Africa. All the same, Sachs, a former freedom fighter and subsequent judge of the South African Constitutional Court, recently re-affirmed the sentiments he expressed in 1990 and elaborated on the critical function of non-instrumental art in society. He believes that art has an essential role in postcolonial and post-apartheid Africa because it is able to "transcend […] politics and continue […] to produce new beginnings by performing the ambiguity and contradictions of historical events" (qtd in Buikema 1) in a way that other formal discursive means cannot. Mda wrote protest literature for a long time, but from the sorts of stories that he now writes, it seems that he shares Sachs's feeling about the role of art in the new South Africa, which is what this study will be exploring.

After South Africa became a democratic state, Mda started writing novels in a style that has been described as experimental. Taking on a new literary form, the novel, and abandoning his earlier ambition to "rally people to action" (Bell and Jacobs 4) with his plays, Mda seemed to be responding consciously to the criticism and concerns raised about protest literature by carving out for himself a new role as a free artist in a democratic South Africa. However, the motivations and practices of writers of protest literature were not as narrow, unliterary and unreasonable as the impression created by many critics, and it is apparent in Mda's experimental post-apartheid work that he wants to reconcile some of the values, motives and literary modes which informed his protest plays with his new projects. Mda's experimental novels place him amongst those African artists pioneering a new chapter for black South African art, and the self-reflexive nature of his novels suggest that he is aware of that fact and is consciously forming and reforming his ideas about what it means to be an artist in post-apartheid South Africa. This study will be unpacking the role of the artist and the function of art in the 'becoming' new South Africa as represented in Mda's novels, thereby hypothesizing Mda's aesthetic philosophy for what an African artist and art should be.

The body of this study is made up of three chapters which examine Mda's practice and views on art, how he represents the artist in his novels and how one of his novels demonstrates how art works by mimicking and interpreting visual art. Chapter 1 is a foundational chapter that considers Mda in context. Mda's views on art in African and what he believes an African artist should be are part of an ongoing conversation on the entire continent of Africa about artists in the

postcolonial situation. More specifically, Mda's remarks about what he calls an African aesthetic and the changes in his literary practice are a direct response to the political and social environment in South Africa. During the apartheid years, Mda wrote protest literature. He also practiced developmental theatre in Lesotho in the 1980s and completed a PhD on the subject. All this formed Mda's literary ideology and defined him as a writer. Of course, there were also earlier influences that formed his creative imagination and his approach to literature, and those will also be considered. However, with that said, as a writer creating under apartheid conditions and exposed to the poverty, miseducation and disenfranchisement of black African people, while himself having the privilege of an education and an imagination that helped him rise above these disadvantages, he adopted an instrumentalist approach to art in response to the conditions that he felt he had a responsibility to actively resist or even alleviate. The political transition, then, from apartheid to democracy had significant implications for him in his role as an artist. So, the chapter in question considers Mda as an African artist within the sociopolitical context of South Africa as it has evolved, how he responds or positions himself in the debates about culture as a weapon of the struggle, and the influence of his work in theatre for development on his post-apartheid fiction.

In the debates happening in South Africa at the time of the transition, debates about reforming the role of black South African writers and artists who had been creating protest literature and art, Mda responds creatively to the question at hand by invoking an Artist Figure in his narratives and imagining a role for him in various scenarios in community, as well as imagining the potential influence of his art. Mda's portrayal of the African artist in his fiction – his/her role, influence and relation to community – is the focus of the second chapter. In this chapter, I propose to analyse three of Mda's novels, *She Plays with the Darkness*, *Ways of Dying* and *The Madonna of Excelsior*, as together constituting a kind of South African black *kunstlerroman*. This group of novels makes it possible to observe the evolution or maturation of the Artist Figure, which I argue represents the experimental refinement of Mda's own conception or idea of what a suitable African artist looks like in postcolonial, post-apartheid South Africa. How Mda's ideas in theatre for development come to bear on the Artist Figure has interesting implications for the communal aspect of the artist's role, and the concept of a 'heterophilous' catalyst helps to clarify what Mda means by an African aesthetic which rejects the idea of art for art's sake. The Artist Figure matures, and so does the conception of the viewer of art in these novels. While hypothesizing about a suitable postcolonial African artist, the novels also reveal the need for a suitable African

audience for the full effect of art to be realized in African societies, and it seems that education is the key.

The issue of education or training an audience, reader or viewer how to perceive art rightly is a matter dealt with in Chapter 3 of this study. *The Madonna of Excelsior* is the sole focus of this chapter, which unpacks the implications of Mda's use of *ekphrasis* or the literary description of a work of art. Mda's remarks about the importance of visual spectacle and imagery in his process of creating literature are reconciled with what he does with *ekphrasis* in this novel. *The Madonna of Excelsior* is full of detailed descriptions of Father Frans Claerhout's Expressionist paintings, and these descriptions achieve several things. For example, they attempt to mimic a painting; make the reader into a 'viewer'; set the scene or prime the mood for the chapter; interpret the painting; and train the eye how to 'see'. Through *ekphrasis, The Madonna of Excelsior* imitates a visual artwork, while at the same time demonstrating how the art works. An historical approach to understanding *ekphrasis* is employed in this chapter in order to explore the various functions of *ekphrasis* which go beyond the literary. In antiquity *ekphrasis* was part of the rhetorical education of young Greek boys and extended to all forms of speech aiming at vividness and persuasion. Mda's use of *ekphrasis* in *The Madonna of Excelsior* has a rhetorical function and is intended to draw the reader into the narrative by making him/her 'see' with the hope that the reader-become-viewer will have the same profound response to what he/she 'sees' as that experienced by the 'viewing characters' in his novels when they encounter art. This novel also expresses Mda's desire to have an educated audience. The narrator teaches the reader that there is a way to interpret art, and this sentiment translates to all art forms.

What emerges in the course of this study is Mda's aesthetic philosophy or 'aesthetics of liberation', as expressed through his fiction, concerning the role of the artist in post-apartheid South Africa, a suitable audience and how art works theoretically. This aesthetic philosophy is one response to the challenge put out by the likes of Nkosi, Ndebele and Sachs in their call to re-envision literary practice and the role of art by black South Africans in the becoming new South Africa.

Chapter 1: Zakes Mda and the Aesthetics of Liberation

Zakes Mda is a celebrated contemporary black South African playwright and novelist. Prior to South Africa's first democratic election, Mda's plays, like the writings of many politically active South African black writers, were a part of what has been called Protest Literature, described by Njabulo Ndebele as a

> kind of writing [which] follows the disillusionment that came in the wake of the banning of the major political organizations […] [and involved] the politicization of creative writing in which there is a movement away from the entertaining stories […] towards stories revealing the spectacular ugliness of the South African situation in all its forms: the brutality of the Boer, the terrible farm conditions, the phenomenal hypocrisy of the English speaking liberal, the disillusionment of educated Africans, the poverty of African life, crime, and a host of other things.
> ("The Rediscovery of the Ordinary" 145)

It is a literature that is generally seen not to display the complexity and subtlety – the "delv[ing] into intricacies of motive and social process" (144) – Njabulo Ndebele famously referred to as the 'ordinary', but as rather tending to affirm already existing generalisations and assumptions. After years as a playwright producing plays intended to "rally people to action" (Bell and Jacobs 3), Mda published his first novel, *Ways of Dying*, in 1995, a year after South Africa's first democratic elections. It was different to what was generally described as protest literature; there was a shift in the focus and expression of his writing heralding a new era, not only for the country, but also for the artist. Mda's post-apartheid fiction is marked by this experimentalism.

However, whatever changes Mda might have undertaken in order to realign himself as an artist in the new dispensation, it seems what remains is that his aesthetic projects as a writer, artist and theorist stem from the values that he cultivated and refined while working in theatre for development. After the end of apartheid, Mda explained that, as a writer and artist, he subscribes to an African aesthetic which rejects the idea of art for art's sake. What is implied by some of his remarks is that the African artist is expected to function within community and to produce work that is relevant to the community. The necessity for the artist's work to be connected to the community, reader or audience is a defining, underlying value in Mda's aesthetic worldview. The connectedness to community in the developmental theatre that Mda was involved with in the 1980s, and which has had such an important influence on him, was necessary because it served the

pedagogic agenda of the actors. But even in his fiction it seems to be a persistent quality in his work, as will be demonstrated by this study.

There are very deliberate and considered shifts in Mda's work that can be observed since the drastic political changes of 1994. He claims that "the end of apartheid freed the imagination of the artist" (qtd in Bell and Jacobs 4), and for him that meant moving beyond being a playwright producing plays that were intended to "rally people to action" (4), to writing novels that are subtle, ironic and humorous. However, while there is a definite shift in the style and focus of Mda's oeuvre, the inspiring values are not altogether different. David Bell argues that there is a "consistency […] in Mda's work [which] is indicative of an underlying sense of values, both aesthetic and social, deriving from his work in the theatre for development which constitute the basis of his perspective on the shifts in the paradigm of political rhetoric" ("A Theatre for Democracy" 17). In other words, the expression and direction of Mda's literary project may have changed along with the political changes in South Africa, but the fundamental values and understanding that he cultivated in theatre for development, which inform his perspective and approach to art and its relation to the socio-political, have not. Margaret Mervis echoes Bell's assessment, believing that Mda "has extended his theatrical blueprint for social change, described in *When People Play People* (1993), to his fictional narrative[s]" (39). For this reason she describes his novels as 'Fiction for Development', a play on the term 'theatre for development' outlined in the abovementioned treatise.

1.1 Theatre for Development

Bell identifies this underlying sense of steadfast aesthetic and social values in Mda's approach to writing not only from the finished products, which are the plays and novels that embody these values, but also from Mda's treatise on theatre for development *When People Play People*. The treatise is based on community work that Mda carried out while working at the National University of Lesotho with the Marotholi Travelling Theatre in the 1980s, and is about the aims and methods of this troupe. Marotholi was a project of the English Department and the Institute of Extra-Mural Studies at the university. It was about using the dramatic art of theatre to effect lasting change in communities. Marotholi took theatre from the elite university space where it is frequently consumed, for the most part, by a disinterested and limited middle-class audience, to rural communities where it was used as a tool to awaken consciousness and activate agency.

Marotholi not only took theatre to communities, but it made itself malleable and evolved in order to create the most effective connections to the communities it visited. The troupe first started by producing agitprop theatre, in which the actors would first find out the issues affecting the community and then prepare a play themselves which they then took to the community. However, they found that this strategy did not have a lasting effect because "it lack[ed] real community participation since the play comes to the village as a pre-packaged message, and the spectators become mere consumers of a finished product" (Mda, "Marotholi Travelling Theatre" 353). There was a lack of conviction created by this sort of theatre, and though there would be individual action, it only lasted for a short term (354). What Marotholi sought was a deep conviction that would lead to a permanent change in the perceptions of the audience, and, in turn, would lead to a lasting, sustained solution. The model they settled for as the most effective method for raising critical awareness and fostering self-education is theatre-for-conscientization. This model of developmental theatre involved maximum audience participation. In theatre-for-conscientization the actors are merely catalysts who perform scenes suggested by locals. Solutions to problems arise from the audience, and "the actors become like puppets [who] perform the action strictly on the spectator's orders" (355). Instead of merely arousing emotions, Marotholi hoped to create critical awareness, and rather than instructing the audience on what to do, they wanted to "arouse the people's capacity to participate and decide things for themselves" (354). This aspect of theatre-for-conscientization has significant implications for Mda's later novels, specifically the rhetorical function of *ekphrasis* in *The Madonna of Excelsior*, which will be examined later in this study.

Marotholi was defined by its experimental nature because it was guided by the objective of finding the most effective way of creating a lasting conviction in the audience. The social and aesthetic considerations that necessitated the experimentation and adaptations in Marotholi are no less significant for Mda as a novelist creating a new kind of narrative for a new situation. This is a possible explanation for the experimentalism that has come to characterise his subsequent creative work, as will be demonstrated later in this study. Theatre-for-conscientization brings together the two elements of the aesthetic and the social, which the artist functioning within the paradigm of an African aesthetic in the postcolonial situation must grapple with. The artist has an aesthetic compulsion, but he is also part of a community, and as such has a responsibility to the community which comprises part of his audience. Balancing creative work and social

responsibility is a recurrent art motif in Mda's novels, and it is perhaps what Mda means when he says that his African aesthetic rejects the idea of art for art's sake, but places a social expectation on the African artist to serve the community through his or her gift.

1.2 Art and Literature in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Mda has always had an instrumentalist approach to art, using his plays to incite his audience to action during the apartheid years. He no longer writes protest literature and, about his new narrative style, he explained in an interview published in 2005:

> I am free now. […] [T]he end of apartheid has freed the imagination of the artist. I tell stories now. But these stories come from an environment that is highly politically charged […] But my main mission is to tell a story, rather than to propagate a political message. During apartheid, it was the other way round. It was part of my political commitment, I wrote plays. I only started novels after the political changes. (qtd in Bell and Jacobs 4-5)

His position as a black writer in the context of post-apartheid South Africa is interesting because he is not an artist creating in a neutral space, but is producing work within a space where there is contention about the role of art and how it has been used. So, when Mda makes the claim that he is now "a storyteller rather than an advocate for a cause" (7), he is responding very self-consciously to a specific discourse around South African literature and art, and purposefully asserting his own position as a black South African writer within the culture debate sparked by Albie Sachs's contentious call in 1990 to "ban […] [the slogan] saying that culture is a weapon of the struggle" (19).

In more recent years, Sachs has since reiterated the sentiment which he first expressed at an ANC in-house workshop and elaborated on it, stating that he believes that art has an essential role in postcolonial and post-apartheid Africa because it is able to "transcend […] politics and continue […] to produce new beginnings by performing the ambiguity and contradictions of historical events" (Buikema 1) in a way that other formal discursive means cannot. He is not vague about the fact that his view of art is utilitarian, because implied in his sentiments is the belief that art has a role to fulfil in service to the country despite the fact that "art […] may yield truths that do not easily fit political or social mandates" (1). When explaining his creative writing process, Mda also admits to "allow[ing] utilitarian concerns to come into play" (Mda, "The Pink Mountain" 71) in the conception of his literature, stating that he sees his as "a literature of public action" (70).

So, like Mda, Sachs also seems to echo the sentiments of what Mda has called an African aesthetic, an aesthetic which does not conform to the idea of art for art's sake, but in which the artist is viewed as a social commentator. Sachs is mostly concerned that this commentary not be reductive, however. As an artist producing in the Southern African context, and particularly as a black artist who resisted and fought against the apartheid government through his art, Mda is grappling with the challenge of what it means to be an artist in the 'new' South Africa.[1] This struggle comes across in the way that art and the artist are represented in his novels, as will be demonstrated in later chapters.

In 1990, as the political landscape in South Africa was undergoing major shifts with the unbanning of the ANC, Mandela being released from prison, and the imminent demise of apartheid, Sachs made his contentious call about the role of art going forward into a post-apartheid South Africa. He claimed:

> [I]n the case of a real instrument of struggle, there is no room for ambiguity: a gun is a gun is a gun, and if it were full of contradictions, it would fire in all sorts of directions and be useless for its purpose. But the power of art lies precisely in its capacity to expose contradictions and reveal hidden tensions. (20)

Exposing and engaging contradictions and hidden tensions is the work that he believed would need to be done in the new post-apartheid South Africa, and it seemed to him that art was best suited to the task. Sachs's pronouncement provoked a huge response largely because of its timing – the cusp of the new democracy. However, he was not the first to express such a view, as Lewis Nkosi and, more famously, Ndebele had raised the issue much earlier than he did.

In a keynote address entitled "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa"at the conference on *New Writing in Africa: Continuity and Change* in 1984, Ndebele criticised the narrow instrumentalism of South African protest literature. He was especially critical of the spectacular in South African protest literature, which is arguably this mode of writing's most defining feature. He described the spectacular as follows:

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[1] I refer to Mda as an artist, instead of a writer, because Sachs's statement about "art as a weapon of culture" uses the word 'art' to broadly encompass literature, painting, sculpture, music and the like. The producers of this art, then, I broadly refer to as artists. Sachs does not differentiate but seems to suggest that the various artistic mediums - visual, literary, musical - all possess this capacity to reveal truth through performing complexity and ambiguity. I use the term artist in this broad manner throughout the thesis. This general use of the term art for writer, painter and musician alike is also the grounds for the comparison I draw between Mda and the various artist characters in his novels.

> The spectacular, documents; it indicts implicitly; it is demonstrative, preferring exteriority to interiority; it keeps the larger issues of society in our minds, obliterating the details; it provokes identification through recognition and feeling rather than through observation and analytical thought; it calls for emotion rather than conviction; it establishes a vast sense of presence without offering intimate knowledge; it confirms without necessarily offering a challenge. It is the literature of the powerless identifying the key factor responsible for their powerlessness. (150)

In place of this sort of writing Ndebele proposed a return to the ordinary, which he defined as "the opposite of the spectacular. The ordinary is sobering rationality; it is the forcing of attention on necessary detail […] [which] will result in a significant growth of consciousness" (152).

Sachs and Ndebele essentially echo each other. Theirs was a similar proposal, which Tony Morphet distilled and usefully summarised as a "redemptive thrust […] towards 'complexity', 'contradictions', 'hidden tensions', 'ambiguity', 'imaginative recreations' and exploration of specific genres," while arguing against the "static, predictable, formulaic rehearsals of fixed positions" (135). Morphet paraphrases Sachs's and Ndebele's respective calls in order to draw attention to the fact that he believes that their proposal is undermined by what he sees as an incoherence in their conception of the cultural imagination. By this he means that "both [Ndebele and Sachs] appeal to the notion of incorporative irony for the sake of greater range, flexibility, complexity and openness, but neither is able to relinquish the fixed point of closure in the framework of social action to which they have committed themselves" (142). Here he is referring to the fact that, while Ndebele and Sachs are calling for an overhaul of literary and artistic procedures, they still maintain that the literature and art in general must have the effect of enlightening society, awakening consciousness, and forming and affirming within the reader a clearer, albeit more nuanced moral sensibility. Significantly, in relation to Mda, the dimension of social action in Sachs's and Ndebele's conception of the function of art has resonances with the aims of theatre-for-conscientization, which, as mentioned earlier, has had an enduring influence on Mda as an artist. As a result, a literary project which maintains such social concerns as enlightening society and, awakening consciousness, as Mda's novels may be argued to do, would not fall outside of Ndebele's and Sachs's proposal for what would be a suitable literature in post-apartheid South Africa.

Ndebele and Sachs believe that art should have the noble role of making people and society better by revealing and affirming what is true and good as something quite separate and other to

what is evil and sinister, but they insist that this should be done through art that is analytic, ironic, complex and embraces ambiguity. Ndebele's contention with spectacular literature is its decided exteriority, "so that we have spectacular ritual instantly turned into symbol, with instant meaning" (143). The opposite of spectacular literature is what he refers to as the return to the ordinary, which is "sobering rationality; it is the forcing of attention to necessary detail" (152). He believes that "paying attention to the ordinary will result in significant growth of consciousness" (152), and he further asserts that while "literature cannot give us lessons, […] it can […] provide a very compelling context for us to examine an infinite number of ethical issues which have a bearing on the sensitization of people towards the development of the entire range of culture" (154). However, Morphet believes that the openness that Ndebele and Sachs are calling for is undermined by the fact that it is made from within the assumptions of their locked ideological positions. Morphet's criticism therefore is of the fact that Ndebele's commitment to "the fullness of life and the victory of the oppressed is not in doubt" (142), even as Ndebele argues for this new, revitalised approach to literature and art. He finds it problematic that Ndebele identifies with the oppressed whom he refers to as "our people" (139), and that his assessment of literature appeals to a problematic nationalist agenda. Morphet concludes that, because Ndebele and Sachs fail to "unpick [this] crucial lock", their proposals are "unlikely to prove genuinely fruitful either in authorising new forms of writing criticism or teaching" (142). Morphet objects to the pre-emptive social obligation that Sachs and Ndebele attach to art. This particular criticism is important and useful because it draws attention to the different perspectives and aesthetic points of view or conceptions surrounding art in different contexts.

1.3 South African Experimental Literature and European Modernism

Morphet's engagement with Sachs and Ndebele's arguments is significant because it highlights the matter of context in aesthetic considerations. He seems to be describing the overhaul of artistic agenda proposed by Ndebele and Sachs in terms akin to European modernism, which gives the impression that, in his assessment of their proposal, he has in mind the categories of Western or European modernism as the model for an effective revolution in art and literature. David Attwell also observes that the quality of revolt that characterises black South African writing has much in common with the European Modernist movement (*Rewriting Modernity* 175). It is therefore not surprising that Morphet should adopt this line of thought when addressing a matter that has to do

with what would be an abrupt and deliberate reinvention not only of a genre, but also of an entire philosophy of art. An important and defining feature of modernism, which has much in common with protest literature, was the "deliberate and radical break with some of the traditional bases of not only Western art, but of Western culture in general" (Abrams 167), and the 'avant-garde', a prominent feature of modernism, was "a small, self-conscious group of artists who deliberately [undertook] […] to 'make it new' […] [b]y violating the accepted conventions and properties, not only of art, but of social discourse" (168).

Therefore, South African protest literature is very similar to European modernism because in some ways it is also a conscious rejection of the prescriptions of a western, European aesthetic. As an example of this, Attwell cites Mutloase's declaration in the Introduction to a collection of short fiction of the Black Consciousness period, where he says:

> We will have to *donder* conventional literature: old fashioned critic and reader alike. We are going to pee, spit and shit on literary convention before we are through; we are going to kick and pull and push and drag literature into the form we prefer. (173)

The sense of frustration and aggression that comes across in Mutloatse's words echoes the frustration and aggressive intent that characterised the avant-garde of Western modernism, a movement that has dramatically shaped an era. When one considers the extent of the similarities, it is very likely that they could be mistaken for having the same impulse. Which is why Morphet, a literary critic of the twentieth century, seems to defer to modernist scholarship when thinking about the overhauling of an entire way of producing literature, because the modernist movement not only provides the guiding philosophy for such a shift, but also has a record of its making its mark in the form of acclaimed literary and artistic works as well as rigorous theorisation. What he misses, however, is the difference in context, which is the reason why the literary and artistic revolution in South African black writing cannot be assessed according to Western and European modernist categories.

Even as Attwell notes the similarities between European modernism and postmodernism in the practice of some black South African writers, he is careful to avoid imposing the terms modernism and postmodernism on the latter because it does not easily fit into those categories, which is why he opts for the phrase 'experimental line' instead. The marked differences between South Africa and Europe, and therefore the implications of those different contexts, are significant when one considers Morphet's criticism of Ndebele's and Sach's proposal. For this reason, the

aspect that is most interesting about Morphet's critique of Sachs and Ndebele is not whether his conclusion is justified or not, but the fact that he identifies an unchanging sense of values in their proposals for change – the very thing that he believes will be a hindrance to a successful literary evolution. He describes their proposals as occupying "fixed positions" that he believes need to be "dislodged" (144) before any real change can occur. The fixed position that Morphet is referring to is the insistence on social action and relevance. These values or "fixed positions" are the moral centre from which the story is told, and they underpin (though, according to Morphet, they undermine) their call for "complexity, ambiguity and flexibility" (144).

Both Ndebele and Sachs belong to the postcolonial, post-apartheid context, a situation that is different from Europe not only politically, historically, culturally and geographically, but also in terms of epistemological orientation. South Africa, as a postcolonial, post-apartheid space, and its artists, can therefore be expected to have concerns, considerations and priorities that differ from those of their European counterparts, even though procedurally there are similarities in the process of their revolt or revision. Ndebele and Sachs make their call for this radical shift in the approach to art in South Africa from a place of intimate and affective knowledge of the struggle, having lived through the brutality of apartheid. As a black man, Ndebele was a victim of apartheid's oppressive policies and practices, and as an activist against the apartheid government, Sachs lost his arm in a car bombing in Mozambique that was intended to kill him because of his activism. The persecution they both suffered at the hands of a common oppressor therefore makes them part of the community of the suffering masses persecuted by apartheid and connected by the bond of a shared plight. One gets the sense from both Ndebele and Sachs that, while they both reject the spectacular in protest literature, for reasons eloquently outlined by Ndebele in "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary" (1986), there are such heavy, immediate violations and absurdities in their shared context of post-apartheid South Africa that the latter necessarily impresses on them (even as they make a call for irony, complexity and ambiguity) an ethical compulsion that does not permit the sort of art that obscures or negates the ethical or moral paradigm within which postcolonial systems, institutions, societies and persons must be viewed. There is a centre, even a moral centre perhaps, from which the post-apartheid, and even the postcolonial artist produces, and the sort of art which denies or obscures reality – the sort of art which is removed from the lived experience of the artist's community or audience – is a mismatch and perhaps even unethical within this paradigm. J.M. Coetzee once conceded this point (before he wrote *Dusklands*) when he asked:

"What value does the experimental line hold for Africa? […] [D]oes not the experimental line assume and perpetuate a rift between the writer and society at large which is a fact of life in the West but need not become a fact of life in Africa?" (qtd in Attwell 171).

In fact, according to Ato Quayson, because there are such cruelties, hardships and absurdities in the postcolonial situation, "the two domains of pain and discourse seem impossible to separate" (qtd in Barnard 246), making postcolonial scholars like himself wary of scholarship which, in the process of theorising, abnegates ethical and moral considerations. He speaks of an 'ethical urgency' that ought not to be diminished in postcolonial literary and cultural scholarship, which Rita Barnard summarises as follows:

> The properly postcolonializing agenda, [Quayson] implies, requires not only a startlingly *new* perspective […], but one that is also a potentially liberatory: an angle of vision that will help us view the terrain of African culture from 'the standpoint of redemption,' as Adorno might put it, or from the standpoint of 'social emancipation,' as Quayson prefers. (278)

And so, "postcolonial studies (more so than other fields of literary and cultural scholarship, in Quayson's view) would seem to demand an urgent ethical response" (Barnard 277). In other words, the literary practitioner of the postcolonial must participate in the postcolonising agenda.

Mda's aesthetic worldview conforms to Quayson's line of thinking when it comes to producing work that has a redemptive impulse. In fact, Barnard notes a "pedagogic agenda" (279) in his novels. Mda says that he subscribes to an African aesthetic, which rejects the idea of art for art's sake. According to his view, the artist has an obligation to be a social commentator. This line of thinking is not unique to Mda, but has been a point of contention amongst African postcolonial writers as they struggle to find a role for themselves in the nation and internationally, with "[p]ost-independence culture in Africa […] tend[ing]" as Gerald Gaylard puts it, "to position the writer publicly as *imbongi* or 'praise poet'" (64). Gaylard believes, for example, that Dambudzo Marechera "adopts the archetypal pose for [the] younger generation [of African writers] when he argues against the sycophantic aspects of the praise poet" (65), and he adds that other postcolonialists are similarly critical of the artist's nationalist role (65). Mda's idea of an African aesthetic, which positions the artist as a social commentator, does not intend for the artist to be a praise poet, a point which he drives home in *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe*, in which the main protagonist repudiates the responsibility of using his art for nation building. Mda's insistence on social influence or relevance in art is what T. Spreelin MacDonald identifies as the unchanging

value that underpins Mda's literary expression as a playwright and a novelist, a value derived from his work in developmental theatre. Such a conception of the aesthetic in Africa and of Africa, with its consideration of the condition of society and its intention to reveal society to itself, is well in line with what Sachs and Ndebele hope for in the art of post-apartheid South Africa.

The idea that in producing art in the postcolonial situation there is an ethical compulsion to engage and not alienate the reader is a concern that Attwell notes significant aspect in the comparison that he makes between the experimentalism of the literature of black South African writers and that of the European modernist movement. Gaylard also notes that while

> African postcolonialism has been as concerned with the creative approaches to new issues within power, desire, the 'global village' and social divisions within the nation as Western fiction, […] it has also retained something of the socialist realism and concern with the immediate contextuality of the nationalist school […] [African] fiction thus provides an ethical response of sorts to Western lost generation fictions, a response that effectively differentiates postcolonialism from postmodernism. (52)

Against the orthodox view that is usually taken of black South African literature, which is that it is journalistic, documentary and instrumentalist, Attwell suggests that, though there is some truth to such a reading, it is often circular – that is, critics echo to other critics. A contextual study of the literature reveals an affinity between the aims, motives and process of the experimentalism that characterises both black writing in South Africa and the European modernist movement.

When Attwell speaks of an experimentalism in Mda's work, he is referring to what he sees as a self-conscious and programmatic epistemological recovery and revision in the work of black South African writers that echoes the European modernist and postmodernist movement. Nevertheless, he does not think one can simply apply the categories of modernism and postmodernism in a crude way to black South African writers, because there are features and elements in the postcolonial situation that are unique to it, which need to be taken into consideration – one of which is maintaining social connectedness. And so Attwell adopts the phrase "experimental line" from J.M. Coetzee, and here he is referring to what Charles Taylor, in *Sources of the Self* views as the propensity for "twentieth-century [M]odernisms [to] collectively [function] as 'epiphanic art', meaning self-consciously aesthetic practices of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries that try to initiate an epistemological renewal in response to conditions we associate with modernity" (175). Attwell sees Mda's experimentalism as participating, in a "self-

conscious and programmatic" manner, in producing a literature that has an affinity with European modernism and postmodernism procedurally. However, unlike the European movement, this literature is not removed from its audience, but in fact strives for a connectedness with its readership. It is an experimentalism that is both "socially connected and aesthetically reflexive" (179), by which Attwell means that it "enables the critique that we associate with realism, but […] also announces the epistemological invigoration and subject construction that we associate with the modernist movement" (179). Three aspects of Mda's experimentalism stand out in particular: his use of magic realism, his use of a communal narrator, and his preoccupation with the visual.

1.4 Magic Realism and Magical Culture

Gaylard posits that "in many ways postcolonial African fiction can be described as African postmodernism," and he is of the opinion that both postcolonialism and magical realism are "'Third World' postmodernisms" (36), with the exception that African fiction has "retained something of the social realism and concern with immediate contextuality" (52) that characterizes politically committed writing. With that in mind, Mda's creation of a literature which allows a connectedness with his audience and/or community is interesting when one considers his use of magic realism and how he has explained his use of this mode. Some critics see Mda's use of magic realism as merely the adoption of a literary device which has been made famous by South American authors such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Manuel Puig, but Mda denies the influence of such writers on his own style. Indeed, when Derek Alan Barker considers the term magic realism in relation to the novels of Mda, he starts off by recalling Edward Said's warning about the need to be careful of specificity and context in the application of the term (1). One should not make assumptions about a particular writer's use of magic realism based on a generalised theory about its use in postcolonial literature, because contexts differ, and therefore each instance of its use should be taken as a unique offering.

There is a great deal of suspicion around the use of magical realism by African writers, with concerns that the terms mentioned in blurbs are a marketing ploy by publishers, and the adoption of magic realist strategies a desperate attempt by postcolonial writers to attain international relevance by riding on the tailcoats of the established and celebrated South American writers who made this literary mode famous (Barker 2; Gaylard 39). In a chapter on postmodernism and magical realism, Gaylard usefully outlines some of the nuances and

differences in Latin American magical realism and the magical realism found in African writing, noting that "some African writers have been uncomfortable with the phrase" (37) while others have chosen to invent a synonym for it, such as Kole Omotoso's term "marvellous realism" (39). This reluctance to embrace the term has much to do with its strong association with South American literature and the "general vagueness in definitions of the term" (38) as a literary phenomenon beyond Latin America. Gaylard notes that some African writers who employ magic realism willingly cite the influence of Latin American writers on their own work, such as Carter, who cites Marquez and Carpentier as significant influences on her writing (38). However, others reject the notion of such an influence. Gaylard believes that the "relationship between Latin American magical realism and contemporary African writing is at best oblique" and that "African writing does have its own unique relation to postmodernism and magical realism from elsewhere" (40). He further asserts that "postcolonialism was strongly influenced by postmodernism's opposition to imperialism, but also [by] nationalist opposition to imperialism which had become a […] metanarrative in its own right" (36). Not only that, but

> [a]rtistically, the magical aspect of postcolonialism has been influenced by a huge variety of different texts and traditions. In Africa its roots undoubtedly lie in indigenous cultures, oral traditions and mythologies, with the animism of African cosmologies being particularly important, though it also has roots in mythologies from other cultures and in ancient texts, from *The Odyssey* to *The Eclogues*.
> (Gaylard 46)

Mda affirms this line of thinking. As a writer who prolifically employs this literary mode in his own writing, Mda rejects any suggestion of the influence of Latin American writers on his style, and insists that the instances of magic realism in his novels are not merely a literary device that he has seen other writers successfully use, but rather that he is expressing in his novels a way of seeing the world that is consistent with the Xhosa culture to which he belongs. He is not alone in making such a claim: Ben Okri, comments Gaylard, has made similar "claims for his art's being a realist report on African ways" (39). There are many literary genres that have elements of the supernatural and the fantastic, but the definition Christopher Warnes puts forward for magic realism to set it apart from those other genres is that "magic realism signifies a mode of narration that naturalises the supernatural, representing real and non-real in a state of equivalence and refusing either greater claim to truth" (74). Mda's remarks about his own use of magic realism and what it signifies in his writing has echoes of Warnes's concise definition. He explains:

> I must tell you that the Latin-Americans have nothing to do with my work. […] I wrote in this manner from an early age because I am a product of a magical culture. In my culture the magical is not disconcerting. It is taken for granted. No one tries to find a natural explanation for the unreal. The unreal happens as part of reality. The supernatural is presented without judgement.
>
> ("Acceptance Speech for the Oliver Schreiner Prize" 280)

Mda not only affirms that the defining quality of magic realism in his work is the equal treatment of the real and un-real in a realist text without giving either greater claim to truth, but also draws a connection between his use of magic realism and the community that he comes from. The magic realist mode is a result of the epistemological frame or paradigm through which he chooses to portray the worlds of his novels and such an epistemological orientation makes the world of his novels familiar and accessible to the Xhosa and Sotho communities in which he is at home. This is significant, because one of the things that sets Mda's literary 'experimentalism' apart from the European modernism which Attwell compares it to is the intent to maintain a connectedness to the audience, a connectedness which characterises not only Mda's work, but also generally characterises the work of black South African writers. So, in his writing, magic realism is not only a stylistic technique, but also a device that connects his art to his community. This he achieves by both a rapport through familiarity, and by portraying the world through a lens that supports his immediate community's epistemological orientation. It is not merely the content and details in the narrative that locate the story culturally and geographically, but also the very style in which the story is told, which is a sort of 'nod' to a specific kind of reader. Mda's work is specifically that of a black South African Xhosa man of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, and his work contributes to the reality of what that means, so that it is immediately identifiable or relatable to the reader who shares Mda's subject position culturally and linguistically. It could be said that Mda's work is intended to establish a rapport with the reader from his community through both content and style; in other words, it is his express intention that this reader should not be alienated by the world of his novels.

1.5 Orality and Communality

Maintaining connectedness to community as an artist is important in Mda's aesthetic worldview (which he refers to as an African aesthetic), and stylistically magic realism is one of the techniques that makes the world of his text recognisable to the audience of his community. But there is

another stylistic measure in his novels that has a similar function to a degree. Mda uses a communal narrator in his novels, which critics see as an element of the orality of storytelling in African cultures, and this sense of orality Mda brings to his own written narrative. The communal narrator in Mda's novels occupies a role that is very similar to the role of *imbongi* or a praise-poet in traditional Xhosa society. In *Ways of Dying*, the communal voice [is] "the all-seeing eye of the village gossip […] we are the 'they'. No individual owns the story. The community is the owner of the story" (Mda 8). Similarly, praise poems "contain multiple voices and multiple memories. If a single unifying voice is imposed, it tends to sit uneasily with these other contending presences" (Gunner 56). Multiple voices expressing a unified opinion or judgement about occurrences within the community and about its members defines the role not only of the communal narrator in Mda's novel, but also of the praise poet of the Xhosa oral tradition.

The role of *imbongi* also resonates with the prescription that Mda makes for the artist in Africa, which is that he must be a commentator on society. Gaylard concurs with this view, noting that "[p]ost-independence culture in Africa tended to position the writer publicly as *imbongi*" (64). Anna Adams and Janis Mayes elaborate that

> quite apart from their published works, African writers, as wordsmiths, typically function – in an evolved African tradition – as Public Intellectuals: insightful, incisive, visible, activist commentators. Whether as regular or occasional journalists, as outspoken university lecturers, or as public officials in other capacities, African writers are often known at home more by their voices as Public Intellectuals than by their creative writings. (qtd in Gaylard 64)

The role that African artists and writers take up as Public Intellectuals is significant, according to Abdul Jan Mohamed, in that they "are major exceptions to the callousness of the elite: they provide one of the few links between educated Africans and the rest of the people" (qtd in Gaylard 64). As mentioned before, a living connection between the artist and society is a value that Mda espouses as African. The remarks that he makes about the social role of the artist in Africa apply especially to himself. In fact, Mda plays a very active role in social development in South Africa, and has explained that his philanthropy is inextricably linked to his creative work, though it does not prescribe this kind of engagement, as I will elaborate on later. He has taken on the role of a

Public Intellectual speaking truth to power.[2] Not only that, but through his novels he critiques post-apartheid government corruption (*Heart of Redness*), the social ills and spiritual maladies crippling folks in the townships (*Ways of Dying*), and governments' dubious nationalist agendas that attempt to subvert artists' prerogative to create freely (*The Sculptors of Mapungubwe*). He has occupied many public platforms and is very outspoken about social, government and literary institutions and leaders, thus emulating the role of *imbongi* in traditional society.

Some African artists have taken issue with and rejected the notion of being *imbongi* because of what they regard as "the sycophantic aspects of the praise poet" (Gaylard 65). Marechera, for example, asks, "was there a difference between the chief on his skull-carpentered throne and the general who even now had grappled all power to himself in our new and twentieth-century image? In either I can only perform as chronicler, subversive jester and teller of tales" (65). While *imbongi* may be used for nationalist purposes, just as artists can, praise poets "from Shaka's time on, have often paid with their lives for being 'on the wrong side'" (Gunner 52). In fact, praise poetry in South Africa has a long tradition of being

> deeply engaged in debates about such issues as the nature of leadership, particular policies and actions, and […] it – perhaps more than any other southern African genre – is knottily analytical. The weight and substance of praise poetry as political commentary – and by implication the weight of those doing the composing – has long been recognised […] Jeff Opland […] refers to A.C. Jordan's delineation of the *imbongi* as chronicler, 'praising what is worthy, and decrying what is unworthy'. (51)

Thus, the notion of African artists being likened to *imbongi* need not necessarily be a wholly undesirable designation, and Mda's choice to have a multi-voiced narrator whose role recalls that of *imbongi* may signal a recognition on his part of the usefulness of such a role.

A special quality that *imbongi* shares with Mda's communal narrator is that the collective voice is complex. Mda's literary ideology and practice is located in and, in good measure, defined by the complex interweaving of cultural, historical, social and political concerns of post-apartheid South Africa. In *The Madonna of Excelsior*, Zulu sees "the collective voice [as] promot[ing]

[2] Among the many public and social roles that Mda has taken up, he has been a regular guest writer for the *Mail & Guardian*. He has also been involved in HIV/AIDS activism for over twenty years. In 1994, he initiated the Southern African Aids Multimedia Trust, which holds workshops each year for story writing and adapting those stories into radio dramas for local radio stations nationally. He is also very active on social media, often giving his opinion on socio-political issues and literary matters on Twitter.

hybridization in the transforming South Africa by offering transcultural modes of representation, which are reciprocal transferences of culture" (324). This has echoes of Nelson Mandela's recollection of Xhosa praise poet S.E.K. Mqhayi's performance at the college he attended: "He had moved from a more nationalistic all-encompassing theme of African unity to a more parochial one addressed to the Xhosa people, of whom he was one" (qtd in Gunner 55). Furthermore, the author's voice becomes part of the collective voice of the community, and "the collective voice seems to demand the reader's involvement in the process of challenging his/her assumptions, as well as those of the novel" (Zulu 316). This participatory aspect of the narrator's collective voice harks back to the influence or values of theatre-for-conscientisation, or participatory theatre, which underpin Mda's approach to creating literature. His work always seems to demand audience or reader participation in some way, which is a core value of Maratholi's model of developmental theatre.

1.6 Mda and Visuality

In addition to his use of magic realism and a communal narrator, Mda also uses visualization to invite the reader to participate in his narrative. He has often said that his stories are always inspired by a physical location: "I usually see a place and immediately decide that it is so beautiful or so ugly that it deserves a novel. […] I get the vision of my stories from that stepchild of the aesthetics of the novel – setting" ("The Pink Mountain" 67). Gail Fincham takes this idea further by arguing that

> Mda's explorations of refigured identity are rooted in his strong painterly imagination. This teaches the reader how to see anew by creating changed spaces in memory and culture that redress the negativity of the colonial experience. Mda uses authorial and figural points of view, perspective and focalisation to alter the reader's understanding. (*Dance of Life* 80)

She sees this in how Mda uses focalisation in *Ways of Dying* to challenge middle-class perceptions of the township space and to overturn "dominant ways of seeing typical of apartheid ideology" (*Dance of Life* xxiv). She quotes Jacob Dlamini's *Native Nostalgia* to support this view:

> In the case of a township and the way we see it, what is apparent to a viewer (that what she has in front of her is row upon row of unimaginative houses on dusty streets) may be as much a function of what her brain has been taught to 'see' as what she sees in front of her. (xxiv)

In *The Madonna of Excelsior*, the true-life events of the 'miscegenation' trials of Excelsior that occurred in the 1970s are retold through the multi-voiced narrator, who represents the opinions and perspectives of the people of Mahlatsetswa township where the women on trial are from. Mda, the authorial narrator in this novel, also reconfigures the story by basing the recollections of these events on the expressionist paintings of Fr Frans Claerhout, thereby suffusing the narrative with the compassion, empathy and humour which characterise Claerhout's paintings. The narrator describes the paintings in detail, and in this way invites the reader to participate in the narrative by 'seeing', a matter that will be elaborated on in detail in Chapter 4. So, in effect, part of how visualisation works in Mda's novels is in re-appropriating spaces, memory and, as we see with Claerhout's paintings, even artistic artefacts.

However, this is not the only way that vision works in the creation of Mda's literature; seeing is important for Mda's creative output for another reason. As mentioned above, Mda says he usually finds a place so beautiful or ugly that it merits a story. His encounter with a pink mountain in the Eastern Cape is very revealing about the role of visual spectacle and what he has described as a "symbiotic relationship between [his] community activism and the creation of literature" ("The Pink Mountain" 70). Mda's story of the pink mountain is found in a paper subtitled "Landscapes and the conception of a literature of public action" (2011), in which Mda recounts how he saw a pink mountain and thought: "That mountain cannot be beautiful for nothing" (67). With this statement, Mda reiterates and re-affirms his aesthetic world view, which he once described as an African aesthetic, one that rejects the idea of art for its own sake and places a social obligation on the artist (Bell and Jacobs 3). For Mda, his African aesthetic brings together his social conscience, the art of storytelling and his professed love for visual pleasures, the force of which he strives to capture in his prose and paintings. As mentioned above, Mda is known for his "strong painterly imagination" (Fincham 80) as a writer who is also a painter. The natural marvel of the pink mountain moved him to start a beekeeping project for the impoverished village at the foot of that mountain, an experience that then informed a play and a novel. Mda is a self-professed social commentator (Bell and Jacobs 3) and community activist (Mda, "The Pink Mountain" 70). In the paper Mda demonstrates what he means when he says that "things cannot be beautiful for nothing" (67) and how this relates to his writing. He is quick to clarify that "it is in its conception that [he] see[s] [his] as a literature of public action, rather than in any professed

or implied function. [He] set[s] out as a storyteller rather than an advocate for a cause" (70). However, I would like to suggest that Mda's is a literature of public action not only in its conception as he asserts, but also in its rhetoric, as will be demonstrated in relation to the use of *ekphrasis* in *The Madonna of Excelsior* in Chapter 3 of this study. I suggest this as one of the implications of 'seeing' in his creative process and output.

Mda's use of the words "see" and "vision" when explaining how he finds inspiration for his literature is interesting, in that he gives full expression to the nuances in the words by invoking their multiple definitions. One might say that his "faculty of sight" inspires in him a "vivid mental image" like "something in a dream or trance" (*Concise Oxford English Dictionary* "vision"). That certainly seems to be his experience when he sees the pink mountain in the Eastern Cape; he is enchanted by the sight, and inspired to take social action and also to create literature. The part in the definition about a dream or trance relates to the idea of transcendence that Mda associates with art in its inspiration and effect. In other words, the word 'vision' for Mda might be said to encapsulate how the imagined story is conceived from what is physically seen. His artistry as a storyteller depends on his ability to see, and so it would seem that everything else pertaining to his process of story making also draws on the same thing: vision. Mda seems to suggest as much when he makes the link between his response to visual stimuli, the creation of literature, and his social activism.

Mda traces the link that he makes between the beauty he sees in nature and the creation of his own literature back to the Xhosa and Sesotho authors that he read in his formative years. These writers, whom he identifies as his "sources of influence as a writer" (67), he remembers for their sensory details in depicting setting, particularly the landscape. He believes they are the reason for his response to the beauty he sees in nature, or as he put it, his "enthusiasm for visual pleasures in general" (71). These writers placed "special emphasis on landscape and its visual appeal" (68). To them setting is "more than just a place for action […]. It is a mirror of their characters' world and a source of rich imagery" (68). Similarly, the landscape in his own novels is "paramount among the environmental factors that are decisive in the emotional and spiritual development that ultimately determines [his] characters' sense of identity" (67). For these Sesotho writers, too, "beauty is not for its own sake. It has a purpose; man in his self-centeredness must benefit from it" (68-69). This is the reason that Mda's reaction to seeing a pink mountain is "That mountain cannot be beautiful for nothing" (67). It seems the attempt to paint a picture with words, the desire

to draw one's attention to the seen in the works of these writers has trained Mda's eye not only to perceive and revel in the beautiful, but has also persuaded him that this perceived beauty should serve the individual and society in some way. Mda then repeats this experience for his readers, who are invited to participate in the narrative through 'seeing'.

Chapter 2: The Artist Figure in Mda's Novels

2.1 The Artist Figure as a Literary Trope

Margaret Mervis makes an interesting claim about Mda with regard to his first novel. She believes that, like his artist-performer protagonist Toloki, who invents a vocation and profession for himself as a Professional Mourner, Mda, with this experimental first novel, is also carving out a new role for himself as an artist in the newly democratic South Africa (39). The correlation that Mervis draws between Toloki and Mda has fascinating implications, one of which is that the re-emergence of a similar artist character in his subsequent novels, a character who increasingly grows in embodying the qualities of a functional heterophilous catalyst and the ideal postcolonial African artist, may reflect the development and refinement of Mda's own aesthetic conceptions about himself as an artist in a new situation and how he theorizes the role of the African artist in post-apartheid South Africa in general. Extrapolating from Mervis's intriguing assertion, in this chapter I hypothesise that three novels by Mda form a cumulative South African black *kunstlerroman*, and demonstrate that a single Artist Figure is refigured and rewritten as a different artist character in each of these novels.

A *kunstlerroman* is a subtype of the *bildungsroman*, and it is defined as a novel "which represents the growth of [an artist] from childhood into the stage of maturity that signalises the recognition of the protagonist's artistic destiny and mastery of an artistic craft" (Abrams 193). It is "centred on the development of the protagonist's aesthetic ideals, the struggle to accomplish them, and the quest for self-achievement" (Plata para 1). However, Mda's fiction is not a *kunstlerroman* in the European sense, but a South African black *kunstlerroman*, which makes it experimental. The Artist Figure matures with each reincarnation, and in his/her artistic sensibilities and interaction with his/her environment, an aesthetic philosophy becomes apparent which has resonances with the values expressed in Mda's treatise on developmental theatre. The role of the Artist Figure in these narratives can be identified with that of the heterophilous catalyst in theatre-for-conscientisation, and this defined role helps to bring the three narratives together in a palimpsest of 'Fiction for Development'. Also, in the process of theorising what a suitable African artist should be in postcolonial Africa, the matter of a suitable African audience arises and is explored as a vital component of the aesthetic philosophy gleaned from this study's proposed South African black *kunstlerroman*.

2.2 The Artist as a Heterophilous Catalyst

The previous chapter outlines Mda treatise on theatre for development, but for the sake of explaining the function of the heterophious catalyst, and to clarify what this designation signifies, the workings of the Maratholi Travelling Theatre will be reiterated in this section. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Mda is a playwright, novelist, painter and philanthropist. However, scholars of his work suggest that the values that underpin his theatre-for-development now inform his plays and novels. David Bell avers that Mda's oeuvre can be interpreted as being based on the "ideas and ideals that he espoused in his work on the theatre for development" ("A Theatre for Democracy" 33), and Mervis echoes Bell's view with regard to his novels, suggesting that Mda has "extended his theatrical blueprint for social change, described in *When People Play People* (1993), to his first fictional narrative of transition, *Ways of Dying*" (30), so as to create what she calls 'Fiction for Development'. One of the key features in Mda's model of developmental theatre is, of course, the role of the heterophilous catalyst, who must satisfy two requirements to warrant this designation. Firstly, s/he must be someone different from the community in terms of social class, educational level, exposure to the media and beliefs. Secondly, s/he must be someone who is empathetic as a result of a "higher level of critical awareness than that of the community members" (Mda, *When People Play People* 87). Mervis persuasively argues that, in *Ways of Dying*, "despite his naïveté and quaintness, Toloki [the artist-performer protagonist] meets both requirements" (43) for a heterophilous facilitator.[3]

Taking its cue from Mervis's important analysis, this chapter will demonstrate that Mda's blueprint for developmental theatre does not simply extend to his first novel, *Ways of Dying*. There are two subsequent novels, *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995) and *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002), which also bear the characteristics of what Mervis has dubbed Fiction for Development. My particular focus here, then, is on the role of the artist-performer character as a heterophilous catalyst in these novels. Dikosha and Father Claerhout are artist-performer characters in *She Plays*

[3] Mervis goes into great detail in her essay "Fiction for Development: Zakes Mda's Ways of Dying" (2011), taking into consideration all of Toloki's eccentricities, how he relates to his community and the role that he carves out for himself as a professional mourner to demonstrates that Mda transposes his blueprint for developmental theatre onto his fiction. I will not reproduce her exposition on *Ways of* Dying here, but merely use her thesis as a springboard to extend her exploration of the heterophilous catalyst in Mda's Fiction for Development to Dikosha, in *She Plays with the Darkness,* and Father Claerhout, in *The Madonna of Excelsior*.

with the Darkness and *The Madonna of Excelsior*, respectively. In these two novels, as in *Ways of Dying*, there is "emotional renewal and social rehabilitation of [the] protagonists via their imaginative projections" (Mervis 46): Toloki is a Professional Mourner who responds imaginatively to death, prompting those who hear his moans and groans to feel the pain of their own loss, and enabling them to mourn; Dikosha animates San rock paintings through her imagination, which becomes a source of healing for her; and Clearhout, through the medium of expressionist paintings, reimagines the landscape and the ordinary Basotho folk amongst whom he lives, offering a redemptive perspective. While Mda has written other novels which have an artist-performer character, the two novels dealt with in this chapter have a peculiar connection to *Ways of Dying*, in that there is a "thread of interconnected ideas about imagination, art and healing, [which] can be traced running through" all three of them (Warnes 83). In this study, I thus draw a special connection between these three novels and their respective protagonists, Toloki, Dikosha and Father Claerhout.

While travelling around Lesotho with the Maratholi Travelling Theatre raising awareness and conscientising communities, Mda realized that coming to a community with a pre-packaged solution was not conducive to the troupe's aim that "society should achieve greater control of its social, economic and political destiny" ("Maratholi Travelling Theatre: Towards an Alternative Perspective of Development" 354). Theatre-for-conscientisation and participatory theatre served that goal best by giving control to the audience to direct the play, and the actors only intervened as heterophilous catalysts to challenge some of the community's assumptions. As mentioned above, a heterophilous catalyst is "different from the community in attributes such as beliefs, values, education and class position" (Mervis 43) and, importantly, s/he must be empathetic rather than have a class determination similar to that of the community. According to Mda, '[t]he source of [this] empathy is political commitment brought about by a higher level of critical awareness than that of the community members" ("Maratholi Travelling Theatre" 87). The actors' and, therefore, the heterophilous catalysts' interventions are minimal and intended to give the community the opportunity to consider possibilities it has not considered or previously been aware of.

2.3 Dikosha and the Art of Subversion

Dikosha in *She Plays* and Father Claerhout in *The Madonna of Excelsior* both meet the requirements of a heterophilous catalyst. Dikosha is fascinating as a heterophilous facilitator because, even though she is from the village of Ha Samane, she is undeniably different from her community – she sees the world differently from them and lives in the world differently from everyone else within that community. She stands apart from her community, literally, by isolating herself socially and physically. Firstly, she isolates herself socially from her community, including her mother, by refusing to speak to anyone and by rejecting the norms and customs of the people of her village, which she does not observe. As a woman, she rejects the cultural role that she is expected to fulfil by refusing to perform domestic duties. And though she is very beautiful and has no lack of suitors, she also rejects marriage and is not bothered by the villagers labelling her a 'lefetwa' (a woman or girl who has long passed the age of marriage), which is meant to be "the worst insult that could be hurled in the direction of any woman" (Mda, *She Plays with the Darkness* 5). Dikosha is a rebel, but she is also portrayed as someone who is committed to living her life truthfully or rather to live true to reality as she perceives it instead of how she is told to live or according to what is expected of her. So, while her lifestyle is self-indulgent and selfish (she does not do household chores simply because she does not feel like it, but instead spends her time admiring beautiful things), the positive aspect is that her vision of life and reality is not clouded by societal expectations and fear of societal sanctions.

Secondly, Dikosha removes herself physically from her community by choosing to spend much of her time in the Caves of Barwa outside her village. And when she can no longer do so, she retreats to the darkness of her rondavel where she locks everyone out. The sort of life she embraces by choosing to live in a dark cave outside the village and, later, to close herself off in a dark hut also separates her ambitions about a good life from the sort of ideas about a fulfilling life held by the rest of her community. The very title of the novel, *She Plays with the Darkness*, emphasises a subversive quality about Dikosha. The title refers to her solitary and mysterious life in the darkness away from the rest of the world. MacDonald sees the title as Mda "cast[ing] Dikosha's attempted escape in ambiguous terms. Her site of greatest fulfilment, in which she agelessly experiences pure and beautiful relationships, is degenerative on a deeper level" (139), whereas Fincham sees Dikosha as a "precursor both for the free spirits who will challenge traditional roles and for the figure of the artist capable of transforming her society – as Niki and

Popi do in *The Madonna of Excelsior*" (91). As a result, she believes that casting Dikosha in this degenerative light is counter-intuitive to the novel's suggestion of the "power of art as a non-instrumental agent of change" (92). She asks, "Why is the desire to create art – whether it be dancing, singing, painting or storytelling – necessarily destructive of community?" (92). I believe part of the answer may be in the proposal I make later in this chapter that Dikosha represents the first stage in the development of the Artist Figure. The artist's relation to his/her community is not inconsequential in Mda's novels, and in a later section of this chapter, I explore how this particular aspect of the artist evolves each time Mda re-introduces a character who is an artist protagonist in his novels.

Darkness has negative connotations such as secrecy, obscurity, confusion or concealing maleficence. What is kept in the dark is generally thought of as something that is not good to be seen; something ill, harmful or shameful. But Dikosha embraces darkness, and through her life demonstrates that it can also hold a less sinister symbolism. This is one of the ways that Dikosha is an agent of change. In fact, through Dikosha, Mda shows that embracing the dark can have redemptive possibilities. At the outset of the novel, the narrator cautions the reader not to be fooled by the villagers who live with "sunshine on their faces" (1), pretending all is well while harbouring a secret fear in their hearts. Dikosha immerses herself in the sadness that the other villagers prefer to sing and dance away. While it can be argued that it is disingenuous of her to refuse to feel the joyous emotions that are evoked by the songs of the village girls, choosing rather to dwell on darker emotions, her insistence on holding on to negative feelings makes her sensitive to and empathetic towards the darker and unsettling aspects of humanity, and this quality makes it possible for people to come to the darkness of her rondavel to confess to her things they could never say in the light. Her silence also means that she is alienated from the social life of the community. But this alienation from the village gives her sufficient distance from the people of Ha Samane that they are willing to come to the darkness of her rondavel to confess and find absolution, as will be discussed in depth later in this study. Dikosha is a heterophilous catalyst for her village in so far as her separateness from village life creates a space for her to function as a catalyst of healing for other villagers. Also, since "she does what she likes, even if it is against custom" (169), she has no fear of judgement, because she has so little regard for the standards of society.

Dikosha initially exists on the periphery of the village during her stay in the Caves of Barwa where she leads a completely other existence, and where she comes under a foreign influence that takes her further away from her community by giving her a different perspective on life. The Caves of Barwa contain ancient rock paintings of the San. When she goes to the caves, Dikosha conjures the paintings to life and lives among them – dancing, eating and making beads with them. Dikosha is creative and a lover of art and beautiful things, and it is this appreciation and her courage to pursue and embrace what she finds beautiful without seeking approval, together with her refusal to simply dismiss beauty or turn away from it, which set her apart and also open her up to the wonderful, life-giving and healing world of the art on the walls of the Caves of Barwa. In the Caves of Barwa, she is treated with kindness. When the people of the village hurt her with their words and attitude, she retreats to the secrecy of the caves where the paintings sing "healing songs" (51) and perform a dance over her intended to "heal the pain that racked her body and her mind, to banish all of her misfortunes" (51). In the caves Dikosha participates in rituals of healing that are different from anything that the people of her village are used to. She participates in the religious and spiritual practices of an ancient culture and people not her own. And there among them she discovers other possibilities and ways of living:

> She loved the peace that reigned among them. No voice was ever raised in anger, and they did not seem to know any form of violence directed at any other human beings. Men did not deem themselves more important than women. There seemed to be an equality among them that did not exist in the world of Ha Samane.
>
> (52-53)

I would argue that, in this way, Dikosha comes to satisfy the second requirement for a heterophilous catalyst, because in the caves she gains access to new knowledge and learns the ways of a foreign culture, thus gaining a level of awareness that is different from that of the Sotho people of her village. An encounter with such difference no doubt changes the way Dikosha sees the world and the way she relates to it. She does not receive the benefit of going to secondary school because the church fathers who sponsor education think it is more worthwhile to educate boys, but in the Caves of Barwa she undergoes a kind of alternative education from the men and women in the paintings which takes her beyond the norms, customs and opinions of the village. Dikosha 'wills' the paintings on the walls of the Caves of Barwa to life. Warnes has argued that,

rather than being a magic realist moment, the above passage evokes the resources of the character's imagination in overcoming the difficulties of her present suffering:

> Dikosha does not encounter any essential San presence in the caves, nor are the dancing San present to her in any unmediated way. On the contrary it is through their art that she is reconciled with their absence. […] [I]t is […] towards the invention of tradition that Mda is signalling: towards hybridised, re-enchanting modes of being accessed not through magical means, but through ordinary acts of the imagination associated with the redeeming qualities of the aesthetic.
>
> (82)

Warnes's keen reading is very illuminating about Mda's aesthetic concerns, and in a later chapter his observations about how Mda portrays the function of art in his novels will be explored in greater detail. However, it seems hasty to entirely dismiss magic or the supernatural in the passages about the Caves of Barwa and limit them only to an act of the imagination. To concede that these are magic realist moments would not take away from Warnes's reading. Mda's own remarks about magic realism in his work, and both related as well as unrelated incidents within the novel itself, suggest that Dikosha's encounters in the caves are very likely supernatural.

Mda himself, as a way of explaining the magic realism in his writing, has said that he comes from a magical culture, and so writes from that position. He is referring to the Xhosa way of seeing the world in which supernatural occurrences are taken for granted as forming part of everyday reality in an unextraordinary way. So, the worlds of Mda's novels exist within the paradigm of a Xhosa worldview, or rather he creates the worlds of his novels under the influence of the Xhosa way of experiencing the world. When Mda's own claims are taken into consideration, one must concede that it is very likely that when the narrator of the novel says that the paintings on the wall are 'willed to life', then within the reality of the novel and the world in which the characters live, a Sotho culture which shares the Xhosa way of seeing – and which is also governed by the principle that both natural and supernatural realities are equally valid and acceptable – it may well be that Dikosha *actually* conjures the paintings to life, and that this is not merely the workings of her imagination. If Mda stylistically assumes the point of view or epistemological orientation of the cultural group that is represented in the novel, then it is possible that the visions that Dikosha sees in the animated paintings which dance with her in the caves is an incorporation of the San belief system into the narrative. As David Lewis-Williams explains, "[San rock] paintings were not simply depictions of other things – animals, people, visions and so forth; rather they were things

in themselves; they had a life and existence of their own" (14-15). In the same way that Sotho spiritual beliefs are taken for granted as being true in *She Plays with the Darkness*, as in the case of Mantsi whose call by the ancestors to become a traditional healer is taken as an actual occurrence, it is possible that the text extends the same treatment to San spiritualism.

If this instance in the narrative is a magic realist moment, it would mean that there is an actual San presence in the caves and Dikosha has received new knowledge. Within the story, the evidence that the dancers are really there and are not simply figments of her imagination is presented in tangible ways by the fact that she is fed by the paintings and no longer eats at home. She looks better nourished than the other people in the village, and in the novel this is accounted for as the effect of the time she spends with the people in the Caves of Barwa, who also imbue her with unfading youth and remarkable beauty. The physiological effect of Dikosha's highly spiritual, but also very physical life in the caves is enduring; many years later when Radisene, Dikosha's brother who was born in the same year as she, forcefully drags her out of her rondavel and takes her out of the village to the lowlands with him, the people that see them together ask Radisene if he is with his granddaughter. She does not age, nor does the dress she wore during her visits to the caves ever wear out. So, rather than merely reflecting the life of the imagination, Dikosha's life in the caves is both magical and real.

Supernatural occurrences in the narrative are not limited to the incidence of the caves. There are other fantastical elements that are not mere superstition, rumour or figments of the characters' imagination, but are, in fact, supernatural realities that actually affect and explain the natural events in the characters' world. One such example is Hlong, who is rumoured in the village to have the power to control lightning. He walks away furious from a heated argument with Father of Daughters and immediately after the latter is flung off his horse when lightning strikes right in front of him. He recognises this as a threat from Hlong. What at first is introduced to the reader as rumour and superstition is then affirmed through an unlikely coincidence. In addition, the omniscient narrator continuously exposes the rumour and superstition among the villagers by revealing to the reader the true explanations alongside what the villagers believe. But the narrator also affirms some fantastic events, which might be taken for superstition, by relating them as true events, and offering no alternative explanation.

If Dikosha's life in the caves with the men and women dancers is indeed a supernatural encounter and not merely an act of the imagination spurred on by powerful ancient art, then the

level of critical awareness she has, which supersedes that of her community members, is the result of spending time with the people of the cave and learning from them new ways of being in the world. She takes on the qualities of a heterophilous catalyst "through communion with […] the traces left by the absent 'Barwa' population that predates Dikosha's Basotho people in that region […]. They are of another, a displaced and erased people who are absent bodily" (MacDonald 136). This powerful encounter with an 'other' culture then makes her a strong heterophilous catalyst. Later, when men enter the darkness of her rondavel to confess to her their dark deeds and to find reprieve from the burdens that weigh on their consciences, she becomes for them what the dancers of the cave have been to her. Indeed, there is no one else in the village who could fulfil that role quite as well as she does. She is sufficiently removed from the social life of the village that no one need worry about her repeating to anyone else what they have said to her. Moreover, by her very lifestyle Dikosha demonstrates again and again that she does not fear the same things that the villagers do, and so does not share their sense of the taboo, nor does she share their judgements. These qualities make her a suitable mediator, which is what a heterophilous catalyst is, for those who are seeking to be reconciled with themselves, which is potentially what confession achieves.

Dikosha is also a heterophilous mediator in respect of the reader, for whom, within this narrative of a fairly homogenous, happy, singing, dancing rural community, she is a subversive element which unsettles the narrative. Her presence suggests to the reader other possibilities of being for the characters. So that, while their home culture dictates one way of doing things and seeing the world, the 'outside culture' that Dikosha embodies offers an alternative perspective and way of being. The reader thus sees Sotho rural life not only as it is embodied by the Basotho villagers, but also as aspects of it are illuminated by its intersection with an 'outside' culture. The role of that outside culture epitomises the function of a heterophilous mediator/ catalylst. So, while "in her quest for the self-contained aesthetic transcendence of her life station […] Dikosha risks becoming enveloped by the darkness of isolation" (MacDonald 139), Mda also provides redemptive possibilities for this darkness.

2.4 Claerhout and the Artist as Outsider

In the Caves of Barwa, Dikosha comes under the influence of a foreign culture and, in *The Madonna of Excelsior*, the Belgian born and raised Father Frans Claerhout – called the trinity because he is "man, artist and priest" (Mda, *The Madonna of Excelsior* 2) – and his Expressionist

paintings similarly bring a foreign influence to this narrative set in a small Free State town in South Africa. Both Father Claerhout and the Expressionist style of painting are foreign to the South African context, though both are adapted to their new context, and it is through an encounter with them that the protagonists Niki and Popi gain a new perspective on themselves and their circumstances. *The Madonna of Excelsior* is a fictional account of true events. The character Father Frans Claerhout, a priest and Expressionist painter, is based on the real Father Frans Claerhout whom Mda once visited in his studio on the mission station where he lived in Thaba Nchu. So, even though the narrative does not provide much information about the trinity, the reader may assume that he shares the same biographical details as the actual Father Claerhout. According to Dirk and Dominique Schwager, Claerhout was a Belgian-born Catholic priest who came to South Africa as a missionary and worked among the Basotho villages around Bloemfontein and later in Thaba Nchu, where his congregation consisted of "simple and illiterate people living in impoverished surroundings" (qtd in Folkey).

Invested with the characteristics of the actual Claerhout, the trinity clearly stands apart from all the other characters in the narrative. Father Claerhout once said, "I see through African eyes with a touch of Belgium here and there. After all, you can't put your heritage in a plastic bag and fling it out the window" (qtd in Folkey para 1). Claerhout is different in all the ways that the heterophilous catalyst is required to be. He is well-educated, belongs to a different class than the people amongst whom he ministers, has different values because he comes from a different cultural context, and most importantly, as a priest he has deep empathy. As Jacobs phrases it,

> Claerhout portrays daily life from a variety of perspectives, identifying with his subjects and also distancing himself from them and, as Strydom puts it, 'painting with compassion and with humour, religiously and philosophically, through the eyes of Africa and from a Western point of view, enervated and serene.'
>
> ("Towards a South African Expressionism: *The Madonna of Excelsior*" 286)

Even while Claerhout identifies deeply with the African context and empathises with its people, he remains Belgian and, as such, is a foreigner among them, and the influence of his heritage and education, which are not of the context he now inhabits, allow him to have a different perspective than that of the people of that region. He is not simply different from the black Basotho peasants who make up his congregation, and who are also the subjects of his paintings, but his views are also markedly different from those of the white Afrikaner men of Excelsior. The trinity does not speak in *The Madonna of Excelsior*, but his art, which is ubiquitous in the novel, reveals his

perspective on the place and the people among whom he finds himself. Claerhout paints in the style of Expressionism, a style of painting that is not so much about the subject as it is about how the artist feels about the subject. In reality, he produced a series of Madonna and Child paintings for which local black women modelled nude. In the novel, Niki and her daughter Popi model nude for 'the trinity', and, from the literary descriptions of the paintings, we see a vastly different view of them compared to that held by the other white men of Excelsior who, like the trinity, are also of the Christian faith.

Strydom's analysis of Claerhout's painting style is that its characteristics are used "to convince the viewer in a direct and empathetic way of the artist's (emotional and intuitive) interpretation of reality" (qtd in Jacobs 287). The local white men see black women as pawns of the devil sent to "tempt [Afrikaner men] and move them away from the path of the righteous" (Mda, *The Madonna of Excelsior* 87), which is how they justify their sexual exploitation of them. But the trinity's artistic treatment of the naked mother and child is different: while in the narrative the local white Afrikaner men's impulse is to violate the black female body, 'the trinity' pays homage to the sacred maternal vessel that is the woman's body and celebrates the uninhibited bonding of mother and child in their nakedness. This is seen in the description of the world on canvas created by 'the trinity', where there are no predators to prey on the mother and child's nakedness. In the paintings they are "frolicking in wide-open spaces that the trinity created" and they are "naked and free […] gambolling in the field" (69). There is even a suggestion in the *ekphrasis* (the literary descriptions of the paintings) of an attempt or desire by 'the trinity' to protect mother and child from the harsh realities of life in Excelsior: the narrator describes them "disappearing into the trinity's splashes and becoming part of the compassion they evoked" (69). In Excelsior, Popi's racial hybridity invites ridicule from the township folk of Mahlatsetswa who call her a 'boesman', and Niki is regarded only with "lust and loathing" (87) by the Afrikaner men, but as subjects in the trinity's paintings they are treated with compassion. Expressionism is emotional painting, and that is the feeling that the subjects Niki and Popi evoke in the trinity. This is in stark contrast with the judgements, perverse responses and violent reactions that they evoke from their community, both black and white.

The trinity is present in the novel primarily through his paintings, which are described in detail at the beginning of each chapter of *The Madonna of Excelsior*. The paintings provide Popi with a glimpse of how 'the trinity' views the world. But the novel goes even further, in that,

through detailed descriptions of these Expressionist paintings, the reader is invited to be a viewer of the very same art that is so transformative for the characters. And as Diana Wylie observes, "these color-laden prose paintings prepare the way for the denouement, when the creative eye of the artist is shown to be the origin of 'healing'" (391). So, in this novel, the trinity is a catalyst within the narrative for the other characters, but his art is a catalyst not only for the characters in the story who are affected by seeing it, but also for the reader. The descriptions of the paintings are not a direct part of the narrative, but are a digression which mediates the reader's perception of the events in the narrative. This means that, through his paintings, Claerhout is a catalyst for the typical South African reader as well, a reader who may share or identify with the subject positions of the characters in the novel.

In Mda's theories about developmental theatre, an artistic form – that is, a play – is used for a pragmatic social end: theatre and performance are the medium used to conscientise the community. Mervis argues that in his fiction Mda has a similar ambition. All three characters, Toloki, Dikosha and Fr Claerhout are linked together, not only by their shared role as heterophilous catalyst in their respective narratives, but they are artists and/or performers, whose vocation is associated with creativity, art and healing. As heterophilous catalysts in Mda's Fiction for Development, they are also cast into playing the important communal role of enlightening their communities.

2.5 The South African Black *Kunstlerroman* and Mda's Artist Figure

In the paper in which Mervis describes *Ways of Dying* as Fiction for Development, she also looks at the different literary modes that overlap in his fiction, and one of her most interesting descriptions of this novel is that it is "a uniquely South African black *kunstlerroman*" (42) or artist-novel. The categorisation of this novel as a South African black *kunstlerroman* is especially interesting because of the debates about the place and function of art in South Africa during the transition, as discussed in Chapter 1 of this study. *Ways of Dying* is not the only novel by Mda that concerns itself with art and has an artist as a significant character. Almost all of Mda's novels feature art or performance and have an artist-protagonist. As argued above, *She Plays with the Darkness*, *Ways of Dying* and *The Madonna of Excelsior* all feature an artist character who functions in the narratives as a heterophilous catalyst. However, these three novels, specifically, also feature visual art, and are tied together by a shared, recurring theme that connects art, healing

and redemption, such that it seems that Mda is rewriting and extrapolating this theme in each consecutive novel.

If that is the case, and if, as Mervis suggests, *Ways of Dying* can be considered as a kind of South African black *kunstlerroman* because of its artist protagonist and because of the novel's concern with art, then this study would like to suggest that this novel forms only part of an extended *kunstlerroman* which comprises and runs chronologically through the three novels mentioned above: *She Plays with the Darkness*, *Ways of Dying* and *The Madonna of Excelsior*, in that order. As an extended *kunstlerroman*, these three novels are held together by the three artist-performer characters, Dikosha, Toloki and Father Claerhout, who appear in each novel respectively, and who, in all three novels, as discussed in the previous section, are cast in the same role of a heterophilous catalyst. In these novels, then, Mda presents the recurring figure of the artist-performer, who sometimes appears in the form of the protagonist, and at other times emerges as a minor character – as in the case of *The Madonna of Excelsior* in which the artist character is known primarily through his art, which is featured throughout the novel. There are recurrences of the same set of features in these three characters who fulfil the role of the artist-performer in each the novels, and this makes it plausible to suggest that Mda may be revising, developing and maturing the same figure, who is reincarnated in the same or a similar role in each successive novel. This is what this study is arguing to be the case. When referring to these three characters as a single figure reincarnated in each subsequent novel, I shall use the term Artist Figure. Through this Artist Figure, Mda explores the role or place of art and the aesthetic in a postcolonial, post-apartheid society in his narratives. As a result, I propose to examine *She Plays with the Darkness*, *Ways of Dying* and *The Madonna of Excelsior* as a cumulative South African black *kunstlerroman* held together by the artist-performer referred to as the Artist Figure. The intention of this examination is to discover how Mda theorises or imagines the role of the postcolonial African artist and to consider the evolution of his aesthetic philosophy as expressed through the Artist Figure in his experimental fiction.

Though *Ways of Dying* was published before *She Plays with the Darkness*, the chronological order of this study will be the reverse because, firstly, there have been suggestions that Mda's second published novel, *She Plays with the Darkness*, was written before his first (see Fincham). Secondly, with regards to narrative continuity, Mda writes realist novels set during very specific times historically, and for that reason, a chronological progression through the

narratives makes sense in the order suggested by this study: *She Plays with the Darkness* is set in Lesotho many years before South Africa becomes a democracy; *Ways of Dying* is set during the years of South Africa's political transition, and *The Madonna of Excelsior*'s time frame begins in the apartheid years, continues through the major political shift to democracy, and then explores life under the new post-apartheid dispensation.

The definition of a *kunstlerroman* given above characterises Mda's Artist Figure in his/her emergence and development as Dikosha in *She Plays with the Darkness*, then as Toloki in *Ways of Dying*, and finally as Father Claerhout in *The Madonna of Excelsior*. The three characters share defining attributes that make it plausible to believe that the same figure is being rewritten and revised, and those defining attributes that they have in common include remarkable insight, a keen imagination, some form of empathy, and often they have an awkward relation to or exist on the fringes of society. All three artist-performer characters who constitute the Artist Figure also share similar circumstances: they live in a time of political uncertainty and/or transition and, to varying degrees, they mediate the reader's perception of the social, cultural and political situations in the novel, whilst offering the other characters an alternative view of the world and the possibility of healing or redemption.

Beyond the three artist-performer characters, there is another dimension to the Artist Figure which relates to the author, Mda. Part of what this study argues is that the particular characterisation of the artist-performer as s/he emerges with each reincarnation as the Artist Figure constitutes Mda's own vision of art and the artist in postcolonial, post-apartheid South Africa. In *Ways of Dying*, the artist-protagonist Toloki has been compared to Mda because, "as an educator and artist who uses his skill to develop and empower his people, [he] plays a facilitating role very similar to that of his author" (Mervis 42). The connection between Mda and his artist protagonist has interesting implications for what this study proposes is an extended South African black *kunstlerroman* that spans the three novels. The implication is that Mda – the theorist, artist and educator – is not merely 'expressing' narratively an ideological position or possibility, but because the three novels constitute a *kunstlerroman*, which means chronicle the development, maturation, achievement and mastery of the artist's aesthetic ideals, then what is unfolding with each novel is not only a reflection of the author's ideological position, but its 'becoming'. Under the new democratic South Africa, Mda is discovering for the first time what it means to be a free artist. As a scholar and a creator, one can logically assume that he is aware of the aesthetic practices and

movements of other places and times, and that he is also acutely aware of his own subject position historically, socially and politically as an artist. From his remarks in interviews and as is evident in his work, he is very deliberate about creating art that embodies and expresses the aesthetic spirit of its context, which he describes as an African aesthetic which rejects the idea of art for art's sake. However, previously there had not been much opportunity for such artistic ambitions to be realised, because the work of many black South African artists functioned as 'a weapon of culture'. So, Attwell rightly describes Mda's novels as 'experimental', partly because the aesthetic sensibility portrayed by the artist-protagonist in each novel is continually evolving.

The three novels that make up the proposed extended South African black *kunstlerroman* are individually complete narratives, and with each instalment there is a revision and/or refinement of the Artist Figure's aesthetic ideals because the author's own artistic philosophy is in the process of becoming. The sense of revision and refinement is especially evident in the novels' Artist Figure, and the achievement of those aesthetic ideals can be measured against how closely or how well s/he realises the values which underpin Mda's theories of theatre for development, which are a balance between creative autonomy and social responsibility or relevance. There are clear parallels, then, between Mda, the author, and the artist characters of his novels. Mda is also an artist who is living through a time of political transition, and whose work in earlier years was produced to serve the struggle for liberation for all those oppressed by apartheid, but is now seen to "create […] in his novels a new role for himself in a new South Africa" (Mervis 39). In these three texts, the artist and art play a significant role in the process of healing and reconciliation, as though the author, whose novels are known for their pedagogic agenda, were purporting or at least expressing the hope that his own work might serve the same purpose. An examination of these texts and the Artist Figure therefore may reveal what the author makes of this period in our history. In other words, the novels can be seen to offer the author's commentary on the actual time and place represented in the respective novels.

Through his novels, Mda explores the possibility of the emergence of the kind of artist that is relevant in post-apartheid South Africa, against the weight of the country's political and social history and the ideological tensions that characterise its present. Dikosha, Toloki and Claerhout, are the artist-performer characters who constitute the Artist Figure and who importantly fulfil the role of a heterophilous catalyst in what may be called Fiction for Development. Art as an expression, extension or embodiment of culture is itself one of the points of tension in post-

apartheid South Africa, since the call has been made that it no longer be a weapon of culture. Now that the country is free, what does that mean for the artist who is now free? What role does art fulfil in a democratic South Africa? Mda's Artist Figure is not an answer, but an exploration – a search for an answer. Mda's own identity and vocation as an artist are under review as the struggle changes. As Mervis puts it,

> In the hiatus between old and new, between ways of dying and ways of living, Mda employs a genre new to him – a novel – to explore new ideas and an alternative ideology through which he can envisage a place for himself and his art in the future. (42)

Mda's novels, then, are a textual representation of a country and discourse in flux. If, for Mda, and according to his African aesthetic, the artist is a commentator on society, then a closer examination of his Artist Figure and the artefacts and/or performances produced by this Artist Figure should reveal not only what the artist/author makes of the state of the cultures and societies represented in the texts, but also what art should, could or does mean in these cultures and societies.

In "'From Work to Text': The Modernist and Postmodernist Kunstlerroman", Carl D. Malmgren provides a compelling motivation for using representative texts to examine the "nature and function of the aesthetic artefact" (5) during times of transition. He posits:

> If the twentieth century has experienced a dramatic change in sensibility, a shift in the prevailing episteme, and if that registers itself foremost in the very nature and function of the aesthetic artefact, then one way to define the transformation would be to examine in detail representative narratives which deal directly with the artist and the nature of his calling. (5)

If this is the case, then in order for us to understand the character of the emergent new South Africa, Mda's novels, read as a cumulative South African black *kunstlerroman*, offer the possibility of defining this society's transformation as it is reflected in "the very nature and function of the aesthetic artefact" (5).

2.6 Dikosha in Keats's Many-Chambered Mansion

In this trilogy of novels that make up a cumulative South African black *kunstlerroman*, Dikosha, the protagonist in *She Plays with the Darkness*, signifies or represents the nascent stages or the early conceptualisation of the Artist Figure. This novel begins the exploration of what the ideal African artist might be. Since a *kunstlerroman* is a sub-type of the *Bildungsroman*, Keats's

metaphor of a many-chambered mansion, which is sometimes used to track the stages of development in a character, is useful for unpacking what this early stage entails. This metaphor will thus be used in relation to Dikosha as way of introducing and establishing the concept that she represents the initial stage of the Artist Figure's maturation. In addition, Malmgren's rubric for a modernist and postmodernist *kunstlerroman* and his idea of 'markedness', which will be explained later, will provide framework within which I will unpack the Artist Figure's evolution or maturation from Dikosha to Claerhout. However, an application of Keats's idea of the many-chambered mansion to Dikosha affirms and gives insight into this initial stage of the artist's development.

Dikosha is not a child for most of the novel; she is called a 'lefetwa' because she is past the age of marriage. However, if "'youth' can imply not so much the state of being as a process of movement and adjustment from childhood to early maturity" (Buckley viii), then in terms of this cumulative *kunstlerroman,* Toloki represents the stage of youth and Dikosha displays the traits of childhood. In Keats's many-chambered mansion "the child […] lingers in 'the infant or thoughtless chamber' as long as he remains content with simple sensations and impressions" (Buckley 1-2). Dikosha vacillates between being childish and childlike. Like the child in Keats's mansion, her experience of the world is very sensorial and visceral: she fearlessly catches snakes simply because they are beautiful, giving no heed to the danger they pose to her, and she is content to spend hours simply staring at the *ditema* patterns drawn on the houses of a neighbouring village. Moreover, her lack of a sense of responsibility towards and complete disregard of her mother, home and the community that nurtured her shows a childish selfishness. She only does what she feels like doing and her aesthetic indulgences are at the expense of domestic duties.

However, Dikosha is not only childish, she is also childlike, and her most interesting childlike quality is her vision of the world. She finds enchantment and beauty all around her. Dikosha's response to the paintings in the Caves of Barwa is a childlike fascination and enthusiasm that is reminiscent of the opening scene of Antoine de Saint-Exupery's *The Little Prince*. *The Little Prince* is a fantastical children's book that critique's adults' inability to see with an imaginative eye and to value things rightly. In the opening scene, a child draws an elephant inside a boa constrictor and shows it to adults who mistake the simplistic drawing for a hat. Only the Little Prince, who represents eternal childhood purity and fascination, has the imagination to see the drawing for what it is. The drawings in the Caves of Barwa are ancient San drawings, which

more often than not tend to be valued for their historicity, and their ethnographic and cultural significance, rather than their aesthetic or artistic qualities. Such drawings are usually simplistic figures. However, Dikosha, like the Little Prince, sees so much more to the drawings. She conjures them to life and they dance with her, feed her and heal her of the ailments inflicted by the world's poisonous words. *She Plays with the Darkness* is a magic realist novel, and while the paintings coming to life and dancing with Dikosha may be read as a magic realist moment, as I argue in a preceding section of this chapter, they can also simply be a figment of her imagination. Viewed as the latter, the animation of the paintings is a childlike, visceral response to the art itself, a response which is in stark contrast to the attitude of the government officials and other important persons from the city of Maseru in the lowlands who visit the Caves of Barwa because of their cultural prestige.

2.7 The Modernist/Postmodernist *Kunstlerroman* and the South African Black *Kunstlerroman*

Dikosha, Toloki and Father Claerhout represent the consecutive stages of the Artist Figure's maturation and, together, all three characters may be explored through Malmgren's rubric for the modernist and postmodernist *kunstlerroman*. Malmgren's paper specifically refers to the modernist and postmodernist texts of Western writers but, as noted earlier, Attwell believes that the experimentalism in the writing of black South African writers is akin to the European modernist and postmodernist impulses in certain respects, and cites as an example the programmatic and self-conscious "process of epistemological recovery and revision […] fully underway" (177) in Mda's novels. Mda's novels are artefacts portraying artists and art within the very cultures or contexts from within which the author Mda himself creates; his work is thus deeply self-reflexive in the style of postmodern literature. With that said, this study will use Malmgren's rubric for the modernist and postmodernist *kunstlerroman* as a springboard for an examination of Mda's cumulative South African black *kunstlerroman*. There are two reasons for this approach. Firstly, as already stated, there are resonances that Attwell notes between European modernism and postmodernism and the literary and epistemological revisions and experimentation in black South African writing (while keeping in mind reservations he expresses which prevent him from applying the terms 'modernist' and 'postmodernist' to what he observes in black South African writing, and his choice to rather employ the phrase "experimental line"). Secondly, the artist-protagonist of

Malmgren's modernist and postmodernist *kunstlerroman* shares some definitive features with Mda's artist-protagonists, but with certain significant differences which can be attributed to the differences in contexts and aesthetic paradigms.

However, before appropriating Malmgren's rubric with reference to Mda's work, it is important to address the concern around applying European ideas or theories to postcolonial texts and contexts. In a preface or disclaimer for her own application of Mikhail Bakhtin to one of Mda's novels, Rita Barnard expresses a reluctance to deploy European critical ideas and theorists in an African context. One of her concerns is that one "invites the charge that by relying on European critical ideas […] one also brings the oppressive discursive structures within which such ideas might originally have been framed into play" (283-284). Her defence, as is that of this study, is that "literary theories are just as capable as any other cultural artefact of being refashioned in new contexts" (284). She also draws on Mda's notion of a heterophilous catalyst in theatre-for-conscientisaton, a figure who necessarily must be a foreigner to "the community in attributes such as beliefs, values, education and class position" (Mervis 43), to suggest that "it is entirely possible that Mda may be consciously importing and rewriting a number of tropes" from European writers and thinkers to create "connections [that] may be productive of fresh and progressive insights" (Barnard 283). In other words, she is suggesting the possibility that Mda not only welcomes, but also actively creates, the opportunity for interaction between European literary traditions and his own project as an African writer.

2.8 'Markedness' and the Artist Figure

Keeping the above in mind, Malmgren's definitions of and categories for the modernist and postmodernist *kunstlerroman* are very useful for framing this study's analysis. The particular category that this study will borrow from Malmgren's comparative examination of modern and postmodern texts is the 'markedness' of the artist-protagonist. In his examination, Malmgren discovers both that the representative modernist and postmodernist artist-protagonists are 'marked' men, and that the "markedness […] is less a cause of the difference than a sign thereof" (7). Thus, the "root causes of difference […] seem intimately bound up with the question of a distinctive sensibility" (7). In terms of Mda's evolving Artist Figure, the distinctive sensibility that sets the artist apart manifests in Dikosha as depth of insight or spiritual enlightenment and a cold, disinterested empathy. She is able to see through the oppressive patriarchal customs within her

culture that limit a woman's role to a subjugated domestic existence that is regulated by superstition and the sanctions imposed by village opinion. She embraces the unacknowledged fact that the people of her village have more reason to grieve (on account of the mist) than to sing and dance, and so she holds onto the sadness within her even when the songs of the other village girls would snatch it away from her. She is also the only one who appreciates the sanctity of the Caves of Barwa. When it comes to empathy, she creates a safe place for the villagers to go to unburden themselves of their dark secrets, though she does not listen out of concern but rather out of relish.

When the Artist Figure is reincarnated as Toloki, there is an evolution in the distinctive sensibility that sets Dikosha apart, and with reference to the values put forward in Mda's treatise for developmental theatre, which encapsulate his own aesthetic sensibility concerning what an artist should be, this evolution represents a refinement of what we see in Dikosha. Mda's aesthetic values have to do with balancing the artist's creativity with social responsibility. In other words, the artist is expected to serve society somehow; to help society and to improve the well-being of communities. Toloki goes a step further than Dikosha. Not only does he have insight into the spiritual condition of the people he lives amongst (which manifests as their inability emotionally to respond appropriately to the tragic circumstances that touch their lives daily), but also through performance, he is able to express and embody emotion, and specifically, grief, and reflect it back to his audience with such pathos that, in empathising with his lament, the same emotion is quickened within them. He does this through his imagination, which is his keenest artistic sensibility, and he has a remarkable capacity to respond in a realistic way to imagined realities. As a Professional Mourner, he "expresses [an] imaginative response to death" (Steinmeyer 166). In recreating worlds and realities that are far removed from him, he draws others into those realities:

> Toloki becomes a virtuoso performer. For mass funerals 'with political overtones' he invents a style which uses sounds that are "loosely based on chants that youths utter during political rallies", modified by swaying, wails, whines and moans "that are meant to invoke sorrow and pain". What Toloki creates is truly popular theatre. (Mervis 44)

Fincham similarly sees Toloki's performance as Professional Mourner as an artistic performance – as theatre. Toloki is set apart by his imagination and, in actualising his imaginative inclinations in community, his performance – from his costume, his lifestyle and his 'professional practice' – carves out for him the role of a heterophilous catalyst: his performance becomes a source of

healing. Significantly, this performative aspect of Toloki links him as a character to the role that Mda is carving out for himself in his novels, which "typically […] enact the performative in their textual strategies" (Fincham 159). This is an aspect of his fiction which Fincham argues "evolved out of his earlier experience of working with the Maratholi Travelling Theatre in Lesotho" (159).

The affective power of Toloki's imagination is evident not only in his imaginative response to death, but also when he and Noria take a 'walk' together through the gardens in the pages of *Home and Garden* magazine pasted on the walls of Noria's shack. This episode in the novel is often interpreted as being magical realist, but Warnes avers that what is demonstrated in this particular instance is the use of the imagination to overcome immediate suffering. If, indeed, what happens is not transcendental but merely a demonstration of the use of the imagination, then it is significant that in the novel it is portrayed as though it were really happening – prompting its labelling as magic realist by many readers. As a description of the potential of the imagination, this scene gives the reader a sense of the power of Toloki's imaginative projections since the reader is made to think that it *is* real, and thereby demonstrates why Toloki is able to inhabit and respond to imagined realities with such conviction. This power he has to make others 'feel' through his imagination is important, because through performance he is able to awaken the dulled sensibilities of his community. And, in enabling his community to experience grief, he also makes them capable of empathy and genuine delight. After all, it is also from Toloki's vivid imagination and ingenuity that Noria's new shack is created; the latter leaves the neighbours astounded and delighted as a result of its otherworldliness.

2.9 Claerhout and the Art of Compassion

Moving on from Toloki, the Artist Figure's sensibilities are further refined when he is once more reincarnated as Father Frans Claerhout, who not only has depth of insight and a powerful imagination, but is able, through his imaginative creations, to illuminate the truth in a deep and lasting way. In Father Claerhout, or the trinity[4] as he is referred to in the novel, the Artist Figure is reincarnated in a character marked and set apart not only by virtue of his vocation as a priest,

[4] The character of Fr Frans Claerhout is referred to as 'the trinity' with a lowercase 't' throughout the novel, alluding to his god-like qualities as an artist who recreates reality according to his whim. The Christian God is called the Trinity because he is Father, Spirit and Son; Claerhout is called the trinity because he is "man, priest and artist. The threeness that has tamed the open skies, the vastness and the loneliness of the Free State" (Mda, *The Madonna of Excelsoior* 2).

which requires that he live on a mission station literally located outside the town, but also by virtue of his extraordinary empathy and compassion, both of which are rooted in his deep insight and understanding, as expressed through a vibrant imagination. In *The Madonna of Excelsior*, the Artist Figure is not the central protagonist; however, his paintings frame the entire narrative, and make his personality ubiquitous. Even though, as a character, he makes only a brief appearance and he never speaks, his perspective suffuses the entire narrative through the narrator's detailed descriptions of his paintings (a matter which will be examined extensively in Chapter 3 of this study). This makes the trinity an important character. In a time and place characterized by fear, hatred, suspicion and exploitation, the empathy or compassion that is evoked by his Expressionist paintings is arresting. He is described as the "white man [who] […] warmly and masterfully daubed his broad strokes", creating "distorted people in their daily chores" (Mda, *The Madonna of Excelsior* 2) and, even though "his subjects are ordinary folk doing ordinary things[,] [y]et God radiates from them" (131). Compassion is the quality in his art that is the most disarming.

Very importantly, with reference to the values which underpin theatre for development, compassion is about identifying with those who are suffering, and it can only be experienced and expressed in community with others. The trinity's paintings depict normal everyday village life through the eyes of someone who sees glory in these mundane scenes and glimpses of divinity in the faces of ordinary village folk. This is a far cry from the cold insight and disinterested curiosity of Dikosha, and is therefore a sign of growth and maturation in the Artist Figure. Although all of the three characters that constitute the Artist Figure deeply appreciate beauty and are moved by it, the trinity, who represents the stage of the mature Artist Figure, does not reject people for a cold self-serving aesthetic. Rather, his art is rooted in community, and perhaps this is the driving force behind the African aesthetic to which Mda says he subscribes. The Artist Figure first manifests as a young black girl in rural Lesotho, and then he emerges as a black middle-aged man in a South African township. Finally, he is reincarnated as a white Belgian priest living on the outskirts of a Free State town. The artistic gift does not discriminate. The trinity's character is based on the actual Claerhout, who was a white Belgian priest, and Mda's choice to portray him as he does in the novel demonstrates his commitment to storytelling without a political axe to grind.

The Artist Figure's maturation is evident in the evolution of the sensibilities which set him apart, growing from deep insight and understanding in Dikosha to a powerful imagination added to that insight, which fosters empathy in Toloki. This is expressed in his production of artistic

performances (Professional Mourning) and artefacts (Noria's shack) that so deeply touch the audience that an important part of their humanity, which is the ability to grieve and also to experience simple delight, is awakened. With regard to the trinity, that quality that delights is evident in his art even in its early stages when "the strokes were simple and naïve. Just black outlines of figures with brown or green oil paint rubbed over them" (1). Yet they "overwhelmed [the child Popi] with joy […] and filled her with excitement in their ordinariness" (2). And then, at a later stage, when Popi is a grown woman, the trinity's same paintings

> exude an energy that enveloped her, draining her of all her negative feelings. She felt weak at the knees. Tears ran down her cheeks. She did not know why she was crying. […] She had not uttered a word to the trinity throughout her visit. Yet she felt she had been healed of a deadly ailment she could not really describe. (238)

The mature Artist Figure's art begins in community and returns to the community with the power to illuminate truth and to reveal society to itself. This is where Mda's African artist departs from the twentieth-century's modernist and postmodernist artist who, according to Alan Wilde, is the "outsider, the uncommitted spectator, longing to overcome his self-consciousness and make contact with the world outside his limited and limiting ego" (qtd in Malmgrem 9).

2.10 Re-emergence of the 'Mature' Artist Figure: Intertextuality in *She Plays with the Darkness* and *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe*

The idea of a cumulative South African black *kunstlerroman* proposed by this study reveals what may be considered as the 'becoming' or 'maturation' of the idea of the postcolonial, post-apartheid African artist, as inferred from representations in Mda's three novels. Mda's creation of an extended South African black *kunstlerroman* and of the Artist Figure is an imaginative pulling together of comparative threads. However, the assertions made in this study about the Artist Figure are re-affirmed in a novel that Mda wrote many years after the three novels that I have argued constitute an extended South African black *kunstlerroman.* The issues that arise in my analysis of the Artist Figure in this extended *kunstlerroman* – issues concerning the communal role of the artist – are confidently asserted and established in Mda's novel *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe,* which was published in 2013 – eighteen years after his experimental first novel in which the healing and redemptive potential of art and performance is first explored. Through the trope of the twinned protagonists, and specific details about these protagonists, *The Sculptors of*

Mapungubwe, which is itself a kind of African black *kunstlerroman*, harkens back to *She Plays with the Darkness*, the latter constituting the first part of the trilogy of novels in this study's proposed cumulative South African black *kunstlerroman*.

The trope of twinned protagonists is a consistent feature in Mda's novels (Jacobs, "Performing the Precolonial" 17), and is not unique to these two novels. However, there are such striking similarities between *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe* and *She Plays with the Darkness* that they invite comparison. While *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe* shares many similarities with all of Mda's previous novels,[5] the twinship trope is particularly interesting with reference to *She Plays with the Darkness,* because these two novels almost mirror each other. There is a direct intertextuality between the two, which suggests that, in *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe*, Mda is deliberately rewriting an earlier narrative in which he was grappling with the dilemma of how to reconcile artistic autonomy, communal participation and relating to the nation-state in postcolonial Africa. In this study, I argue that Mda has been developing an aesthetic philosophy which is expressed in his artist-performer characters and, through the idea of a cumulative South African black *kunstlerroman*, I suggest that a mature vision of the artist is realised in the character of the trinity in *The Madonna of Excelsior*. In *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe,* however, a new and confident vision of the mature African artist is presented in a precolonial parable about art. The mark of the trinity's maturity as an African artist, in *The Madonna of Excelsior,* is the empathy and compassion that he has for ordinary village folk, qualities which, through his powerful imagination are transferred to his Expressionist paintings. Empathy and compassion show the artist's connection to the community from which his paintings' subjects derive. He is the trinity because he is not only an artist, but also a man and a priest. A priest's life is devoted to serving, comforting, encouraging and guiding. So, his vocation as a rural priest means he occupies a vital and humble communal role, even though, as an artist, "his work was to paint the subjects, and not to poke his nose into their lives beyond the canvas" (Mda, *The Madonna of Excelsior* 268).

In *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe*, Chatambudzi bears the qualities of the 'mature' African artist displayed by the trinity – that is, an artist who is communally minded but artistically autonomous. What is most fascinating, though, is the intertextuality established between Dikosha and Chatambudzi. In other words, Dikosha, who is figured in the cumulative South African black

[5] In "Performing the Precolonial: Zakes Mda's *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe*", J.U. Jacobs succinctly outlines the recurrences of similar characters and/or attributes in Mda's previous novels.

kunstlerroman as representing the childhood stage in the Artist Figure's maturation, is mirrored in *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe* by a 'mature' protagonist – the sculptor Chatambudzi. By 'mature' I am referring to characteristics in Dikosha that make her deficient in the role of an African artist according to Mda's African aesthetic, and what is lacking and unresolved in Dikosha as an African artist, finds resolution and fulfilment in Chatambudzi. It is as though, having grappled with conceptualising the Artist Figure and how s/he relates to society and the State, and then realizing that 'mature' Artist Figure in the trinity, Mda then creates Chata, who bears the qualities of the mature Artist Figure, and so is in some way his ideal African artist. Mda goes back to his earliest narrative and rewrites some of its major tropes from the vantage point of an established vison of the African artist.

To demonstrate the point made above, it is useful to consider the specific ways in which *She Plays with the Darkness* and *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe* intersect. The question of art and politics is a major theme in *She Plays with the Darkness*, which was published early in 1995, just under a year after South Africa's first democratic elections. Mda saw this major shift in the political landscape of the nation as an opportunity for artists to create freely, and by that he meant freedom from the demands of a political situation that compelled the artist to reduce their art to a weapon. However, even as he makes this claim about the artist's freedom, in this novel there seems to be a struggle to find purpose and relevance for the artist in the postcolonial situation – a purpose and relevance, that is, apart from politics. In fact, there are two seemingly irreconcilable narrative strands in this novel, which represent the two major themes of art and politics as represented by the twin protagonists, Dikosha and Radisene. The one strand follows the secluded, indulgent aesthetic life of Dikosha in a mountain village of Lesotho; and the other follows her ambitious brother Radisene's corrupt and lavish lifestyle in the politically unstable Maseru in the lowlands.

Similarly, in *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe*, the relationship between art and politics, or rather between the artist and the State, is the novel's main concern. This novel also has twin protagonists who represent the two respective sides of this contentious relationship. Chatambudzi, called Chata, represents what the novel seems to put forward as the ideal aesthetic realisation. He is driven to create by an internal impulse that is informed by a personal ritual connecting him to the memory of his ancestors. His art seems to be pure self-expression that has no utilitarian agenda, and this is posited as a more authentic way of creating art. He does not want to be part of the

official institutions of Mapungubwe, which will prescribe for him the sort of art the state mandates for its own ends. Rendani, on the other hand, holds the prestigious office of Royal Sculptor, an official position which his father, Zwanga, who was the Royal Sculptor before him, contrives to secure for him. This title elevates him to the upper echelons of Mapungubwean society, and geographically he even leaves his father's mine on the outskirts of town to establish his homestead on top of the hill among the other grandees. The only artistic activity that he participates in while living on the hill is the carving of the palisades which all artists who are citizens of Mapungubwe are required to carve out in preparation for the annual rain-making ceremonies. His time and efforts are spent on finding ways to increase his political influence and on indulging in the indolent lifestyle of the grandees that live on top of the hill. In this sense *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe* mirrors *She Plays with the Darkness*.

Chata and Rendani are called the Zwanga twins by the people in the mining compound because they are born in the same year, though to different mothers. They share a father though they do not know this. Similarly, Dikosha and Radisene's mother is referred to as the Mother-of-Twins by the villagers because the two siblings are born in the same year. However, Dikosha is conceived four weeks after Radisene's birth. Like Dikosha, Chata is portrayed as having an authentic aesthetic sensitivity and sensibility that is not polluted by ambitions for power and prestige, the desire for which derails Rendani and Radisene. The spiritual character of these twin-protagonists is symbolically inscribed in their geographic locations in both novels. Mda once wrote that he uses detailed descriptions of the environment to reveal something about the spiritual condition of his characters ("The Pink Mountain" 67). Chata lives on the edge of town, in the area occupied by the old residents, who are despised by the upper-class residents who live on top of the hill in the centre of town. He spends much of his time on the outskirts of the town, whether working on the mine or hunting in the wilderness. He also periodically suffers bouts of 'mitshimbilo' or wanderlust which takes him not only beyond Mapungubwe, but even across the seas. There is something large, free and untamed about the landscape of his soul. Similarly, Dikosha lives in the mountains, far from the city with its formal institutions and political upheavals. She roams the fields and dwells in caves, uninhibited by societal expectations. Likewise, Rendani and Radisene's environments are similar, in that they are both located at the heart of political and institutional power: Maseru, the capital city of Lesotho, and the top of the

hill in Mapungubwe, respectively. Corruption and power politics characterise both Maseru and the top of the hill in Mapungubwe, and leave no room for authenticity and creativity.

Unlike Dikosha, though, Chatambudzi does not despise his community, but sees himself as a part of it, even though he does not share its view of the world. He is proud to be a citizen of Mapungubwe and abides by its laws. He also has a sense of duty towards his adoptive mother, Ma Chikuriku, providing for her with wild game and respecting her counsel, unlike Dikosha who childishly shirks all her domestic duties. In addition, the changes that Chata's personality undergoes when he creates the sculpture of the Rain Dancer are that he develops genuine compassion and forms real human connections, instead of the cold empathy, which is really just curiosity, that Dikosha shows. And, very importantly, Chata's attitude towards his 'twin' Rendani in the end closes the novel on a hopeful note, rather than the sense of futility that characterises Dikosha and Radisene's irreconcilable relationship at the end of *She Plays with the Darkness*. In the latter, there is a sense of the futility of the artist-performer, whose rich aesthetic life has no real effect beyond her small, isolated existence. The ending of this first novel points to the fact that the worlds represented by Dikosha and Radisene, respectively, cannot be reconciled, nor can they exert a positive influence on each other. In fact, there is a sense of powerlessness in Dikosha since she cannot save Radisene. In *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe*, the artist is asked to save the nation through projects that promote social cohesion and nation building, but this only quenches the artist's spirit, much as Dikosha is futilely sacrificed to save Radisene. The artist must be free to tell the truth without prescription or restriction if his/her art is to have any redemptive possibility, and this means that the artist must be separate from the state or politics, which necessarily impose a different agenda on him or her.

There is a sense, in *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe*, that Mda comes full circle from the early conceptualisation in *She Plays with the Darkness* of the Artist Figure and his/her role in society. As an artist, Chata shares the attributes of the mature Artist Figure represented by the trinity in *The Madonna of Excelsior*. The many assertions within *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe* about art and the artist, as well as the fact that there do not appear to have been further revisions to how the African artist is conceived by Mda, but instead there is a reworking of an earlier narratives, reveals a confidence about what such an artist is and does, according to an African aesthetic, and this may reflect Mda's own confident and mature position about such matters.

2.11 Visual Art and Imagination as a Catalyst for Healing

In *She Plays with the Darkness*, *Ways of Dying* and *The Madonna of Excelsior* visual art or images become a catalyst for healing. As mentioned in Chapter 1, visual spectacle is very important for Mda in the creation of his literature. The inspiration for his narratives comes from him finding a place so beautiful or so ugly that it deserves a story (Mda, "The Pink Mountain" 67). He also finds inspiration from writers in the indigenous African languages of South Africa who are "storytellers of the literary tradition who transport their readers with imagistic details that evoke a strong sense of place", and from the Sesotho oral tradition, which makes "multiple references to the landscape" (71). As also discussed in the previous chapter, when it comes to his own literary practice, Fincham argues, that "Mda's explorations are rooted in his strong painterly imagination […] [which] teaches the reader how to see anew" (*Dance of Life* 80). The novels that make up the proposed cumulative South African black *kunstlerroman* do not only demonstrate the growth and 'becoming' of the Artist Figure, but they also show responses to art, and specifically visual art, that point to 'viewer' participation and are strongly suggestive of a belief in the redemptive, healing quality of art.

As mentioned above, the vital thread holding *She Plays with the Darkness*, *Ways of Dying* and *The Madonna of Excelsior* together links art with healing and reconciliation. The focalised character responses to art add a further dimension to the cumulative South African Black *kunsstlerroman*: if this *kunstlerroman* is expounding the development of a theory about the ideal or appropriate African artist, then the response by a character to visual art extends that theorisation to the response by the audience (whether reader or viewer) to art. With regard to the viewer, there is a consistent theme in all three novels in which characters viewing art have what appears to be a transcendental experience. In *She Plays*, which is the first novel in the trilogy, both Dikosha and her brother Radisene see the paintings in the caves of Barwa, but Radisene is unaffected by them, and neither are the officials from the lowlands who scribble their names over the paintings. In *Ways of Dying*, Jwara's sculptures delight the children in Noria's township, but there is no focalisation or explanation from the narrator to help the reader understand how and why the sculptures have that effect. However, there is some insight offered by Toloki and Noria's 'walk' through the gardens on the pages of a gardening magazine pasted on the walls of Noria's shack. Toloki takes Noria's hand and teaches her how to activate her imagination; he teaches Noria how to 'see'.

In *Ways of Dying*, the response to art is minimally focalised and in *She Plays with the Darkness*, though the reader experiences the art as Dikosha perceives it, the details of how the painting becomes animated are limited to the word 'conjures'. What is apparent from both novels is that 'how' the characters see is what sets them apart, and those who know 'how' to 'see' can teach others. Of the three novels in this study's extended *kunstlerroman*, *She Plays with the Darkness* gives the most insight into how Mda possibly theorises the healing or redemptive potential of visual art. This theorisation is limited to visual art but, as Mda demonstrates with his novels, images can be created with words as well, and so the visual aspects of his narratives mean that his readers are also 'viewers'. *She Plays with the Darkness* extensively features *ekphrasis*, which is defined as 'a literary description of a work of art'. The *ekphrasis* in this novel teaches the reader to 'see' as one of its functions, but this aspect will be examined in detail in Chapter 3 of this study. Art features prominently in *The Madonna of Excelsior*, and the process of viewing is given special emphasis. One of the protagonists, Popi, focalises her viewing of Father Claerhout's paintings from two perspectives: when she is five-years-old and when she is a thirty-year-old woman. At different stages, she responds differently to the same paintings, and the growth and changes in her perception are revealing about the sort of 'viewer' (or consumer of any art) that needs to be cultivated for art to have the highest effect.

In *She Plays with the Darkness*, Dikosha focalises a response to San rock art. As discussed earlier, the paintings on the walls of the Caves of Barwa coming to life and dancing with Dikosha may be read as an act of the imagination – her attempt to "overcome the immediacies of suffering", as Warnes puts it – and at the same time, there is enough evidence in the novel to support the view that these scenes are magical realist in nature. For the reader, an act of the imagination and magic realism mean the same thing: the reader is constrained to experiencing the San rock paintings according to how Dikosha experiences them. Through focalisation, the reader is taught different and possibly new ways of visualising. Dikosha's response to the paintings is similar to Mda's response to the pink mountain in that it is not a passive response: she 'conjures' the paintings to life and they nourish and heal her, whether through magic or imagination. Dikosha describes how the paintings come to life, dance over her and remove arrows from her body when she is sick from the unkind words of the villagers. This demonstrates that Dikosha knows something about San mythology, because one of the beliefs of San religion is that "malevolent shamans and the spirits of the dead, attracted by […] beautiful singing and dancing, shoot small, invisible 'arrows of

sickness' into people" (Lewis-Williams 14). Dikosha's response to the San rock paintings is therefore not purely visceral, but is mediated by a knowledge of San religious belief, though the novel fails to show how she came about that knowledge (it seems that the reader is asked to believe that there is an actual San presence in the caves). The significance of an 'educated' audience, or an audience that knows how to 'see' or receive art is thus consciously represented and enacted in *She Plays with the Darkness*.

There appears to be a determination in Mda's novels to be accessible to a post-apartheid South African audience. Perhaps because, if the examples of encounters with art in his novels are anything to go by, he hopes that, like the characters in his stories, readers of his literature will be enlightened and deeply affected by his work, which is why his writing is so visually oriented. However, as many postcolonial African artists have discovered, only so much can be done, because "a considerable amount of work must be expended by the individual to achieve a meaningful interaction with art, indeed, […] the healing offered by art is only really available to those who need it and have journeyed far to obtain it" (Gaylard 70). So, in the cumulative South African black *kunstlerroman* the idea of a suitable African artist in the postcolonial, post-apartheid situation is explored but, in addition, the matter of a suitable African audience – that is, an audience with an aesthetic education – becomes apparent. Connectedness with community is a core value in Mda's aesthetic paradigm; it is the mark of a mature African artist. However, the ability of the community to connect with the art is a matter beyond the artist's control, and has proven to be a real impediment among audiences in postcolonial Africa.

Dikosha's viewing is mediated by a knowledge of San mythology. So, even as the cumulative South African black *kunstlerroman*, in the process of theorising the postcolonial African artist, links art with healing and reconciliation, the kind of audience that is suited to benefit from the artist's vision is also explored. What is apparent is that there are levels or kinds of literacy or education that are prerequisite among the audience or community members or viewers in order for them to fully participate in and to fully receive the artwork.

The problem of an audience or readership that is unable to 'rightly' or fully appreciate the work of African artists – even within their own communities, and especially among the lower classes – is a matter that has been a stumbling block for many postcolonial African artists. Ukadike bemoans the lack of proficiency in art appreciation amongst African audiences with specific reference to African film, though Gaylard believes that his concerns are pertinent to fiction as well.

Ukadike comments that, "while African […] practice has succeeded in renovating its […] language, it can also be argued that it has failed to produce a new African audience capable of exploring different patterns of signification" (qtd in Gaylard 69). Gaylard sums up the general attitude of the late modern and early postmodern experimenters to this frustration among African audiences by quoting Piet Mondrian's comment:

> [Artists now] know that humanity is not served by making art comprehensible to everybody; to try this is to attempt the impossible. One serves mankind by enlightening it. Those who do not see will rebel, they will try to understand and will end up by 'seeing'. In art the search for a content which is collectively understandable is false. (70)

The chasm that often exists between postcolonial African artists and their African audiences is perhaps the reason Mda uses magic realism in his novels, that is, a literary mode that supports the Xhosa way of seeing the world. As claimed earlier in this study, the familiarity of a shared word-view may be one of the ways that Mda tries to overcome the alienation that the reader from his community or his home culture may experience when encountering his work. Chapter 3 of this study will examine how, in *The Madonna of Excelsior*, Mda uses *ekphrasis* in an attempt to educate the reader to 'see' or appreciate Father Claerhout's Expressionists paintings, so that the paintings become a lens for understanding his characters in a deeper way.

Chapter 3: The Work of Art

3.1 *The Madonna of Excelsior*: *Ekphrasis* and a Literature of Public Action

In *The Madonna of Excelsior*, Mda gives full expression to his professed "enthusiasm for visual pleasures in general" ("The Pink Mountain" 71) by dedicating at least one paragraph in thirty-four of the novel's thirty-five chapters to detailed descriptions of Father Claerhout's paintings. These detailed descriptions of art are a literary trope called *ekphrasis*, which is defined as a literary description of a work of art. However, historically *ekphrasis* has had a broader meaning. Goldhill consults rhetorical handbooks that go as far back as the first century to discover Theon's definition of this trope as a "descriptive speech that brings the thing shown vividly before the eyes" (3). He notes that these handbooks have a "wide range of potential subjects for *ekphrasis* […] [which] show how *ekphrasis* as description bleeds into all forms of writing as well as into a more general sense of a visual regime" (3-4). It is for this reason that this study proposes that Mda's use of *ekphrasis* in *The Madonna of Excelsior* reveals a rhetorical function in the vivid description in his early novels. In the rhetorical tradition, *ekphrasis* extends to all use of language to create arresting images, with the intention to persuade, and more than that, to create a lasting impression. This intention is not very different from the aims of Marotholi's theatre-for-conscientization, which was to create awareness, and a deep and lasting conviction that activated the audience's agency. Mda claims that his literature is no longer intended to rally people to action, as it did when he wrote protest literature (Bell and Jacobs 4). He says that his is a literature of public action in its conception rather than in any implied function ("The Pink Mountain" 70). Nevertheless, the link that he makes between his own experience of a striking visual image and his creative writing affirms this study's claim, which is that the vivid descriptions of his novels express a desire to create a lasting impression and a conviction that creates a deep change in the reader. This is not unlike the aims of his protest literature and theatre-for-conscientization, making his novels not only Fiction for Development as Mervis once labelled them, but also a literature of public action.

3.2 *Ekphrasis*: A Brief Overview

> Here in the Free State the sky is big. A red sun oozes out of the sky. It drips down on the yellow fields. It melts everything it touches, eliciting a feast of colour. Thirty-five years ago, the sky was just as big. The sun dripped on the yellow fields. Colour ran amok. But the trinity's world was of dark sombre tonal values.

> Charcoal on white. Figures in tight embraces. Naked women being observed by floating heads. Flowing figures in squiggles that became lace. Three birds of prey perched on the naked buttocks of a woman. Naïve women and children in a naïve black and white world. A world of sinless doodles. […] Three naïve girls walk out of the trinity's naïve world. (Mda, *The Madonna of Excelsior* 13)

The above extract from Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior* is an example of *ekphrasis*, a term which in modern criticism is often taken to mean "a 'description of a work of art' and [is] applied to a variety of poetic and prose treatment of the arts" (Webb para 1). It has its roots in the first century rhetorical tradition where it was used to denote "any elaborate digressive description embedded within rhetorical discourse" (Cheeke 19). In late antiquity the term *ekphrasis* was broadly taken to describe "a vivid speech which appealed to the imagination, making the listener seem to see the subject matter" (Webb para 1). The above extract from Mda's novel is an example of *ekphrasis* in the sense of the broader ancient definition of the term from the rhetorical tradition, as well as the modern literary sense. The first part of the extract adheres to the older definition as it is not a literary description of an artwork like a painting, but rather a vivid painterly description of the actual Free State sky and landscape which appeals to the imagination. The second part is how *ekphrasis* has come to be known in modern times: that is, as a literary description of a work of art, and, in this case, a detailed description of a charcoal drawing by Father Frans Claerhout. Mda's use of *ekphrasis* in *The Madonna of Excelsior* makes his work subject to the theories and traditions to which this mode is subject, and for that reason, it is worthwhile here, before unpacking the particular outworking of *ekphrasis* in Mda's novel(s), to briefly consider some of the rich historical application and theorization of this mode, and in that way also establish a framework within which Mda's use of *ekphrasis* can be assessed.

Plutarch, a first century rhetorician who wrote significantly about *ekphrasis*, suggested that though painters and poets use different mediums, both are engaged in the "making of images", referring to the *bon mot* of Simonides that "painting is silent poetry, poetry painting that speaks" (qtd in Goldhill 5). Zakes Mda is an artist and writer whose prose has been described by Fincham as 'painterly'; he is a creator of images whether with paint or words. Plutarch's use of the phrase "making of images", which is a fitting description of Mda's own style of writing, is significant for the context in which he uses it: that is, a rhetorical tradition in which making an audience seem to 'see' what is said is underpinned by a theory of seeing which relates to the psychological functioning of *ekphrasis* in persuasion. As stated earlier, in Mda's career as a writer and

playwright, his literature had the aim of rallying to action and conscientization, and persuasion was for this reason an inherent quality of his creative writing. His use of *ekphrasis*, a mode which historically has a rhetorical function, has interesting implications when one considers it in light of his past literary practice.

Since *ekphrasis* has a specific origin in first-century rhetoric, an historical approach to the term, its meaning, application and function is the best way of understanding how Mda uses this trope in his writing. The concept of *ekphrasis* can be traced back to the handbooks of Greek sophistic educators under the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity. These handbooks were used in the rhetorical education of young wealthy Greek boys and were "designed to prepare students to present public performances of complete speeches" (D'Angelo 439). The definition of *ekphrasis* has evolved with time, and in order to get a comprehensive, albeit generalised, understanding of its rhetorical uses, it is worthwhile to consider the varying concepts this term has come to stand for and relate those broadly to Mda's work. Over time *ekphrasis* has come to denote a rhetorical strategy, a rhetorical prose description of a work of art and a poetic or literary genre (440). In this study, the first two definitions are applicable to Mda's use of this mode, and so they will be the focus of this exposition. Hollander notes that, today, scholars only recognise as *ekphrases* those poems that "entail engagement with particular or identifiable works of art" (445). Even so, D'Angelo emphasises that it cannot be easily separated from its roots in the preliminary exercises that formed part of the education of young Greek boys in rhetoric. Some of the traits that it has in common with that tradition are: the location of individual scenes in their narrative contexts; the description of selected features in a work of art; and emphasis on clarity and vividness (446).

The very purpose of *ekphrasis* within this tradition is to make "public address more vivid and hence more persuasive" (Clark, qtd in D'Angelo 440). As a rhetorical strategy, *ekphrasis* had as its subject people, places and times, which were also standard elements of narrative. In fact, with reference to writing style, Gerard Genette notes the close relationship between narration and description when he points out that "[e]very narration … comprises two kinds of representation […]: on the one hand, those of actions and events, which constitute the narration in the strict sense and, on the other hand, those of objects and characters that are the result of what we now call *description*" (qtd in D'Angelo 441). Description as a technique of *ekphrasis* is used to set the scene and to depict persons and events. Very rarely in this tradition were works of art subjects of description. So, in fact, Mda's detailed descriptions when setting the scene in works other than

The Madonna of Excelsior, may be considered a technique of *ekphrasis*, and for that reason, how *ekphrasis* functions in the latter has implications for the former.

Rhetoric is shrouded in suspicion, and "an elaborate description might seek to reveal its subject in greater depth or clarity, or merely distract attention, seduce or otherwise spellbind an audience" (Goldhill 19). Goldhill expands on this idea when he looks at the key psychological effect of *ekphrasis*, which is its power to astonish. He notes from the work of Quintilian, Longinus and Plutarch, rhetoricians from early antiquity, that for persuasion, the key idea at work in *ekphrasis* is *enargeia*, which is "the ability to make visible" (3). Fascinatingly, *enargeia's* power to enslave the listener is most potent when it is "closely involved with factual exposition" (4). Goldhill explains as follows:

> the orator uses a visualisation actually in the moment of making his factual argument, with the result that his thought has taken him beyond the limits of mere persuasiveness. Now our natural instinct is, in all such cases, to attend to the stronger influence, so that we are diverted from the demonstration to the astonishment caused by the visualization, which by its very brilliance conceals the factual aspect. This is a natural reaction: when two things are joined together, the stronger attracts to itself the force of the weaker (Longinus, qtd in Goldhill 5).

This assertion has interesting implications for *The Madonna of Excelsior*, because Mda's narrative is based on actual events, the paintings are real, not imagined, and he even includes excerpts of the actual newspaper reports of the miscegenation trials with which his narrative deals. Mda fictionalises true events, and so his use of *ekphrasis* potentially has the power that *enargeia* has when linked to factual exposition.

In all, the power of *enargeia* is the power to astonish – "that key psychological effect in rhetorical and realistic art" (5). Visualisation amazes, it *dazzles* – therefore it conceals, leading us "away from proof, away from demonstration towards passive experience" (5). For this reason, Goldhill calls it a "weapon of rhetoric" (5). The master of *ekphrasis*, in the retelling of historical events, enables his audience to experience the emotions of amazement and confusion that one would experience if one were present at the event. Longinus sees such an experience of astonishment as "a way of getting past the censor of the intellect, a way of dazzling us away from factual representation" (5). The aim of *ekphrasis* is to "move" and "excite" (7), and therefore, leave a lasting conviction.

3.3 The Pink Mountain: Visual Spectacle, Literature and Public Action

In my line of argument for the rhetorical function of *ekphrasis* in *The Madonna of Excelsior* I see a link in the social relevance of art and the aesthetic underpinning Mda's approach to literature. It is certainly a value which is evident in his discussion, or reflection rather, on how his community activism and the creation of literature are linked. Mda tells of a pink mountain that he comes across on his journey through the Eastern Cape. He finds the sight incredibly moving especially against the village at the foot of the mountain with its "emaciated land that passed for cornfields […] [and] modern cottages that were nevertheless decaying" (Mda, "The Pink Mountain" 67). When he sees the mountain he says to himself, "That mountain cannot be beautiful for nothing" (67). The mountain is pink because of the aloes that are in bloom. His thoughts turn towards bees and after learning more about beekeeping himself, he returns to the village to introduce its people to the concept of beekeeping. Then a process ensues of discussions and debates as well as literacy, management and beekeeping training. From that, a beekeeping co-operative was started which has since grown into a viable business run by the women of that village. The experience of seeing the pink mountain and being moved to developmental action informs a play commissioned by the Netherlands Theatre Company and the novel *The Madonna of Excelsior*. In the play, a woman from the Eastern Cape is exiled in the Netherlands during apartheid, while the opening image of *The Madonna of Excelsior*, a novel whose leading character goes through a ritual of healing with bees, is the Free State platterland with its vast fields of sunflowers. This is the countryside that Mda drove through on his way to and from the Eastern Cape.

Mda uses this experience to explain the "symbiotic relationship between [his] community activism and the creation of literature" (70); and adds that this is what he means when he says that "it is only in its conception that [his] is a literature of public action, rather than in any professed or implied function" (70). However, this experience reveals more about his theory of visualization than the simple, surface connections that he makes, which uncover a desire or subconscious intention to create a literature of public action. Mda describes the mountain as a significant experience. He describes the mountain as "transcendent" because it is "physically beautiful" and "emotionally compelling", likening it to "the variously stark or lush landscapes of [his] settings" (70). It is the sight of the mountain that stirs and moves him to community activism. For him to achieve the same transcendent, emotionally compelling quality in his writing, he has to make the

reader 'see' the settings of his novels, which is what he aims for with his painterly style of writing. It is no doubt a desired outcome to replicate the effect that the mountain had on him on the consciousness of his reader – that is, for his reader to feel compelled by the power of the image.

For this reason, an examination of how *ekphrasis* functions in *The Madonna of Excelsior* has significant implications for how we understand Mda's experimental writing. In *The Madonna of Excelsior*, Mda takes the visuality of his writing to new heights by transposing visual art, in the form of expressionist paintings, onto his written text. All except one of the chapters in this novel open with *ekphrasis*. Visual art, in the form of Father Claerhout's Expressionist paintings, is the inspiration for this novel, and serves as a sort of catalyst for each chapter. There are thirty-five chapters, and each one has a black and white thumbnail image of a Claerhout painting on the left margin directly next to the chapter title. All the chapters open with a paragraph or two of a vivid description of one of Father Frans Claerhout's paintings, except for Chapter Fifteen which has instead slightly edited excerpts from *The Friend* newspaper. The images in the thumbnail in each chapter do not correlate with the description of the painting in that chapter. In other words, the image of the painting in the thumbnail is not the same painting that is described within that chapter. Further, each paragraph of *ekphrasis* is a digression from the main narrative of the novel.

Ekphrasis as a digression in Mda's novel may create the impression that it is superfluous, but the opposite is the case because of the significance he gives to visual experience. His description of his pink mountain experience has strong resonances with the psychological effect of *ekphrastic* logos, which is described by Longinus: an "astonishment caused by visualisation […] by its very brilliance" (Goldhill 5). Mda seeks to capture the force of visual experience in his narrations because he recognises its power, as Goldhill puts it, to "dazzle" and "astonish" (6). The notion of *enargeia*, "the ability to make visible" (3), is key to why rhetoricians believed *ekphrasis* to be an essential element of persuasion. A vital aspect of *ekphrasis* in this tradition is a strong emphasis on clarity and vividness. Mda himself explains that clarity and vivid description of setting are a considered and important quality of his creative writing. This is crucial because of the belief that "by penetrating the visual imagination of the listener and involving him in the subject of the speech, the orator can persuade more effectively than through logical argument alone" (Webb and Weller in D'Angelo 445). As a writer of protest literature and a playwright doing developmental theatre, Mda employed rhetorical strategies in his creative work because it was his aim to persuade, and he has carried over his values in developmental theatre to his fiction. As a

rhetorical device, *ekphrasis* leaves the reader "not just 'as if a viewer at events', but with the destabilizing emotions of that event" (Goldhill 6). This is the affective power of visualisation that Mda draws on with the elaborate visual descriptions in his novels.

3.4 Creative (Re)Imagining: Appropriation of Images

In a rather fanciful manner, Mda sets the tone for *The Madonna of Excelsior* with a dedication to a gold bird. He had visited Father Frans Claerhout's studio, where the artist presented him with a study of his paintings written by Dirk and Dominique Schwager, but first he painted a bird on the back of the black flyleaf and signed his name. Tellingly, Mda does not dedicate the novel, which draws so much inspiration from Claerhout's paintings, to the artist who has painted the bird. Neither does he dedicate it to Dirk and Dominique Schwager, whose insights the bird accompanies and whose critical appraisals Claerhout clearly endorses as the appropriate lens through which to view and understand his work. Whatever contribution Claerhout and the Schwagers may have made towards Mda's narrative, it seems it is not to them that Mda feels he owes his particular appreciation, but to the bird itself. To art apart.

Since the narrative is beyond the canvas, it is of no consequence to the painter. At the end of the novel, the narrator remarks that the trinity, which is Claerhout's title in the story, "never knew all these things. His work was to paint the subjects, and not to poke his nose into their lives beyond the canvas" (Mda, *The Madonna of Excelsior* 268). Mda separates the creation from the creator, and also removes it from those whose expert eye is supposed to mediate our viewing of this particular artist's work. He then takes up the position of creator and mediator of a new artwork – a novel which mimics a painting by trying to appropriate its unique characteristics. If he were to credit Claerhout and the Schwagers for this new work, he would have to abandon his own creative trajectory and be faithful to them in his (re)presentation. By giving special honour to the painted bird instead of to the artist in the dedication that precedes the narrative, Mda is highlighting the fact that it is not exactly Claerhout's vision that he (re)presents in the novel.

This appropriation and re-imagining is further emphasised in the narrative through the re-creation of Claerhout as a character in the story. The "trinity" (2) of *The Madonna of Excelsior* may be based on the actual artist, Father Frans Claerhout, but as a character in the novel he is a figment of Mda's imagination. He is not Dirk and Dominique Schwager's *Claerhout: Artist and Priest* (1994), whose book attempts to capture the spirit and vision of the actual man and his work

as the title suggests, but Mda's "trinity: man, priest and artist" (Mda, *The Madonna of Excelsior* 2). Nonetheless, Claerhout and the Schwagers are mentioned in the dedication even if it is not dedicated to them. This is because to not acknowledge them would be to deny the great deal that Mda owes to them. In Claerhout's paintings, he found a subject readymade and in Dirk and Dominique Schwager's book, he found the work of understanding the artist and his art already done. With the material ready in hand, he had only the job of creative reimagining. Mda recreates the worlds and subjects of Claerhout's paintings according to his own creative whim, which is not unlike what Claerhout does with his Expressionist paintings, which distort reality, reproducing it in the artist's own image. The artist bears the qualities of God in his capacity and audacity to (re)create the world. In *The Madonna of Excelsior*, the trinity, a title which alludes to the Christian God of creation, "has tamed the open skies, the vastness and the loneliness of the Free State" (Mda 2). Through *ekphrasis*, Mda returns the visual spectacle to the word in terms of that Christian reference.

One of the characteristic traits of Mda's creative writing practice is that words emanate from visual impressions. His response to Claerhout's compelling visual art is similar to his response to striking visual scenes in nature. As he explains, his literature flows from those impressions:

> I usually see a place and immediately decide that it is so beautiful or ugly that it deserves novel. The next question is: What characters would live in a place like this and what memories are contained in this landscape? I see the trees and the rocks and the grass and the hills and the rivers as storing places of memory. ("The Pink Mountain" 67)

Mda uses Claerhout's paintings in the same way he uses moving, evocative landscapes. He treats the paintings (which, as artefacts, are part of the Free State's historical and cultural heritage) the same way that he treats the places that have inspired his other novels: that is, as "storing places of memory" and therefore, for him, catalysts for creating literature. While his narratives may be inspired by actual people or the histories of the places his stories are set, such as the Xhosa cattle killings in *The Heart of Redness* and the miscegenation trials of Excelsior in *The Madonna of Excelsior*, the novels, nonetheless, remain works of fiction, products of his creative imagination.

The fact that the narratives are inspired by true events has significant implications for how *ekphrasis*, particularly in *The Madonna of Excelsior*, functions rhetorically, as will be discussed later in this chapter. Jacobs notes that in *The Madonna of Excelsior* Mda has used actual history

as the 'model' for his fictional narrative, but one of the ways that he has distorted it is by switching around the names of the actual people who were implicated or somehow involved in the miscegenation scandal in the Free State town of Excelsior in the 1970s. Instead of trying to be faithful to place, people or history, Mda is interested in a creative reimagining for the sake of a good story, which is what he does when he appropriates the figures and landscapes in Claerhout's paintings, which are also a creative reimagining.

The novel's ultimate act of appropriation, however, is the *ekphrasis* at the beginning of each chapter. The fascination that writers have with representing visual works of art in their verse or prose has been explained in various ways. One of the suggestions offered is that of "the struggle to render or control the image verbally" (Cheeke 2). Gail Fincham notices this about *The Madonna of Excelsior* in the way it "adopts only those painterly depictions that fit [Mda's] fictional world […] [clearly showing the] supremacy of the textual authority over painterly authority" (*The Dance of Life* 81). Other suggestions are that "there is a certain stability or accessibility inherent in the artwork as object […], which makes it appear available to literary representation" (Cheeke 2). Or perhaps it is just a laziness in writers who "discover in art a subject ready-made" (2). Whatever Mda's reasons, I suggest that a more fruitful line of inquiry would be to examine how he uses art, how it functions in *The Madonna of Excelsior*, and to what end.

Expressionist painting is about how the artist sees and feels about the world and the objects he paints rather than representing the actual reality before him. When the trinity paints the Blue Madonna described in Chapter Seventeen, Niki notices that even though she had been the model, the subject of the painting looked nothing like her. Though Popi was supposed to pose for the child, in the painting both mother and child look like Popi. The trinity gave the Madonna Popi's face, "not the five-year-old Popi [but] the way Popi would look when she was older" (108). Through the characters, the novel is self-reflexively considering the artist's prerogative and audacity. Once again, the reader is invited to ponder the godlike qualities of the artist: "Niki wondered what gave the trinity the right to change things at the dictates of his whims. To invent his own truths. From where did he get all that power, to recreate what had already been created?" (108).

3.5 Introducing the Madonna (of Excelsior) and Child

The Madonna of Excelsior is a novel that begins where it ends. Its opening sentence, "All these things flow from the sins of our mothers" (Mda 1), is echoed in its closing sentence, "From the sins of our mothers all these things flow" (268). The sin of these black women, as Diana Wylie incisively observes, is to be desired by the local white farmers, and to bear their children. In the analeptic first chapter, the protagonist, thirty-year-old Popi, goes back twenty-five years to the moment when she first encountered Father Frans Claerhout's expressionist paintings as a five-year-old on her mother's back. Popi had gone to Claerhout's studio with her mother Niki to see if Niki could get work as a nude model. It is important that in tracing back to where the story begins, Popi goes to Claerhout and his paintings. She tells the narrator "that it all began when the trinity was nourished by Flemish expressionists" (5). The statement about where it all began is true not only about the artist character in the novel, but also about the actual novel itself, since its narrative is constructed around the actual expressionist paintings of Father Frans Claerhout, which depict the lives of the ordinary people of the impoverished and underdeveloped area of Thaba Nchu, where his mission station was located.

The story, however, really begins with Niki's first sexual encounter, when, as a teenager collecting dry cow dung with her friends she is accosted and raped by a local white farmer, Johannes Smit, in the sunflower fields. She later marries Pule, a black mine worker. They have a son, Viliki, and Niki has a good life. A turning point in the story happens when Madame Cornelia, Stephanus Cronje's wife, humiliates Niki by making her strip naked in front of the other employees in the butchery to show that she has not stolen any meat. Niki takes her revenge on the wife by starting an affair with Stephanus, which becomes her undoing. Popi, her 'coloured' daughter, is the product of that liaison.

The story is set in the 1970s in apartheid South Africa when the Immorality Act which prohibited sexual liaisons between white South Africans and people of other races was still in force. When the birth of Niki's 'coloured' child draws attention to her, she and the other black women in Mahlatsetswa (Excelsior's township) whose 'coloured' babies have also raised eyebrows are arrested and jailed with their infants. Niki loses everything after this. Pule abandons her, and her house is looted while she is in prison. Moreover, being infamous, no white madam will hire her. At this point in the novel, the story turns to Popi as she negotiates life with a broken mother and politically active brother in a racially segregated small town where she is despised for

being a 'boesman' who is neither black nor white enough. The trinity becomes part of Niki and Popi's life when he employs the struggling mother and daughter to model for his Madonna and Child paintings. Niki and Popi are the Madonna and Child in the title of this novel. When Popi returns to the trinity's studio as an adult, his paintings help her begin the process of healing from the anger and shame that she carried because of her coloured identity.

3.6 Digressive Descriptions: Mirroring the Spiritual Landscape

Structurally, the elaborate descriptions of the Expressionist paintings in *The Madonna of Excelsior* digress from the narrative, rather than forming an integral part of it. As mentioned above, all the chapters, except for Chapter Fifteen, open with a paragraph or two describing a Father Frans Claerhout painting. In all the definitions in the old exercise books, *ekphrasis* is never isolated, but always part of a longer speech and within that speech is used as an aid to persuasion (D'Angelo 440). This takes us to the definition of *ekphrasis* as a digressive speech that both Cheeke and Goldhill in their respective research find unchanged throughout the rhetorical tradition. The idea of *ekphrasis* as digression has shrouded it in suspicion, since it means that it "might be taken as ornamentation or amplification, or conversely perhaps as excess or superfluity" (Cheeke 19). However, in *The Madonna of Excelsior*, the digressive *ekphrasis* serves the function that elaborate "sensory detail of setting, particularly of landscape" (Mda, "Pink Mountain" 68) did for the Sesotho writers who influenced Mda's own bent towards detailed description when setting the scene in his writing. For these writers, "setting is more than just a place for action […]. It is a mirror of their character's world and a source of rich imagery" (68); and for Mda "the landscape is paramount among the environmental factors that are decisive in the emotional and spiritual development that ultimately determines [his] characters' sense of identity" (67).

Functioning in the same way as the setting of a novel, *ekphrasis* surreptitiously reveals for the reader the spiritual condition of the characters, sets the mood and tone of the chapters and informs judgements of the events and characters by disarming the reader through subtle emotive language and evocative images. For example, the opening paragraph of Chapter Four, which is titled, "In the very beginning there were three naïve girls", describes the Free State sky and landscape in painterly language. The texture of the text is given the quality of a painting in the following description: "the red sun oozes out of the sky. It drips down on the yellow field [and] melts everything it touches, eliciting a feast of colour" (Mda, *The Madonna of Excelsior* 13). This

is a description not of a painting, but of the Free State sky, and is set in contrast with the next paragraph, which describes a black and white charcoal drawing.

As the title, "In the very beginning there were three naïve girls", suggests, this chapter in the novel recounts the beginning of the story – the genesis, as it were. Just as in the creation story of the Bible the earth was "empty [and] darkness was over the surface of the deep" (Genesis 1:2), so "the trinity's world was of dark and sombre tonal values" (Mda, *The Mdadonna* 13). The subjects of the trinity's world were "naïve women and children in a naïve black and white world" (13). In the *ekphrasis* the word "naïve" is repeatedly used to describe not only the artist's style of drawing, but also the subjects of that drawing. The narrator describes the black and white charcoal drawings as "a world of sinless doodles" (13). The biblical allusion in the title to the creation of the world links it to another Christian idea, namely the innocence of the world before the Fall. The reader knows from the outset that the story is about the consequence of the mothers' sins. So, from this state of naivety and innocence, the anticipation of a tragic fall which will have ramifications for the sinners and their offspring is created. Through association, the qualities of innocence and naiveté are invested in the three subjects that walk out of the canvas and become characters walking "among the cosmos flowers that grew between the fields and the edge of the road" (13).

The subjects of the black and white charcoal drawing emerge out of the stillness of the image on canvas and walk into the animated existence of the narrative where they take on the identities of the adolescent Niki, Mmampe and Maria – naïve and innocent. Since the illusion is created of the characters coming out of a drawing, it is visually framed as a spectacle that the reader is encouraged to 'see'. This technique of having the characters appear to emerge from Claerhout's artworks is repeated in all the instances of *ekphrasis* in the novel. The reader meets Niki for the first time, and an important relation is created between her and her environment, which is revealed through a description of the landscape. When Johannes Smit drags eighteen-year-old Niki deep into the sunflower fields where he tries to rape her, the natural world to which Niki escapes to find freedom from her drunken father turns sinister. The picture-perfect landscape is described in terms that evoke a ruined painting: after he throws her on the damp ground among the sunflowers and pulls off her underwear, we read, that "yellowness ran amok. Yellowness dripped down with her screams" (16). When she gets the opportunity to escape from under him,

she runs like a tornado, "destroying a swathe of sunflowers in her wake" (16). She destroys the natural world which is no longer a haven for her as it has shielded a predator.

3.7 Education and Learning to 'See': Popi's Artistic Maturation

> What did it all mean? What did it matter that that she did not understand what it meant? Was it not enough just to enjoy the haunting quality of the work and to rejoice in the emotions without quibbling about what it all meant? Why should it mean anything at all? Is it not enough that it evokes? Should it now also mean?
> (Mda, *The Madonna of Excelsior* 236)

These are the thoughts of thirty-year-old Popi as she moves from canvas to canvas in Father Frans Claerhout's studio where she modelled as a child with her mother, Niki, for some of the trinity's Madonna and Child paintings. What the paintings make her feel is so overwhelming that she cannot find words to articulate what she is experiencing. However, while she does not have the words to explain what she feels or why she feels that way, the fact that the viewing *evokes* emotions suggests inchoate comprehension on her part. To "evoke" is to "bring or recall (a feeling, memory or image) to the conscious mind" (*Concise Oxford English Dictionary* "evoke"). There may not be a conscious awareness of any meaning perceived in the paintings, but the emotional response, which is not mere frustration from confusion, but an enjoyment, even an enchantment, ultimately leads to her walking out of the studio feeling "she had been healed of a deadly ailment she could not really describe" (Mda, *She Plays with the Darkness* 238), suggests that she has seen something that changes her consciousness because it 'speaks' to her on a profound level. So, while it may seem that she is unable to make sense of the experience of viewing, the fact that she recognises the "haunting quality of the work" (236) means that she has grasped a meaning which is symbolically represented in the Expressionist paintings rather than overtly stated. The paintings, as external stimuli, trigger something in Popi's conscious or unconscious mind, something which brings to the fore of her conscious mind what she cannot or will not name, but which she knows and understands, because if she had no recognition of it, then she could not be moved by it.

Whether the meaning Popi perceives in the paintings during this visit to the trinity's studio is the one intended by the artist or one that she projects onto the paintings is not immediately clear, because she does not say what it is about the paintings that moves her so much. A twenty-one-year old Popi keeps postcards of Father Claerhout's paintings because of nostalgia and because

the "celestial blue calm[s] her when she [has] had a particularly bad day" (139). This naïve experience of art occurs, of course, before she starts immersing herself in the books about Flemish Expressionists in the library. Her response to the art is childlike because it is mainly visceral, and at this point she sees no need to make sense of the feelings evoked. Similarly, as a five-year-old child in the trinity's studio she thinks the skewed houses and elongated people on the canvas are odd, yet still they "overwhelm her with joy" (2). This is one level of experiencing art and, though it is limited, it is nonetheless valid and is an intrinsic quality of this form of painting, one that is an integral part of the philosophy of Expressionist art. In fact, part of what motivated celebrated abstract Expressionist artist Wassily Kandinsky's theories about his brand of Expressionism was the realisation that the "viewer need not recognize the object portrayed in order to appreciate a painting, but can simply enjoy the particular combination of [colours] and forms that build up the specific combination" (Dabrowski 79). This characterises Popi's early experience of the trinity's art, and if her responses to art are to be taken as a pointer to how the reader is intended to respond to the *ekphrasis* in the novel as a 'surrogate viewer', then a simple appreciation from the reader of the combination of colour and form, without any knowledge of Expressionism or art, is sufficient to make the role the *ekphrasis* plays in *The Madonna of Excelsior* effective.

However, there is another level of experiencing art, and that is with an expert eye that understands the style and form, and knows what to look for. Towards the end of the novel, when Popi as a thirty-year-old visits Claerhout's studio, she tries to recognise in the trinity's paintings the influence of the Flemish Expressionists she has been reading about in the library. There is a remark about the robustness in Claerhout's paintings that is perhaps derived from the "broad strokes, some of which were created with palette knives instead of the usual broad brushes" (236). While it is not clear from this passage whether this expert observation about how the trinity has strayed from his early style and the effect it has had on his work is Popi's or the narrator's, there is reason to believe that Popi is herself now capable of making such an assessment. The narrator, who speaks knowledgably about the paintings that he describes, gives the impression that what he knows about art he learnt from Popi, who is the one who told him "that it all began when the trinity was nourished by Flemish expressionists" (5). He also comments that, knowing these details, Popi "shares them with all those who care to listen" (5).

So, while thirty-year-old Popi's thoughts may suggest that her reaction to the paintings in the trinity's studio is also purely visceral (because she cannot make sense of what she feels) there

is, however, a significant difference in this particular viewing, as is evidenced by her response, which is different to her previous reactions. Her viewing this time is informed by an understanding of how the Expressionist style of art functions and the ideology behind it, because she has been learning about Flemish Expressionism from the large glossy books in the new township library. Before educating herself about this form of art, she was moved by the simple beauty of the paintings, but she now comes to the paintings with a trained eye. She now perceives not just beauty, but also truth in the paintings, engaging both heart and mind. There is a meaning that Popi perceives at a level beyond the intellectual, but it is enabled by what she has learnt and understood via her intellect through study. What she feels now are not the simple feelings of joy that the paintings evoked prior to this moment, which required no explanation. Her experience of the paintings this time is so profound that it completely alters her consciousness:

> She felt weak at the knees. Tears ran down her cheeks. She did not know why she was crying. […] She had not uttered a word to the trinity throughout her visit. Yet she felt she had been healed of a deadly ailment she could not really describe. In the taxi home, weakness was replaced by a great feeling of exhilaration. There was no room for anger and bitterness in her anymore. (238)

Throughout this novel, before this moment we see that Popi struggles with who she is and is often obtuse and defensive about matters pertaining to her identity as a coloured woman. Viliki's lover, a coloured girl that Popi despises and considers a disgrace for being coloured, makes the observation that the reason Popi "hates [her is] because [she] reminds [Popi] of who she really is" (204), an observation that Viliki is struck by because he knows that, Popi, his own sister "could never talk about such issues" (205). However, after Popi has been healed of her anger and shame by visiting the trinity's studio, she is able to joke about being interracial. One thing is certain: the paintings do more than just give Popi a feeling. She perceives something profoundly different this time around, which makes it reasonable to believe that the paintings do not only make her feel, but also carry across to her a meaning and perspective not entirely her own, one which she nonetheless recognises as truth. Expressionist painting is emotionally driven, and the emotion that is carried across to Popi is one that is deliberately invested in the painting as is characteristic of this very style of painting. Popi knows something about how to view Expressionist art at this point in the novel. She understands that it distorts reality in order "to achieve a desired emotional effect on the viewer or the representation of the inner life of the feelings of the artist" (Fichner-Rathus 282). With this understanding, she now better perceives the trinity's feelings about the subjects of his

paintings. In other words, how he sees the world around him is communicated more clearly and deeply to Popi.

Popi has a different experience with the trinity's paintings after studying Flemish Expressionism, and theories of visualisation from the Hellenistic rhetorical tradition offer a possible explanation as to why this is so. While Popi is not able to put words to her experience, the force of what the spectacle of the paintings invokes is not without comprehension, but rather exceeds it. There is a grain of truth that is recognised in the art, but it is subsumed and superseded by the stronger force of the visual image that affirms it. And the visual image moves not the mind, but the emotions. This is the power of art and visualisation. It is the particular power of the visual spectacle that ancient rhetoricians recognised in their use of *ekphrasis* and which Mda tries to appropriate through his use of this literary mode in this novel, and by the painterly language and vivid descriptions of settings in his other novels. *Ekphrasis*, as a rhetorical weapon, would "get around the censor of the intellect, to cut the listener off from the facts, to leave him not just 'as if a viewer at events,' but with the destabilizing emotions of that event" (Goldhill 6). There is something about the image that goes directly to the emotions, but it is important to note that the effectiveness that the rhetoricians perceived in vivid descriptive language is attached to truth or factual exposition.

Simon Goldhill, in his consideration of the psychological impact of *ekphrasis*, notes that "Quintilian uses the notion of *phantasia*, [or] "impression" to insist that through *enargeia* [the ability to make visible] in *ekphrastic* prose the orator can reach the innermost mind – the deepest emotions – of the listener" (4). Quintilian asserts that,

> [i]t is through [*phantasia*] that images of absent things are represented to the mind in such a way that we seem to be in their presence. Whoever has master of them will have the most powerful effect on the emotions. Some people say that this type of man who can imagine in himself things, words, and deeds well and in accordance with truth is […] [most skilled in summoning up *phantasia*]. (qtd in Goldhill 4)

Of particular interest here is the qualification that *ekphrasis* must be "in accordance with truth". This idea is reiterated in Longinus's remark that "it is when closely involved with factual argument that as well as persuade the listener, [rhetorical visualisation] enslaves him" (qtd in Goldhill 4). To explain this fascinating and seemingly odd inclusion of factual exposition as a necessary

requisite for the most effective impact of visualisation, Goldhill considers how Longinus expands on this idea:

> Here the orator uses a visualisation actually in the moment of making his factual argument, with the result that his thought has taken him beyond the limits of mere persuasiveness. Now our natural instinct is, in all such cases, to attend to the stronger influence, so that we are diverted from the demonstration to the astonishment caused by the visualization, which by its very brilliance conceals the factual aspect. This is a natural reaction: when two things are joined together, the stronger attracts to itself the force of the weaker. (5)

This is a marvellous phenomenon, which Longinus suggests is a natural psychological response. The destabilising brilliance of the visualisation is "a way of getting past the censor of the intellect, a way of getting [the audience] away from the factual representation" (Goldhill 5). Longinus uses phrases such as "beyond […] mere persuasiveness" and that visualisation "by its very brilliance conceals the factual aspect". The audience is dazzled away from the intellect into an emotionally destabilised and passive state; "away from analysis into passion and confusion" (qtd in Goldhill 6). But it is what the mind has understood and accepted, that is, truth, which makes the forceful impact of the visualisation possible.

While the actual viewing of a painting and imagining it through *ekphrasis* are two different things that naturally elicit different responses, a psychological explanation of *ekphrasis* in rhetoric is insightful for hypothesising why Popi is affected differently by the trinity's paintings towards the end of the novel. Knowledge, or rather what the ancient rhetoricians called truth or factual exposition, seems to be what makes the difference. In the process of learning about Flemish Expressionism, Popi's eye has been trained to 'see', just as the narrator trains the reader to 'see' in the process of describing and interpreting the paintings.

3.8 Naïve Appreciation of Colour and Form

Popi's reaction to the paintings, from her naïve delight as a child, to her simple and unquestioning nostalgic enjoyment as a young adult, and finally her educated gaze after learning about Flemish Expressionist art, is useful for understanding the ways that the *ekphrasis* at the beginning of each chapter in *The Madonna of Excelsior* is intended to function. Her suggestion that it is enough that the paintings "evoke" without "quibbling about what it all mean[s]" (236) seems ultimately to be the purpose the descriptions are meant to serve. The *ekphrasis* at the outset of each chapter seems to be intended to illicit from the reader an emotional response that sets the tone for that specific

chapter, and in some instances even a counter-tone. This is done mainly through the connotative language of the descriptions and the symbolism of the colours, which relies on the reader's recognition, and also the focus of these descriptions on specific elements of the paintings. While it is a common enough practice in poetry to use words as much for their connotative as their denotative value, in prose the literary devices often used to connote, such as metaphor, satire and allegory, usually have a literary, aesthetic quality that makes sense and is coherent literally even before the symbolic potential is grasped. Prose generally aims for immediate recognition that does not need to be unpacked. But the *ekphrasis* in these chapters is not easy to make sense of in and of itself, and even in the context of the chapter the link between the *ekphrasis* and the narrative is, at face value, at best tenuous. However, when this digression is considered in the context of the use of *ekphrasis* as a rhetorical tool in ancient times, its function in the novel takes on a truly unique dimension.

Perhaps it is of no real consequence to Mda that the painting in the thumbprint does not correspond with the *ekphrasis* in the chapter, as the purpose of the latter is the emotive atmosphere created through the elements in the paintings, which he invests with meaning through his interpretive descriptions. As a rhetorical tool, I suggest, the primary function of the *ekphrasis* at the beginning of the chapter is to create a setting which not only informs the spiritual formation of the character, but also sets the tone for the drama that unfolds later in the chapter. The tone created in the *ekphrasis* becomes the backdrop for the story in the chapter, creating a sense or atmosphere that is apposite to the narrative, either by extending and seamlessly melding with the emotions and drama that it conveys or by creating a stark contrast with them for emphasis. An apt example of how the *ekphrasis* in *The Madonna of Excelsior* foregrounds the tone of the chapter may be found in the sixth chapter, titled "She is holding the sun". This chapter opens with the *ekphrasis*: "She is holding the sun entwined in her arms. It is blazing red […] [and] glows through her body" (25). There is a pervasive sense of dread and discomfort as "[e]verything around her is fiery red. The sky is red. The ground is red. Rivers of white run on the red ground" (25). The colour red, which has multiple connotations, is used in this context to emphasise extreme heat through words such as 'blazing' and 'fiery'. It imbues everything with an aggressive quality. Since none of the colours that signify life for earth and sky are to be found anywhere, the description invokes a sense of post-apocalyptic desolation. The scene described is an environment that is not conducive to life, as the heat of this sun is destructive, consuming everything in its wake: sky, ground, rivers, all are

overtaken by it. A further connotation of "fiery red" is rage, an uncontrolled, destructive anger. These emotive associations are all invested in this use of the colour red which permeates everything, evoking a sense of dread and anxiety at the outset of the chapter. And the description of the one holding the sun is also telling. The pupils of her eyes are described as being "black like the night" (25), which suggests a dark mystery, something fearful. Indeed the description concludes with the interpretation that she is "dark and sinister. And beautiful" (25). She is associated with the sun, which holds the beautiful promise of life as well as the sinister threat of destruction for farmers.

The *ekphrasis* only takes up the first paragraph of the chapter and is a digression from the main narrative, which begins in the second paragraph with an "infernal drought that was incinerating parts of the Free State" (25). It is a devastating time for the farmers of Excelsior. There are "aphids that […] [are] having a field day on [the farmers'] spring wheat crop" and, on top of that, a 'freak' hailstorm adds to their problems. There is disaster after disaster for the farmers, and "when the farmers cried, the people of Mahlatswetsa cried too, [because] their livelihoods depended on the grace of weather" (25). The tone then set by the description at the outset of the chapter foregrounds the mood around the events that take place in the narrative. While one might be able to draw links between the merciless, overpowering and sinister sun in the *ekphrasis* and the Excelsior residents suffering at the mercy of elements over which they have no control, such connections have to be established, even actively contrived by the reader. By contrast, the *ekphrasis* at the outset simply creates a mood that will carry the story; it merely evokes, without meaning.

Another example of *ekphrasis* functioning in this way in *The Madonna of Excelsior* is in the ninth chapter, titled "The Cherry Festival". The opening paragraph is a light-hearted, comical description of a painting of a donkey carrying a red cock "in a transparent bag strapped on [its donkey's] back and hanging from its side" (43). The "long-eared […] ass poses like the monarch of the canvas" (43). Though the description pokes fun at the donkey, it is not contemptuous, because the first thing the narrator says is, "we have seen how the trinity loves donkeys" (43). In fact, the observation recalls an earlier chapter when the trinity tears a magazine page and shapes a donkey for the child Popi, and then prances around braying, while she "laughed and laughed" (3). The generous and affectionate trinity would not mock the donkey. It is through the narrator's description that the painting is interpreted in a comic light. This is perhaps because there is

inherently something humorous and incongruous about a donkey, traditionally known as a beast of burden, assuming a regal posture. So, while the painting is interpreted for the reader by the narrator, there is also an inherent irony in how the donkey is portrayed in the painting. It is as much the artist's vision that comes through in the interpretation as it is what the narrator makes of it. Once again, it is the diction that creates this light-heartedness. First, there is a sense of affection for the creature through the knowledge that the donkey is beloved of the trinity. Then the "long-eared creature" (43) is described as "foolishly fill[ing] the whole space" (25), as though to suggest that it is an impertinence that a donkey should presume to take up an entire canvas. The juxtaposition of likening an "ass" to a "monarch" emphasises the humour created by the irony. The narrator then concludes the description with the absurd declaration that "[t]he donkey and the cock own the world" (43).

This *ekphrasis* is a light-hearted, funny and endearing introductory paragraph to a chapter that is set entirely at a cherry festival. It foregrounds the cheerful atmosphere of the festival with its parade, food stalls and beauty pageant, and suggests to the reader's mind the jovial background against which the human drama – the intrigues, anxieties, disappointments and betrayals – in this chapter plays out. So, once again, the *ekphrasis* at the beginning of the chapter, without any meaning within itself that clearly links it to the chapter in any significant way (beyond the early connection in the second paragraph, where a donkey leads a parade procession) evokes a mood or tone that foregrounds the atmosphere in which the drama unfolds.

However, the tone created by the *ekphrasis* in the introductory paragraphs in each chapter of the novel *The Madonna of Excelsior* is not always aligned with the tone of the narrative in the rest of the chapter. The *ekphrasis* at the beginning of the chapter can also evoke a counter-tone to the one of the narrative in that chapter. A striking example is in Chapter Thirteen, titled "Glory". The description of the painting in this chapter takes up the first three paragraphs. The emphasis of the first paragraph is on colour and what it symbolises, as in the description of the "sunflower fields [which] lost their yellowness and assumed a deep brownness" (69). The change in colour signifies a change in season; the sunflower is dying. The trinity's palette is "dominated by siennas and umbers", colours which are described as "warm and sombre" (69), thus evoking a mood or feeling. The second paragraph is a highly imaginative and animated description of Niki and Popi, the subjects who are

> frolick[ing] in the wide-open spaces that the trinity created for all those who loved wide-open spaces […] It is a rapturous sight. Popi, truly coloured in red and blue patches, running among the brown sunflowers. Petals wilted and lost their yellowness. Popi naked […] and running in the brown field. Niki, naked and free, running after her. Popi and Niki gambolling in the field whose wilting colours formed a fading image. […] Until woman and infant merged with Payne's grey. And became one with it. Disappearing into the trinity's splashes and becoming part of the compassion they evoked. No one would ever find them. (69)

In the paragraph preceding the excerpt above, it is first suggested to the reader to associate the colours in this painting with warmth and sadness, thereby investing the description with a pervasive sense of earnest solemnity. The effectiveness of the mood created in this instance of *ekphrasis* lies in its positioning in the novel. The preceding chapter is the beginning of a particularly difficult period in the main character's life. Niki's fortune has taken a turn for the worse. She and eighteen other black women from Excelsior and surrounding areas (who would come to be known as the infamous Excelsior 19) are imprisoned with their 'coloured' children for contravening the Immorality Act. The unbridled freedom and carefree atmosphere of the *ekphrasis*, which is created through the emphasis on "wide-open spaces" and untroubled "frolicking", is in stark contrast with the enclosed space and harsh reality of the prison at the end of the preceding chapter, which continues in this chapter. The *ekphrasis* then, which is a digression, is almost like a vivid dream of freedom (a dream being quite separate from reality) in the midst of the horrid captivity of the characters. And as waking from a tranquil dream to a nightmarish reality would increase the feeling of distress about that reality, so this happy digression serves to intensify the horror of the prison. Even as the reader's anxiety about the prison situation introduced in the previous chapter is assuaged by the "compassion evoked" (69) in the *ekphrasis* at the outset of this chapter, suddenly and violently, the "clanking noise of keys, and the grating sound of metal bowls […] dragged [Popi and Niki] protesting out of the splashes […] into the world of fluster and bewilderment" (69-70). The "wide-open space" in the trinity's painting and the warm, sombre colours into which the Niki and Popi of the painting disappear are suddenly replaced by the continuing narrative's overcrowded stuffy cell, with its "stench of sour milk from lactating breasts […] [a]nd the vapours that released themselves from the open toilet bucket" (70).

The vividness of that sudden change from a wonderful dreamlike place to its extreme opposite is an assault on the mind and emotions. Along with Niki and Popi, the reader is dragged from the safety of the artist's aesthetic compassion to the crude world of a realist narrative. In this

particular *ekphrasis* in the novel, Popi and Niki are identified by the narrator as the subjects of the painting. This description is not just a digression with a subtle echo or subliminal connection to the narrative: art now attempts to subsume the characters, to protect them from their cruel 'reality'. But it fails. Nonetheless, as a rhetorical technique, the fool's paradise created by the *ekphrasis* makes the already anxious reader emotionally vulnerable and defenceless against the shock of the foul atmosphere of the prison. Its horror is experienced with a greater intensity. The destabilising feeling of a psyche assaulted by the brilliance of a vivid description is similar to the psychological effect of *ekphrasis* which Longinus observed. This ability of *ekphrasis* to leave a reader "not just 'as if a viewer of events,' but with the destabilising emotions of that event" (Goldhill 6) is characteristic of what "rhetoric makes of the power of *enargeia*," which is 'the ability to make visible'. The way the *ekphrasis* functions in this instance is reminiscent of how *ekphrasis* as a rhetorical device was thought to work on the psyche of an audience in antiquity. Longinus warns of its capacity to enslave an audience, to make them passive recipients instead of critical listeners. *Ekphrasis* seems to function similarly in this instance in *The Madonna of Excelsior*.

3.9 The Written Word Competing with the Still Image: Producing a Viewing Subject

In Chapter Eight, titled "The big sky is bereft of stars", the narrator expresses a very important idea about art, and by extension, about *ekphrasis*; that is, the attempt to translate or capture the image in words. The narrator explains that even though Popi was not there to witness the events that happened before she was born, she is able to "experience them in the immortal world that the trinity has bequeathed us. She is able to become part of the whole lives that are frozen and rendered timeless. A memoir that conveys our yesterdays in the continuing present" (38). If Popi is able to be part of the "whole lives that are frozen" on canvas, then *ekphrasis* hopes to replicate that experience for the reader through recreating the images with words. The (re)presented image invites the reader to become almost a viewer. According to Fairbanks, at one point in the development of *ekphrasis* as a rhetorical description of a work of art, it could be said that "literature and painting vied with each other in the presentation of the same themes" (qtd in D'Angelo 443). In fact, according to Liz James and Ruth Webb, as a rhetorical strategy, "the *ekphrasis* aims to present the same subject as the painting, in an equally vivid way, and the speaker often underlines this by claiming to rival the painting" (qtd in D'Angelo 443).

As a rhetorical strategy, the different definitions that *ekphrasis* has been given include "an expository speech distinctly presenting to view the thing being set forth" (Nadeau, qtd in D'Angelo 440), and "an account in detail, visible as they say, bringing before one's eyes what is to be shown" (Baldwin, qtd in D'Angelo 440). *Ekphrasis* aims to make the reader or listener 'see'. This is important in rhetoric and in how *ekphrasis* functions in *The Madonna of Excelsior* because the "ability to make visible" (Goldhill 3), termed *enargeia*, is key to why rhetoricians believed *ekphrasis* to be an essential element of persuasion. And as already mentioned, Mda's literary practice has always had the aim of persuading, and his use of *ekphrasis* as a novelist suggests that this is still an underlying aspect of his literature.

The noble and grand ambition of art to 'capture and make visible' transient reality and hidden truths has been expressed by other writers and artists. Joseph Conrad in the preface to *The Nigger of Narcissus* writes about how the task of the artist is to make others see; to capture something about a moment in time and render it as clearly as possible so that the audience may get a glimpse of the truth contained in that moment. Expressionist painting, rather than representing reality, aims at expressing an impression or feeling about reality. Art has the power to immortalise a moment, a feeling, an impression. Shakespeare asserted as much in Sonnet 18. In that poem, in which the speaker's love for the woman and her beauty is made immortal by the strokes of the poet's pen. She might be compared to a summer's day except that "summer's lease hath all too short a date" (l.4). However, her "eternal summer shall not fade" (l.9) because "so long as […] eyes can see,/ […] this gives life to thee" (l.13-14). The speaker's impressions of and feelings for his beloved are captured and expressed in a poem, which will allow posterity to experience and know something about her through his eyes. Likewise, Niki and Popi's story is preserved and expressed through the compassionate eyes of the trinity in his paintings, and the reader of *ekphrasis* can experience it all, not just in the flat words of a documented history, but through words that have been invigorated with the vitality, colour and texture of a painting whose strokes can express and invoke passion, compassion and empathy.

The descriptions do not paint a very clear picture of what is described, which is not surprising considering the style of painting. Expressionist painting is not realistic; rather, it "is the distortion of reality – as opposed to the imitation of reality – to achieve a desired emotional effect on the viewer or the representation of the inner feelings of the artist" (Fichner-Rathus 282). Expressionist painting does this "by distorting the appearance of figures and landscapes,

dramatizing them and enlarging or otherwise emphasising certain aspects" (*Museum Voor Schone Kunsten GENT*). A consequence of the lack of realism in the Expressionist paintings that Mda describes in *The Madonna of Excelsior* is that a literary description results in a confused, and rather unimpressive image. This is even more so when the reader has no conception of the style of painting. Yet, the confusion occurs only if one tries to summon a complete and coherent mental image that correlates in some way to reality. It is difficult to do this with Mda's descriptions, not only because of the lack of realism in the style of painting, but also because the descriptions do not give the sort of detail that is useful for recreating an image of the thing described. He leans more toward expressing how he feels about the paintings. In this way he imitates what the Expressionist artist does, which is to represent the object in his art not as it is, but as he feels about it and as he desires the partaker of that art to feel about it.

Mda's approach in his descriptions is not uncommon for *ekphrasis* since classical *ekphrasis* also tended to "neglect the details of the subject's appearance and to evoke instead the visual and emotional impact of the sight upon the viewer" (Webb para. 2). Mda's descriptions are more interested in conveying the mood and emotive quality of the paintings. The lack of a clear image is not the only thing that makes the inclusion of the *ekphrasis* difficult to follow. The other factor that makes this aesthetic choice seem clumsy is that there often appears to be no correspondence between the paintings described and the chapters, and where a connection can be detected, it seems tenuous at best. A black and white thumbprint of a Claerhout painting is provided at the top of the page, at the beginning of each chapter. In the acknowledgements, the publisher, not Mda, thanks Rene Goosen and Alice Bester "for their help in facilitating the use of [the] images" included in the novel. This gives the impression that the inclusion of the images may be an intervention by the editor in an attempt to give the reader a point of reference when trying to make sense of the *ekphrasis*. It can therefore be presumed that Mda, in putting together this novel, considered the *ekphrasis* itself as sufficient for the visualisation that he intended as part of the story.

3.10 Ernest Mimicry: The Novel's Defense of its Own Form

If the descriptions of the Expressionist paintings seem incomprehensible and superfluous to the narrative, then in Chapter Twelve the reader is warned to not take lightly the message just because it is carried across by a form that seems ridiculous. In this chapter, the painting described is of a man with "purple shoes [that] look like a ballerina's dance slippers. […] One hand is in his pocket

and another is holding a white umbrella" (63). Just as in Chapter Two, in which the three subjects of the drawing walk out of the charcoal on white canvas and become characters in the story, so too in this chapter, in a moment that seems almost magic realist, the subject of the painting enters the narrative as "[t]he man with the Umbrella [who] walk[s] hesitantly towards Niki's shack" (63) to warn her about the police who are following every rumour, going from shack to shack looking for coloured babies He warns Niki to take the child to Lesotho or Thaba Nchu, but Niki does not take the matter seriously "especially as the news came from a stranger with a white umbrella and funny shoes" (64). It is difficult to take seriously a message conveyed by a medium that appears, however mistakenly, in its audience's judgement, not to take itself seriously. The man looks silly to Niki and so she ignores his warning to her own detriment.

Father Frans Claerhout said he "like[d] to paint through the eyes of a child" (nladesignvisual) and that childlike quality comes across in his style. Even five-year-old Popi, when she first sees the trinity's paintings, thinks to herself that she could draw better than him. Dismissing a message because the medium is alienating may result in overlooking or missing out on something profound, just as someone who dismisses the trinity's paintings because they, at face value, appear childish and naïve. The same principle would be applicable to *The Madonna of Excelsior*, which features the paintings in all, but one of its chapters. If the reader ignores or dismisses as superfluous and alienating the contribution of the *ekphrasis* in each chapter and in the novel as a whole, then an essential aspect of the novel is lost to him or her. For this reason, it is important for the narrator to come across as knowledgeable and, in his use of jargon and through his interpretations, to raise the descriptions of the paintings in the reader's estimation to more than just strange and confusing images.

3.11 The Educated Gaze: Training the Eye to 'See'

In answering the question "what is *ekphrasis* for?" Goldhill first establishes a general framework within which to consider it. This framework consists of the key issues that emerge in his study of the Hellenistic invention of the *ekphrastic* epigram. First, he notes that it "dramatized the moment of looking *as* a practice of interpreting, of reading – a way of seeing meaning" (2). He notes that while there is some description, "it is subordinate to the work of analysis or the work of responding" (2). Also, it is not any kind of interpretation, but the demonstrating of "an educated wit" (2). Secondly, Goldhill notes that many of the poems "discuss *how* to look as they do it", and

it is here that "the category of the "professional viewer" finds its institutional origin" (2). Thirdly, this critical gaze "creates and regulates the viewing subject – both by a selection of what to look at and how to look – and by parallel exclusions too" (2). So, not only does the poem dramatize the "the viewing subject seeing himself seeing", but it also moulds the viewing subject – in short, "you must learn to look *like this*" (2). This has very real implications for *The Madonna of Excelsior*, where the narrator is also in the process of progressively teaching the reader how to interpret Expressionist painting, because without such knowledge he or she will not get the benefit of the meaning invested in the painting or may not see the narrator's interpretations as valid or proceeding from the painting. The fourth key issue that emerges is that "this critical viewing is also part of a wider theorization of the visual" (2). In the discourse of viewing, the notion of *phantasia* – impressions – offers a psychological and physiological explanation of how viewing functions. An understating of this notion is crucial to what rhetoricians in antiquity believed makes *ekphrasis* useful for persuasion. Goldhill's summary is that "*ekphrasis* is designed to *produce a viewing subject*. We read to become lookers, and poems are written to educate and direct viewing as a social and intellectual process" (2). This is the general background within which he develops the argument that the rhetorical handbooks are the key theoretical guide to understanding *ekphrasis*.

The novel's descriptions of the paintings are quite sophisticated, displaying the narrator's intimate knowledge of the Expressionist artist's discipline. In Chapter Two, the narrator informs the reader where he gets his knowledge from, when he says that "Popi tells us that it all began when the trinity was nourished by Flemish Expressionists" (5), and then goes on to elaborate that she "knows all these things, and shares them with all those who care to listen" (5). The narrator then explains that Popi did not always see the paintings with such knowing eyes, that, when she first saw the paintings as a five-year-old child, she "knew nothing about Flemish Expressionists. She had not experienced through the broad pages of colourful coffee table books, their mystique which embodied protest" (5). The word choice in the description of the Flemish Expressionist art movement as protest art, which was set apart from other forms of protest art by its mystique, is similar to how Dirk and Dominique Schwager phrased it in their large and glossy coffee table book *Claerhout: Artist and Priest*. This is the same book that Mda mentions in his dedication in *The Madonna of Exceslior*, when he acknowledges the gift from Father Frans Claerhout. Evidently, the artist Claerhout thought it necessary that Mda's eye must be taught to see, and therefore gave

him the book. He gave Mda this book to mediate his viewing of his artworks. And the language of the descriptions in the novel suggests that Mda's viewing of the paintings is framed by the Schwagers' book.

The necessity for specialised knowledge to guide the viewing of the paintings is extended to Popi, who then passes on what knowledge she has gleaned from the coffee table books to the narrator. As stated earlier, the communal narrator says that Popi shared her knowledge about Flemish Expressionism with all who would listen, and also states that Popi is the one who informed the narrator that "it all began when the trinity was nourished by Flemish expressionists" (5). Of course, the communal narrator, in the process of describing the paintings is also at the same time engaged in training the reader not only how to see Expressionist paintings, but how to see Father Frans Claerhout's particular style of painting, which is influenced by the Flemish Expressionists. This is done surreptitiously from the very beginning of the novel. For example, in the *ekphrasis* in the first chapter, the description notes that the people are "without feet or toes – all of them" (1). This sentence is set apart from the main *ekphrastic* paragraph and stands alone a single line paragraph. On the face of it, it does not seem significant, but for that particular detail to be included in the description when so many other meaningful details could be included instead suggests a deliberate choice by the narrator. It is given significance by being repeatedly noted in other *ekphrases* in the novel. What the narrator is in fact drawing attention to is an intentional and acknowledged attribute of Claerhout's oeuvre, for whom Expressionism entailed painting only the necessary, as is evident from the subjects of his paintings, which are meant to represent or express an idea rather than reproduce reality. Claerhout himself has said, "I draw mouths, hands, faces, not feet and toes" (nladesignvisual).

In the next chapter, titled "The wedding", the narrator establishes himself as an authoritative voice in matters of art, and through his critical gaze begins to teach the reader how to 'see'. He gives credence to the interpretations in his descriptions of the paintings by establishing himself as a knowledgeable authority in the jargon, techniques and tools of a painter. For example, early in *The Madonna of Excelsior*, he describes how the "scrappy palette-knife-created white lace that hangs from her head right down to her powder-blue shoes makes [the bride] look very delicate" (20). Here the narrator not only interprets the effect that the lace has on the subject, but also shows that he makes this judgment as someone who is expert enough to recognise the tools the artist has used, (that is, the palette knife, rather than the brush). In the process, he possibly suggests that

such an intimate knowledge of the artist's trade puts him in a position to know not only the how but also the why of the artist's method, therefore making his interpretation reliable and authoritative. Indeed, whenever an interpretation is offered the narrator makes a point to show not just what he makes of the painting, but that the effect that he reads is a result of a particular deliberate technique by the artist.

Based on his study of the Hellenistic invention of the *ekphrastic* epigram, Goldhill asserts that when, in this contemporary time, a "modern gallery visitor looks at a painting, and feels the need to make an intelligent, precise, witty, public remark […] [he] is – however belatedly or unconsciously – an heir of Hellenistic *sophos* and his epigram" (2). The narrator of *The Madonna of Excelsior* follows this tradition. Amongst the key issues which Goldhill notes in his study are two points about *ekphrasis* in that tradition which are pertinent to the depiction of the narrator of *The Madonna of Excelsior* and his use of *ekphrasis* in this study. One of the observations Goldhill makes about the poems in his study is that they "discuss how to look as they do it" (2). The critical gaze of the "professional viewer" is developed. And linked to this is another observation, which is that this critical gaze is "committed to a value-laden view of things", which is to say that "it creates and regulates the viewing subject – both by a selection of what to look at and how to look – and by parallel exclusions". In short, "you must learn to look *like this*" (2). In the *ekphrasis* in *The Madonna of Excelsior* the narrator establishes himself as an expert with a critical eye, and as already noted, also trains the reader how to see, which has implication for how the latter comes to see the characters of the story through the *ekphrasis*.

In the *ekphrasis* in Chapter Seventeen, the narrator further demonstrates his expert eye and his knowledge about Flemish Expressionism in interpreting a painting. An accordion player who is the subject of the painting is described as having "nothing Flemish Expressionist about him. The black outlines are thicker than ever. And rougher. Yet they fail to give him a robust look" (203). He is also described as looking "frail", which is attributable to the way the artist relates the subject to the objects around him. It is the "weight of the accordion [that] has given his body a delicate demeanour […] [and] the weight of his purple boots has given him a painful gait" (203). The subject is described as having "sharp knees" which hints at the slightness of body. After having made an expert assessment of the painting with thick, rough, black outlines that fail to give a robustness to the subject, the narrator goes on to explain why this is so, noting how the other

elements in painting temper the effect that those strokes would normally produce. In this way, the narrator is establishing the fact of his own critical gaze.

As already intimated, the narrator's discussion of how to see paintings also teaches the reader how to look. And since the *ekphrasis* at the beginning of the chapter, at a subliminal level, informs the spiritual formation of the characters, this knowledge in its turn has implications for the characters. The reader does not have the image before him and is therefore dependent on the narrator's selection. So, as a viewer, the reader of *The Madonna of Excelsior*, as in the Hellenistic tradition, is created and regulated by the narrator who directs his gaze. The reader becomes the 'viewer' that the author/narrator desires.

The process of showing the reader how to see the painting in *The Madonna of Excelsior* is linked to Popi's own aesthetic education as discussed above. Parallels can be drawn between the reader's artistic *Bildung* and her artistic maturation, from a child who is intrigued by the distortion of reality in Expressionist paintings and delighted and soothed by their colours to an adult with a refined artistic sensibility which enables her to truly appreciate the depth of meaning and intention in the paintings. The reader who knows nothing about Expressionist art or Father Frans Claerhout's paintings may first experience the *ekphrasis* in the novel much like the child Popi: the descriptions make no sense, there is an unreality about them. At best, the author/narrator hopes that the reader will have a childlike delight in them, in spite of their lack of realism or relevance, instead of dismissing them as nonsense in the way Niki does. Against the reader's simple delight in the strange descriptions, the narrator then emerges as a savant who imbues the paintings with meaning for the reader-made-almost-viewer, and at the same time, through his selections, the elements in the paintings that he brings together and interpretations, he trains the reader how to 'see' in a meaningful way. Linked to this, are the subtle, and even subliminal connections that the paintings have with the story.

An example of how this educational process works may be found in Chapter Ten titled "A barn full of moans", which is about the illicit barn orgy that Niki and four other women from Mahlatswetsa location participate in with five farmers from Excelsior. There are five women in the painting, just as there are five women who "sneak into the barn", which is described as a "wanton temple" (52). Niki is a married woman and, as previously noted, starts her affair with Stephanus Cronje to get back at his wife, Cornelia Cronje, her employer. The *ekphrasis* preceding the events of the chapter is telling, and it reveals much about those events than is actually stated,

or even suggested in the narrative itself. Particularly significant in this regard, are the aspects of the painting, specifically elements of the subjects, that are focused on, and the build up from previous *ekphrases*. The reader learns with each instance of *ekphrasis*, with the narrator's guidance, what to look for and how to look. The *ekphrasis*, in this chapter, which takes up two paragraphs, begins as follows:

> The one in front has big […] brown feet with grey toenails. Grey toes on each foot. An occasional departure from the trinity's norm. Feet and toes! […] Her sad face is black and her eyes are cast down to the red ground. Her gaunt posture hides the fact that she is a leader. She leads four women in their prime. A woman in a red blanket and red slippers. […]. She has bedroom eyes, and she walks sideways. Her feet point in the direction from which she comes.
>
> She is followed by the one who has thin legs. Grey legs without feet. […] There is a softness about her. […][There is] a brown woman behind her [whose] bare feet point to where she is going. Forwards. She has only three toes. The last woman faces sideways, giving us her back. Giving us her bare heels. […] Her black face is turning to the other women. She is looking in the direction they are all going. Her hands are raised to the heavens as if in supplication. (51)

Each subject in the painting is given a distinct personality through which they express their individual feeling about the mission that they are on, and though each is different from the other, there is nonetheless a coherence in the overall feeling that they contribute to the painting. There is a pervasive sense of ambivalence and shame which is deliberately communicated through the *ekphrasis* by the narrator's particular selections and the elements in the painting that he brings together.

The description begins with the narrator calling the reader's attention to the importance of the woman in front with the simple detail of giving her toes on each foot, which is not the trinity's usual practice. The reader, of course, will readily accept that this is a meaningful detail, because in previous *ekphrases* the narrator has remarked on the lack of toes in barefoot subjects. Accordingly, this seemingly minor detail invests the subject with significance. And since, in the story itself, Niki's determination to get back at Madame Cornelia is the catalyst for the escapades in the barn and since she is the Madonna in the title of the novel, the concomitant suggestion is that she is linked to the leader. This has very real implications for how we view Niki, because in the story she is cold and quite smug about sleeping with Madame Cornelia's husband. By contrast, the leader of the painting has a sad face with downcast eyes, and nothing in the way of pride. Her

face is black, and as the reader has learnt from the narrator's descriptions to attach meaning to the colour used in the paintings. A black face suggests gloom or a shadow upon her. Nonetheless, she is a sure-footed leader, as is symbolically affirmed by the detail, definition and attention given to her feet, which are unlike those of the woman behind her which are facing the direction she has come from. The narrator suggestively describes the second woman as having "bedroom eyes" instead of saying she looks sleepy, hinting at a motive to seduce. Interestingly, the direction of her feet suggests ambivalence about what lies ahead, whereas the lack of feet in the third woman give the impression that she is simply carried along by the company she is with. The woman behind her shares a quality that the leader has, as she has also been given toes, although only three. She is like the leader, only slightly less significant. There is no ambivalence about where she is going – "Forwards". The final woman's stance seems to bring together everything expressed by the other women – the shame, ambivalence determination – and her dramatically raised hands seems to offer up a prayer for them all.

3.12 Religious Imagery and the Redemptive Gaze

The phrase "The sins of our mothers" refers to the sexual exploits Niki has as a black woman with the white farmers of that town, which was in violation of the Immorality Act, a law prohibiting sexual relations between white people and those of other races. But, as already noted, Wylie points out that, ironically, "the 'sins' of these mothers was […] to have been desired by white men" (389). This is particularly interesting because Stephanus Cronje sees Niki "only as body parts rather than as one whole person. He saw her as breasts, pubes, lips and buttocks" (Mda *The Madonna of Excelsior* 42). But there is something redemptive about Father Claerhout's portrayal of the naked Madonnas, and of Niki in this particular instance, whose bodies have been exploited and treated as 'unholy'. The artist's compassion is demonstrated through two instances of *ekphrasis*. In the one *ekphrasis*, Niki is identified with the suffering Christ in a chapter where a group of Afrikaner elders from the Dutch Reformed Church are, ironically, bemoaning the terrible temptation that is the "devil in the guise of black women" (88) that has been waylaying upstanding Afrikaner men. The second redemptive instance in the novel is in the *ekphrasis* through which the narrative encourages the reader to make sense of Niki's public condemnation by the law and the humiliation she suffers during and after the trial.

In Chapter Fourteen, the description of the painting places the crucified Christ in the Free State landscape: "A brown Christ crucified in a field of pink and white cosmos […]. One big sunflower grows next to the cross, its yellow petals touching the bent knees of the Christ" (80). The brown Christ of the painting is given the same skin tone as the people of the Mahlatswetswa. In this Free State landscape, he is made to identify with the black population, and the "procession of women in blue dresses and shawls" (80) next to his cross are wearing Basotho hats and "[t]heir bodies are bent forward by invisible burdens" (80). The brown Christ's followers, those weighed down by the grief of his crucifixion, are also identified with the local Basotho population through the description of their dress/attire.

The crucifixion of Christ is a loaded, emotionally charged motif. Christ is a historical figure who suffered unjustly at the hands of the religious leaders of the day and anything associated with him evokes passionate religious feeling from those who believe in him as a saviour. Since the Bible teaches that all humanity was complicit in his persecution and execution, Christ's crucifixion often evokes religious piety and sorrow in his believers. In the novel, Niki, owing to the persecution she endures for contravening the Immorality Act, is aligned with the historical and religious context of Christ's Passion. In fact, a direct link is established between the Christ of the painting and Niki in the transition from *ekphrasis* to the continuing narrative: "A sunburnt Christ. Like Niki's face" (80). The skin on Niki's face had been terribly burnt, cracked and discoloured by the Super Rose He-Man skin-lightening lotion of the infamous Krok brothers which contained dangerously high levels of hydroquinone. The direct link between the suffering of the Christ of the Free State and Niki's suffering invests Niki's story – the injustice, pain and humiliation of her persecution – with the pathos associated with Christ's death.

This association of Niki with divine suffering at the beginning of the chapter is in stark contrast to how she and the other black women in the trial are seen by the devout men of the Afrikaner community as they gather around Reverend Francois Bosman's hospital bed later in the chapter. The Reverend is there because he has tried to kill himself after being charged with contravening the Immorality Act. The elders comfort him by expressing their understanding of the terrible temptation he faced and assuring him that, like many other fallen comrades "who had been led astray by the devil in the guise of black women" (88), he remains a good person.

Chapter Seventeen is the aftermath of the trial of the Excelsior 19. Charges have been dropped by the State against Niki and the other women, and the former returns home to find her

shack looted. Although glad to be out of prison, she is angry for the injustices against her, for how she has been used and abused: "she was free. And hungry" (106). The *ekphrasis* at the outset of this chapter opens with the following sentences: "The blue madonna is different from the other madonnas. No cosmos blooms around her. She is not sitting in a brown field of wheat. No sunflowers flourish in her shadow. Yet she exudes tenderness like all the others […] She is not naked but wears a blue robe" (107). In stating that this madonna is not like the others, the description establishes a direct link with the *ekphrasis* in Chapter Three titled "All these madonnas". In that chapter, there are "madonnas all around. Exuding tenderness" (11). A "mother in a blue shirt, squatting in a field of yellow ochre wheat [with a] baby wrapped in white lace resting between her thighs […] Naked breasts dangling above the baby's head […] Unhampered bonding of mother and child and wheat" (11). The second madonna in this *ekphrasis* is a "naked madonna lying on a bed of white flowers […] Her voluptuous thighs are wide open, ready to receive drops of rain […] Her breasts are full and her nipples are hard. Under her arm she carries a baby wrapped in white lace" (11). The description of the painting at first glance gives the impression of an eroticised body, but that quality is then muted through the presence of the child. Her wide-open thighs contain a sexual suggestion which is, however, denied by the fact that she awaits rain, not copulation. The denial may also be just a perception of the reader who is accustomed to viewing the naked female body as a sexual object. The bodies of these "brown madonnas with big breasts" (11) have been re-appropriated and re-signified, which is pertinent in this novel in which the black female body is removed from the person who is embodied by it, as, for instance, happens when Stephanus Cronje sees Niki "only as body parts rather than as one whole person. He saw her as breasts, pubes, lips and buttocks" (42). In the description of the painting, the narrator's diction, though sexually suggestive, also hints at a different way of viewing the madonna's body. Her breasts are described as not just big, but full of milk to nourish her child, a description that is followed by the details of her nipples, which are hard to enable her child to suckle. This painting celebrates the woman's naked body for its maternal qualities. She is a madonna. And in a gentle, natural environment – among the cosmos and the sunflowers – she is compassionately described in a shameless natural state, bonding with her child without an invasive male gaze to grab at her body, making it something shameful. Though the trinity's gaze is also male, Niki, while posing naked as a model for him remarks that it is different. Rather than ravage her body, his eyes honour the whole woman by treating her body as sacred, and venerating the

maternal. His is a redemptive gaze. In the *ekphrasis*, the reader is therefore taught to see the madonna through the trinity's compassionate gaze, and so the fictionalized narrative redeems an historic event.

Mda has said that one of the things he learnt from the Sesotho writers that he admired, was how the vivid descriptions of the landscape informed the spiritual formation of the characters and that he also tries to incorporate this correlation into his own writing. In the examples of *ekphrasis* in *The Madonna of Excelsior*, the vivid description at the beginning of each chapter certainly informs our perception of the characters in the narrative. Part of what guides our perception as readers and the links we establish as we read is the narrator's "professional gaze", which is always engaged in training us how to 'see'. Being made to 'see', we are left with the emotional impression of being a witness. And therein lies the potential to make a profound impact on the 'viewer', who may respond like Mda before the pink mountain or like Popi before the trinity's paintings.

Conclusion

Albie Sachs's call to "ban […] saying that culture is a weapon of the struggle" (19) created a dilemma for writers of protest literature, who had operated on the somewhat simplistic and unambiguous assumption that a political commitment to fighting apartheid was sufficient validation for whatever they had to say. Sachs's call was a call to rediscover an art that thrives on complexity, contradiction and irony, that is not usually reducible to one straightforward "message". The reactions to Albie Sachs's pronouncement, which are documented in *Spring is Rebellious* (1991), show the exasperation of writers, artists and others who were part of the liberation movement about, firstly, the apparent prescription for how artists and writers should create, and secondly, criticism, from a fellow struggle hero, of a mode of aesthetic production that they deemed legitimate and necessary. Yet, at the same time, some artists and writers recognized that a change in the social and political order would make it necessary for them to revise their own aesthetic practice which was at that time propelled to a large degree by a political commitment to fighting apartheid. For writers like Zakes Mda, who was a playwright who wrote protest literature, the changes in the political situation in South Africa had significant implications for the artist, setting him free to simply tell stories without an agenda (Bell and Jacobs 4), as he once explained. However, Mda's portrayal of art and artists in his novels suggests that there is a struggle to redefine the role of the black South African artist and his art in society apart from the aims that the previous situation had seemingly made unambiguous for practitioners of protest literature. This struggle becomes apparent in changes in Mda's own practice as is revealed through the artists and artistic practices, which Mda portrays in his novels.

While in the protest literature of apartheid time, the artist and his art had a unified function, in theorizing about the role of art and the artist in post-apartheid South Africa, Mda distinguishes between the role of the artist and the function of art in society. This can be deduced not only from Mda's remarks about his process of creating literature (stating that his is a literature of public action only in its conception instead of in any implied function (Mda, "The Pink Mountain" 70), effectively separating his social function as an artist from the social function of his work), but it is also reflected in how art and artist characters are portrayed in his novels. He often uses the opportunity afforded by public platforms to distinguish for the public between his role in developmental projects in society – what he calls public action – and the aims of the literature he

writes. The process of creating inspires him to do philanthropic work, and so he becomes a catalyst for development, which is what he means by the "symbiotic relationship between [his] community activism and the creation of literature" (70). However, his novels are not intended to move people on to any particular action. He says he tells stories without an agenda. The reason for the distinction between the role of the artist and the function of art seems to be an attempt to satisfy the impulse which informed his artistic practice when he wrote protest literature, while at the same time, consciously responding to the concerns raised by Njabulo Ndebele and Albie Sachs about protest literature and culture as a weapon of the struggle.

Mda's claims about himself as an artist and the role of art in society cannot always be reconciled with the portrayals of art and the artist in his novels. His novels portray both the artist and visual art in the form of paintings, drawings and sculpture as catalysts for change, and if his novels may be seen as expressing Mda's own view, be it an unconscious one, of the role of the artist and art in society, then his novels suggest that he believes that art has a role to play in the healing of individuals and communities. Even more specifically, *Ways of Dying* and *The Madonna of Excelsior* especially give the impression that art may have the special function of being a catalyst for healing in post-apartheid South Africa. Visual art and performance are a prominent leitmotif in Mda's novels and the artist-performer is a recurring character. His first novel is described as a "unique South African black *kunstlerroman*" (42) by Margaret Mervis because of its extensive treatment of the subject of art and because the protagonist is an artist-performer. Mda wrote subsequent novels, which not only deal with art, but which reiterate the certain presumptions about art in the postcolonial, post-apartheid Southern Africa. As stated in an earlier chapter, Warnes notices as a "romantic pattern of relating the aesthetic to liberation and reconciliation" and a "thread of interconnected ideas about imagination, art and healing" (83) in the three novels *She Plays with the Darkness*, *Ways of Dying* and *The Madonna of Excelsior*. In each of these novels, the central character's encounter with visual art leads, respectively, to epiphany and psychological, or perhaps even spiritual healing. These three novels also have the artist-performer character, who, similarly to how the visual art functions in the novels, acts as a catalyst for healing and reconciliation. This might be seen to give expression to the idea of a catalyst who conscientizes society so that communities are able to help themselves – an idea which comes from theatre-for-conscientization, which is a model of developmental theatre used by the Marotholi Travelling

Theatre – a troupe which Mda was a part of when he worked at the National University of Lesotho in the 1980s.

Despite the fact that when it comes to public action, Mda distinguishes between his own role in society and the one intended for his work, his own novels reveal a desire for the artefact (novel, painting, sculpture) to do the work of a heterophilous catalyst, which, in theatre-for-conscientization, is an actor from outside the community who belongs to a different social class and has a greater level of awareness who works with the audience members to help them see themselves and their problems from a new perspective. This transposition of features of theatre-for-conscientization to his novels is the reason Margaret Mervis describes Mda as a "writer of 'Fiction for Development' (39). Mda's novels are fiction for development at two different levels: the first is how the narratives are constructed, with the artist-performer characters fulfilling the role of the heterophilous catalyst in what this study argues to be an extended South African black *kunstlerroman* comprising the three novels that have the shared theme of linking art, healing and reconciliation. The art itself also, apart from the artist, functions in the narratives as a heterophilous catalyst. Secondly, the visuality of *The Madonna of Excelsior* makes the book itself something to be viewed as it mimics expressionist paintings, creating for the reader the possibility of being affected in the same way as the characters in the novel.

The South African black *kunstlerroman* theorizes the role of the artist and art in post-apartheid South African with a particular focus on visual art. Mda's own writing style has been described as 'painterly' (see Fincham) and he has himself said that he takes great care to invest his novels with that vivid descriptive quality which he so admired in the Sesotho writers, like Thomas Mofolo, whom he read while growing up. What is significant for him is that for these writers the vivid descriptions of landscapes had a utilitarian function for the writer, and it is because of this influence that when Mda comes across a beautiful mountain in bloom he thinks, "That mountain cannot be beautiful for nothing" ("The Pink Mountain" Mda, 67) and then finds a way for that beauty to make community life better. This response to the striking image of the mountain and the link that he makes between the effect of that mountain and the vivid descriptions of the Sesotho writers has significant implications for his choice to write an explicitly painterly novel – *The Madonna of Excelsior*, which is for the most part *ekphrastic*.

Ekphrasis is a literary description of a work of art, however, in the rhetorical tradition of antiquity it included any digressive speech with vivid descriptions. In *The Madonna of Excelsior*,

Mda uses this mode in both senses. *Ekphrasis* mimics the visual image in an attempt to gain access as well as to reproduce the visual image's unique power. In *The Madonna of Excelsior* this happens on two levels: the actual and the created. By making the reader a viewer through vivid descriptions of the Free State landscape, Mda is attempting to recreate for the reader his own experience before the pink mountain which inspired him not only to write a play and a novel, but also to help the women of the village at the foot of that mountain to start a beekeeping collective. And through the detailed, expert descriptions of Fr Claerhout's expressionist paintings he is trying to recreate for the reader the experience of the characters of his novels, who are healed when they encounter visual art in the form of rock paintings in *She Plays with the Darkness*, drawings and sculptures in *Ways of Dying* and expressionist paintings in *The Madonna of Excelsior*. Such a use of *ekphrasis* belongs to the Hellenist rhetorical tradition, which relied on this mode of speech to make listeners into viewers who are left with the unshakeable emotional impression of being witnesses themselves. The self-reflexive nature of *The Madonna of Excelsior* is revealing because the novel teaches how to see in the process of describing. The paintings speak, and how they direct the imaginative eye through the selections and interpretations in the description hints at how the image is supposed works on the psyche.

What Mda's painterly novel reveals is his belief in the power of visualization to create a profound and lasting impression. It also demonstrates the desire to harness that power in order to make that sort of impression on the reader. Such a desire is reminiscent of the objective of theatre-for-conscientisation, which also used a physically performative visual form of storytelling – theatre – to make a deep and lasting impression on an audience. For *The Madonna of Excelsior* to have this implied intention, it belies Mda's claim that it is only in its conception that his is a literature of public action rather than in any implied function. In all three novels, the characters do not remain the same after their profound encounters with visual art in the form of rock paintings, expressionist paintings, drawings and sculpture. They see and live in the world differently than they did before the epiphany caused by their viewing art. Mda's novels have a developmental agenda, though the author may not own it. *The Madonna of Excelsior* is Mda's only novel with literary descriptions of art, but as Gail Fincham notes, the language of his novels in general is 'painterly'. The reader is made a viewer, and so, like Popi and Dikosha, the reader-viewer must not be left the same after the encounter with Mda's 'art', but must be conscientized, and like Mda before the pink mountain, must be moved to action. So, when it comes to public action, the

distinction that Mda makes in interviews and public platforms between his own role and the function of his art in society is refuted by his own practice and the aesthetic worldview expressed by his novels.

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