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**Reconciling Nature and Culture for an Eco-sustainable World: Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness***

**Abstract I:** *The Heart of Redness*, pubblicato da Zakes Mda nel 2000, è oggetto d'analisi di questo articolo che, alla luce della Teoria della Trasformazione Culturale proposta dalla studiosa Riane Eisler, prende in esame la dialettica natura-cultura al centro del romanzo per esplorare la tensione tra tradizione e modernità dalla prospettiva della specificità sudafricana dell'autore. L'articolo mostra come i concetti di 'progresso' e 'civiltà' vengano rivisitati e contestati nel testo denunciando le catastrofiche conseguenze generate da una cieca rincorsa dei miti occidentali ai danni di una rispettosa e pacifica convivenza sul pianeta. Particolare attenzione viene rivolta alle forme e alle modalità attraverso le quali i confini tra natura e cultura, tradizione e progresso, passato e presente sono decostruiti e attraversati nella complessa struttura narrativa di un romanzo che conferma la preoccupazione centrale dello scrittore per questioni etiche, sociali e ambientali. Mda sollecita un ripensamento critico di opposizioni dicotomiche radicate e di assunti preconetti quale tappa fondamentale per prefigurare un mondo più equo e sostenibile e per re-immaginare un futuro di effettive pari opportunità. In questa prospettiva si rivela di primaria importanza il ruolo giocato dalla letteratura, dal linguaggio, dall'educazione (Eisler 2013), una responsabilità che lo scrittore si assume in prima persona attraverso la sua scrittura creativa di impegno e di riflessione critica.

**Abstract II:** Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2000) is investigated by adopting Riane Eisler's 'Cultural Transformation Theory' in order to highlight the culture-nature dialectic at the core of a novel that explores the long-lasting conflict between tradition and modernity through a distinctive South African perspective. The article shows how in Mda's novel the notions of 'progress' and 'civilization' are called into question by denouncing the catastrophic consequences that ensue when they are blindly pursued at the expense of a respectful and harmonious cohabitation on Earth. Particular attention is given to the forms and ways in which the borders between nature and culture, tradition and progress, past and present are deconstructed and traversed within the complex narrative framework of the novel which testifies to the central and permanent concern of the writer for ethical, social and environmental issues. Mda, as I intend to demonstrate, encourages a critical re-thinking and re-orientation of ossified dichotomical oppositions and prejudiced assumptions as a necessary first step in fostering a more equitable and sustainable world so that a future

of equal opportunities available to all can be re-imagined. From this perspective, fundamental is the role played by literature, language and education (Eisler 2013), a responsibility the writer fully endorses through his committed and challenging fiction.

Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2000) is investigated by adopting Riane Eisler's *Cultural Transformation Theory*<sup>1</sup> in order to highlight the culture-nature dialectic at the core of a novel that explores the long-lasting conflict between tradition and modernity through a distinctive South African perspective. In the novel the notions of 'progress' and 'civilization' are called into question by denouncing the catastrophic consequences that ensue when they are blindly pursued at the expense of a respectful and harmonious cohabitation on an Earth whose ecological balance is increasingly menaced. Even if the drive towards progress and change is irrepressible, this does not exempt us, the writer suggests, from proceeding with intelligence, caution and moderation. Among the many possible critical approaches that this complex and challenging novel would warrant because of the multiple layers of interweaving political, social and ethical discourses, the chosen focal point of analysis is intended as a tribute to Veronica Brady whose whole life and intellectual commitment were inspired by the founding values of partnership and cooperation<sup>2</sup>.

*The Heart of Redness* confirms Mda's unswerving preoccupation and interest in producing a creative work deeply rooted in the social arena. The novel's strength lies in its potential to awaken its readers' conscience, stimulating a positive drive for change and promoting a critical interrogation of the past and the present, with a view to constructing a more democratic world of effective mutual respect, partnership and reconciliation. The writer's work as a playwright, starting in 1985 with the Theatre-for-Development Project at the University of Lesotho and with the experience of the Maratholi Travelling Theatre, was driven by the declared aim of encouraging the development of self-determination and empowerment among rural communities by actively involving people in the plays through participatory techniques. The "Theatre for Development" naturally leads the way, in the post-apartheid years when Mda turns to writing fiction, towards a "Fiction for Development", as Mervis

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<sup>1</sup> Eisler's Cultural Transformation Theory identifies the crucial role literature, language and education play as source and basic roots for a radical, structural transformation of the world in terms of the urgent and necessary shift from a dominator system to a partnership model which guarantees more equitable, peaceful and democratic relations both at a personal and at a collective level. Eisler's theory contests the conventional notion of the linear progression in the history of mankind from 'barbarism' to 'civilization', a progression which has traditionally been seen as related to scientific, technological and economic advancement (Eisler 1987; 2000; 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Veronica Brady was one of the founding members of the Partnership Studies Group (PSG), a research group based in Udine which works in close collaboration with the Centre for Partnership Studies (CPS) in California ([www.centerforpartnership.org](http://www.centerforpartnership.org)). The PSG ([http://all.uniud.it/?page\\_id=195](http://all.uniud.it/?page_id=195)) applies Eisler's 'partnership model' to the study of world literatures and cultures exploring how literary texts, cultural products and language itself reflect partnership/dominator configurations and how they contribute to foster values of cooperation, sharing and care.

(1998) defines it in her analysis of Mda's debut novel *Ways of Dying* (1995). The writer's concern with the dynamics and transformations of the contemporary world is confirmed by his subsequent works of fiction which investigate the new South Africa in its difficult and demanding passage from a regime of segregation to a post-apartheid democracy vitiated by new forms of injustice and exploitation, a conflictual society over which the burden of the past looms large. This powerful social and ethical agenda is the structural motif underlying and sustaining also his third novel *The Heart of Redness*, a challenging and demanding post-apartheid text revealing an "ability to grapple with legacies of oppression and imagine new states of being and even new beings of the state" (Durrant 2003: 441). Mda's literary writing thus manifests its transformative potential and establishes itself as a site for the reinvention and reintegration of a wounded community dis-membered by colonization, which did not limit itself to acts of destruction and appropriation, but deprived the oppressed of their past, their memories, their histories, their voices. The process of re-membering is an essential phase in healing the wounds of the past: it entails the recreation and restitution of erased, distorted and manipulated traditions and stories which guarantee and preserve a dignified collective identity. The critical re-discovery and re-reading of the past and of its legacy in the present become of crucial importance in this perspective. As Riane Eisler maintains, myths, stories, literature and language play a foundational role in the shaping of our individual and collective selves (Eisler 1987). They are responsible for the construction of systems of oppression, of alterity and difference, by erecting insurmountable barriers which exclude, segregate and marginalize the 'Other'. And yet, they can offer a fundamental contribution to the dismantling of simplistic and arbitrarily forged binary categories, walls apparently enclosing us within the safety of protective/protected territories, but that can be easily transformed into prisons, as Edward Said warns us (Said 1984).

The journey of the novel's main protagonist Camagu into the 'heart of redness' is illuminating in this respect because it symbolizes the attempt to overcome artificially constructed ethnic, racial, social and gender boundaries through a critical analysis of the past and its retrieval as an empowering source of affirmation. Grounded firmly in the present, the novel draws on the past in order to project proactively into the future. The borders between nature and culture, tradition and progress, past and present are deconstructed and traversed within the complex narrative framework of a novel which testifies to the central and permanent concern of the writer for economic, social and environmental issues. Mda encourages a critical re-thinking and re-orientation of ossified dichotomical oppositions and prejudiced assumptions as a necessary first step in fostering a more equitable and sustainable world and in re-imagining a future of equal opportunities available to all.

The structure of the novel, which is developed on different time levels that constantly overlap and intersect with one another, reveals the writer's attempt at a revisionist re-reading of the past as a means of investigating its inevitable consequences and reverberations in the present. Drawing on postmodern strategies to disrupt the idea of a coherent, stable and monolithic culture rooted in the Western vision of a teleologically orientated world of

progress and advancement, this peculiar form of postcolonial 'historical novel' intermingles the memory of the destruction and violence brought about by colonization with its legacy in the present, a present which is overburdened with new forms of invasion, exploitation and control on the part of the superpowers of the globalized market with their affiliations in South African society. In light of such a history, at the core of the novel lies the reflection on whether the local and the traditional have to be preserved at all costs or whether they should enter into the global economy, on the condition that their specificity and uniqueness are preserved. Despite the apparent simplicity of the plot, the novel, which revolves around the story of a community torn between tradition and modernity, foregrounds delicate and urgent issues that reflect a central concern with the preservation and re-forging of a cultural identity closely connected to environmental questions. The relationship with nature and with the land stands out as one of the preeminent preoccupations of the novel, a sort of *fil rouge* which interlaces the past with the present. The land has always occupied a peculiar position in the South African imagination, representing the source not only of material, but also of spiritual life: it is the place of the affirmation and negotiation of collective and individual identities, a metaphor of oppression and dispossession, but it is also a symbol of renewal, rehabilitation and liberation. In this novel the struggle with the British for the land in the XIX century, with the disastrous consequences that ensued from that conflict, continues to reverberate in the post-apartheid fight waged between the Believers and the Unbelievers who quarrell about the future of Qolorha-by-Sea, a pristine paradise doomed to be transformed into a tourist site for the use of rich and greedy foreigners. Qolorha is the central geographical location of the story, which constantly shifts between the mid-XIX century colonial invasion to a postcolonial, post-apartheid present in which local people are facing a different invasion, that of Western capital, with its lure of economic progress and wealth that the planned holiday village would bring. The conflict between the two factions, which disrupted the traditional community during the previous century, is thus replicated in the present among their descendants who contend fiercely about the touristic transformation of the area. The intersecting of the two temporal levels, signalled by the duplication of the names of the characters such as those of John Dalton, Twin, Qukezwa and Heitsi, displaces the reader who is urged to cross the border between past and present in order to reflect on the dangers deriving from an overenthusiastic and simplistic celebration of the forces of progress at the expense of traditional cultures and ways of life. What is at stake, moreover, is the disruption of an the ecological balance already severely threatened.

During colonial times, when the Xhosa people were being increasingly subjugated by the white settlers and their cattle were dying from a lung disease imported by foreign herds, the Believers trusted in the prophesy of the young girl Nonqkawuse who announced that an act of mass sacrifice would save them from the British invasion and oppression. Following her vision many destroyed their crops and slaughtered their animals, the result being the spread of famine around the country and the inevitable surrender of the local people to the colonizers. Twin, at the head of the Believers, claims that: "You cannot stop the people from believing in their own salvation! [...] A black race across the sea, newly resurrected from the dead, is surely coming to save us from the white man" (Mda 2003: 84). The cattle killing of

1856-7 is thus re-read by Mda who places it in the specific context of the desperate search for an escape from the brutal oppression of the colonizers whose aim was to “destroy the political independence of the Xhosa [...] to make their land and labour available to the white settlers, and to reshape their religious and cultural institutions on European and Christian models” (Peires 1989: 312-313). As Camagu tries to explain in the contemporary timeline of the story, “it is wrong to dismiss those who believed in Nongquawuse as foolish [...]. Her prophesies arose out of the spiritual and material anguish of the amaXhosa nation” (Mda 2000: 245).

In colonial times Twin’s brother Twin Twin, leading the Unbelievers, is even ready to side with the British agent John Dalton in order to save his people from the total annihilation which will be caused by the blind and insane belief in the prophesy, despite the fact that the much hated Dalton murdered the twin brothers’ father and boiled his head in order to send it back to the British Museum as a specimen of the barbarous race that the English had been able to ‘tame’ and ‘civilize’.

A new John Dalton, a descendant of the XIX century British trader, reappears in the contemporary story line as the village shopkeeper with a much contaminated identity. Symbolic of the inevitable process of cross-fertilization that colonization determines, he speaks the Xhosa language and has gone through such traditional rituals as circumcision, showing himself to be in much closer contact to the local culture than Camagu himself, who has spent most of his life in the US and who, despite his origins, has undergone a process of westernization. In the hybridized context of the present the clash between *ubuqaba* (which stands for backwardness and heathenism) and *ubugqobhoka* (which stands for enlightenment and civilization) is reawakened through the feud between the descendants of the twin brothers: on the one hand Bhonco, who is the leader of the Unbelievers, and on the other Zim, descendant of Twin, who strenuously contests the planned transformation of the little town on the Wild Coast into a water-sports theme park and a casino. Bhonco, though determined to back the project which will bring wealth to his people, is nonetheless perplexed by its implications. If he affirms that “the Unbelievers stand for progress [...]. We want to get rid of this bush which is a sign of our uncivilized state. We want developers to come and build the gambling city that will bring money to this community. That will bring modernity to our lives, and will rid us of our redness” (Mda 2000: 92), he states at the same time that he is “suspicious of this matter of riding the waves. The new people that were prophesied by the false prophet, Nongqawuse, were supposed to come riding on the waves too” (Mda 2000: 199). The failed promises of the young woman’s prophesy in the past resurface in the glare of success and richness that progress and civilization promise to bring. The Unbelievers, in the present timeline, are paradoxically those who fall prey to a foolish belief when they ingenuously embrace the myth of newness. It is Bhonco as well who, while aspiring to get rid of the “redness” which is a marker of backwardness, objects to his daughter Xoliswa’s western education that has blinded her by detaching her from traditional customs: “Education has made this girl mad, thinks Bhonco. Has she forgotten that, according to the tradition of the amaXhosa, bees are the messengers of the ancestors? When one has been stung, one has to appease the ancestors by slaughtering an ox or a goat and by brewing a lot of sorghum beer” (Mda 2000: 227).

The irresolvable conflict between the Believers and the Unbelievers finds a dialogical though problematic space of negotiation in Camagu's contemporary journey of enlightenment and discovery into the 'heart of redness'. After 30 years of voluntary exile in the United States where he earned a doctorate in communication and economic development, Camagu returns to South Africa full of enthusiasm about the idea of contributing to the advancement of the young democracy. However, disappointed by the general corruption and disgusted by the cronyism pervading the country, unable to find a place and a high-level job in the new South Africa because he is 'overqualified', he is succumbing to the temptation to go back to the United States, when he finds himself hypnotically driven to follow a beautiful woman, NomaRussia, whom he has met at a wake in Johannesburg. In tracking her, he arrives at the main location of the novel, the village of Quolora by Sea, where he becomes involved in the fierce debate between the traditionalists and the innovators, a conflictual situation in which he is, at first, reluctant to take part: "I am not an Unbeliever. I am not a Believer either. I don't want to be dragged into your quarrels" (Mda 2000: 118). As a returnee with a top class education, he feels deracinated and estranged from contemporary South African political culture, unable to perceive and participate in its new internal dynamics because "he never learnt the freedom dance" (Mda 2000: 28) that was fashionable at the political rallies during the apartheid years when he was abroad completing his doctoral degree. Gradually, however, he "strips off the white mask of a Westernized African" (Bell 2009: 20) and begins to retrieve his amaXhosa identity, an identity radically reformed in consequence of the cross-cultural contaminations and hybridizations determined by his in-between status as an exile both in the Western world and in his own country. In the course of this process of change and inner development Camagu abandons the role of an indefinable, amorphous and detached "transnational hybrid" (Dannenberg 2003: 4) and begins to take sides and make specific choices as a member of a community for which, like every individual, he is responsible. If, at the beginning of the novel, Camagu seems to be a potential bridge between different worlds apparently able to challenge, thanks to his position, a politics of polarity and exclusion (Bhabha 1994), he actually discovers that in everyday life the precious heritage represented by the complex and cross-fertilized background does not relieve the subject from his/her obligation to consciously choose a definite, unambiguous life project and system of values. Camagu refuses to maintain his stance as the unconcerned and passive witness of the 'peaceful' penetration of Western economic powers into a traditional South African world which has already been wounded in the past by the plague of colonialism in its most virulent and degenerated forms and which is victim in the present of the assimilationist forces of a Western-directed globalization. On the contrary, relying on his knowledge and the experience he has acquired during his formative years in the West, he plans and fosters a dignified and intelligent project of local development that preserves the specificity and peculiarities of the area without surrendering the opportunities offered by foreign capital. He realizes a project of cooperative ecotourism which is an alternative to that promoted by multinational investors, one which is in tune with the values and ethical principles of the local community, respectful of and caring for its history, culture, tradition and for the ecological balance of the environment (Eisler 2007).

Camagu's developmental journey is marked by crucial moments of insight occasioned by a respectful confrontation with other characters in the novel. The strengths and potentials of a 'dialogical dialogue' (Panikkar 2007) as a catalyst and resource for mutual recognition and comprehension (Eisler 1987, 2000) loom large in the novel and play a preeminent role in the inner transformation of the characters. Dichotomical world views are explicitly embodied and voiced by the two female characters Camagu is attracted by, women who affect and determine his growth as a conscious man and citizen of the world, enabling him to question the myth of modernity and reappraise tradition as a valuable source of identity and empowerment for the whole community.

Xoliswa Ximiya is constructed within a binary pattern which opposes her character as the westernized subject *par excellence*, "prepared to die for civilization" (Mda 2000: 259) in her father Bhonco's words, to that of Qukezwa, Zim's daughter, who lives in tune with nature and breathes the spirit of the land, defending its traditional laws and values. Xoliswa's cold beauty and what, according to Western standards, is the physical perfection of her figure is juxtaposed against the joyous and very earthly allure of Qukezwa's plump and voluptuous body. Although at first Camagu is dismayed by Qukezwa's earthly instinctual behaviour, her contagious energy and smile, directness and sensuality, and the woman's creative and independent spirit in perfect tune with nature, draw him towards her:

Qukezwa sings in such beautiful colors. Soft colors like the ochre of yellow gullies. Reassuring colors of the earth. Red. Hot colors like blazing fire. Deep blue. Deep green. Colors of the valleys and the ocean. Cool colors like the rain of summer sliding down a pair of naked bodies (Mda 2000: 193).

Contrasting with Qukezwa is Xoliswa, rigid and controlled in her body and personality, who after her studies abroad has become the local school principal and who betrays her infatuation with Western culture by celebrating uncritically the myth and icons of progress and civilization. She perceives all traditions as detrimental to her people inasmuch as they keep them in a state of backwardness, as symbolized by the 'redness' of the ochre with which they decorate their bodies. Her dream of civilization and advancement will eventually cause her to join the "Aristocrats of the Revolution" (Mda 2000: 33) in Pretoria where she will obtain the prestigious job of deputy-director in the National Department of Education.

Through a series of dialogues, in particular with these two women in his life, about the status of the local people, their habits, rituals and presumed backwardness, and about the project of civilization and advancement and the concept itself of primitiveness, Camagu gradually detaches himself from the values and way of life embodied by Xoliswa, who is unable, in her enthusiastic adherence to the dream of economic and cultural advancement, to detect the consequences that the development of a tourist village would have for the local people and their culture: "You have seen – she claims – how backward this place is. We cannot stop civilization just because some sentimental old fools want to preserve birds and trees and an outmoded way of life" (Mda 2000: 67).

Camagu's grateful and respectful response to the appearance of a snake in his hotel room – an animal in which he recognizes Majola, the totem of his clan, so that he does not

allow the staff to kill it – gains him the esteem of the local community, but at the same time arouses Xoliswa's contempt for a gesture she thinks reinforces and keeps alive all that she considers as barbarism and heathenism (Mda 2000: 172): "You are an educated man, Camagu, all the way from America. How do you expect simple peasants to give up their superstitions and join the modern world when they see educated people like you clinging to them?" (Mda 2000: 150). In the instinctual comparison Camagu draws between the two women, the route he is ready to follow is clear. Talking to Xoliswa about Qukezwa he caims: "where you see darkness, witchcraft, heathens and barbarians, she sees song and dance and laughter and beauty" (Mda 2000: 219).

Qukezwa is the primary agent of Camagu's inner transformation, the spiritual guide who reveals to him the sacredness of the land and its most profound secrets. Thanks to her, he comes to re-discover and re-appreciate once again the values of his traditional culture rooted in a profound respect for nature and its laws. While fascinated by the intellectual and cultural appeal of Xoliswa, a fierce native woman who vindicates her rights in the difficult context of a patriarchal community, Camagu surrenders to the seduction of the rebellious and joyful spirit of Qukezwa, an "ecofeminist" (Sewlall 2009: 216) who lives in symbiosis with nature and is respectful of its laws. She is the depositary of precious knowledge concerning the local flora and fauna, and the guardian of her people's traditions such as the dying one of split-tone singing (Mda 2000: 152). The beauties and magic of the land are arrayed before Camagu's enchanted eyes thanks to Qukezwa's mediation. His journey into the 'heart of redness' thus re-reads and overturns Marlow's tragic path into the hellish 'heart of darkness' of Conrad's novel which the title explicitly echoes. In contrast with the appalling blank space, the site of the most atrocious evils and barbarity which Marlow describes as peopled by unhappy savages, more shadows than human beings, the novel introduces the reader to what Camagu enthusiastically considers the most beautiful place on earth, vibrant with an inner mysterious energy, a sort of gift on the part of a "generous artist [...] using splashes of lush colour" (Mda 2000: 55). This view is reinforced by Camagu's physical and spiritual entrance into the lively landscape of the Valley of Nongqawuse, with its indescribable explosion of colours, a paradisaical garden in which plants and animals compose a natural work of art on a fascinating canvas.

It is this land, with its prerogatives and its rights, a land which is the source of physical and spiritual life, that Qukezwa tries to preserve at all costs by invoking the wisdom of traditional laws to protect the threatened environment. She turns up in front of the local court, which accuses her of having vandalized the trees without even using them as fuel, dressed in an evocative and symbolic red blanket, insisting on her right to be judged for what she did even if, according to Xhosa customs, it is the father who should be charged for a crime committed by his daughter. In her defence, she proclaims herself guilty but explains the reasons behind her act:

The trees that I destroyed are as harmful as the inkberry. They are the lantana and wattle trees. They come from other countries [...] to suffocate our trees. They are dangerous trees that need to be destroyed [...]. Just like the umga, the seed of the wattle tree is helped by fire. The seed can lie there for ten years, but when the fire comes



it grows. And it uses all the water. Nothing can grow under the wattle tree. It is an enemy since we do not have enough water for this country (Mda 2000: 216).

The court is impressed but cannot absolve her because there is no specific legislation concerning wattle trees. However, it is evident from the court's deliberations that traditional laws, though infused with superstitions and popular beliefs, aim at preserving ecological balance and thus forbid wicked acts of destruction. The court asserts: "When we punish boys for killing red-winged starlings, we are teaching them about life. We are saving them from future misfortune" (Mda 2000: 217). In its deliberations, it is trying to protect not only the isomi bird, which is considered holy, but also the sacredness of nature at large, a nature which has to be honoured and preserved. Thus, an ecological education becomes an imperative "without which – the writer seems to suggest – the future of any nation, no matter how sophisticated, would be doomed" (Sewlall 2009: 217).

Qukezwa brings her powerful message to bear against the insane exploitation of the land's resources. As in the past, during colonial times, the imperialistic venture disguised its destruction and plundering of the land by representing it as the inevitable price to be paid for the diffusion of the light of civilization among the 'savages' and the 'heathens', in the present the lure of progress, technological advancement and money impedes a full comprehension of the disastrous consequences of economic projects which enter into conflict with the ecological balance of the Earth at the expenses of local populations. In the past timeline of the novel the governor Sir George Grey, ironically referred to by the local people as "the Man who Named Ten Rivers", asserts: "The Advance of Christian civilization will sweep away ancient races. Antique laws and customs will moulder into oblivion [...]. The ruder languages shall disappear, and the tongue of England alone shall be heard all around. So you see, my friends, this cattle-killing nonsense augurs the dawn of a new era" (Mda 2000: 206). His enthusiastic celebration of the White enterprise into the heart of savage Africa, is echoed in the present timeline by the developers during the public meeting they hold with the villagers to explain their plan of development for the area (Mda 2000: 197-200).

Men's greed and lust for power and wealth are thus explored and exposed by the writer as representing, though with different manifestations and justifications, a continuum from the colonial past to the present. They are patent expressions of a system of domination that Riane Eisler synthesizes in the following terms:

So what you see in European history starting from the Middle Ages onwards is an upward spiral with dips. We are in a similar dip today. The growing gap between haves and have-nots worldwide, the re-concentration of economic power in the hands of giant multinational corporations, which are really the new international fiefdoms of our time; the mantra of let's get women back into their 'traditional places', which is a code word for subservient, male controlled place [...]; the rise of religious fundamentalism, which is really dominator fundamentalism [...] and worldwide now the increased reliance on violence in intertribal and international relations, they are all part of the regression to the dominator system (Eisler 2007: 30-31).

The gloomy vision of ineradicable economic interests on a global and local level partially darkens Camagu's project for a holiday camp operating as a village-owned cooperative venture. Cynical power plays, lust for money, lack of reciprocal respect represent serious hindrances to the development of a partnership society based on the principles of sharing, mutual support and communal benefit, a society respectful of the precious ecological balance essential for the survival of humankind. However Mda, though conscious that political and economic interests are driving forces at both a national and international level, fosters through his character's project of eco-sustainable tourism a viable alternative to the violent penetration of foreign capital and the commodification of the local by the globalized market ruled by the interests of the multinationals. By expressing his dismay at the absence of a serious concern for ecological issues, he urges the necessity of a thorough and honest reflection on the massive and uncontrolled exploitation of the environment, and on the progressive annihilation of local traditional cultures that are stifled by a western-dominated globalization with the consequent crisis of individual and collective identities. Significantly Camagu, while drawing upon both worlds he has been living in and upon their respective cultures, gradually detaches himself from a vague "hybrid" status which has served as an excuse not to take sides. Fully aware of its complexities and contradictions, he comes to see it as a source of empowerment and agency enabling him to foster his project. He overcomes the binaries of Eurocentric thought symbolically embodied by the two factions so as to adopt the "post-dialectical (and post-*anti*-apartheid) mode of secular intellectual politics" (Titlestad & Kissack 2003: 268). Endowed with the knowledge and experience attained in the Western world, he is ready, thanks to his precious and complex heritage, to "recuperate a qualified form of the indigenous – and with it, a form of belonging plausibly available within conditions set by the late twentieth century" (Vital 2005: 308). Local culture, according to Camagu and Mda himself, has to be protected from violent manipulation and erasure, although the hybridization processes will inevitably alter and transform it. In *The Heart of Redness* the indigenous Xhosa culture is represented as having been already contaminated in colonial times, thus debunking the myth of a pure, original and monolithic tradition and identity. The process is continuous, irrepressible and increasingly accentuated in present times. In such a context and in the face of, but also thanks to, inevitable cross-cultural fertilizations, Camagu's project of ecotourism seems to guarantee the autonomous survival of the local community by preserving its traditional social values and customs without renouncing the advantages of a modern business system, which would allow the South African people to enter the global economy on their own terms. His plan – an environmentally orientated, ethical project of development – is formulated in clear, rational terms and is based on the establishment of the village as a national heritage site (Mda 2000: 201), one to be viewed not as a relic of the past to be preserved immune from all forms of contamination, but as a vital, vibrant and constantly moving reality which progresses and transforms itself. He promotes "a kind of tourism that will benefit the people, that will not destroy indigenous forests, that will not bring hordes of people who will pollute the rivers and drive away the birds" (Mda 2000: 201).

Camagu organizes a cooperative of local women who harvest the sea, make and sell

traditional Xhosa clothing and jewellery, thanks to which the Department of Arts, Culture and Heritage declares Qolorha to be a national heritage site and rejects the project to build the casino and the tourist resort. Camagu's plan triumphs, though he is aware that it is only a contingent success and that the future of his country is in the hands of the powers that will come:

As he drives back home he sees wattle trees along the road. Qukezwa taught him that these are enemy trees. All along the way he cannot see any of the indigenous trees that grow in abundance in Qolorha. Those who want to preserve indigenous plants and birds have won the day there. At least for now. But for how long? The whole country is ruled by greed. Everyone wants to have his or her snout in the trough. Sooner or later the powers that be may decide, in the name of the people, that it is good for the people to have a gambling complex at Qolorha-by-Sea (Mda 2000: 277).

Camagu's experiment represents an exception in the disquieting panorama determined by the invasion of the global market, with the consequent corruption of traditional values and ways of life by a capitalist economy under the control of Western neo-imperialist powers with their headquarters in Johannesburg among the black ruling élites. Despite the fact that the village is doomed to undergo inevitable transformations, Camagu and his people have won, at least temporarily. Camagu, once a returned exile, feeling out of place in his own country, frustrated and rendered impotent by the widespread corruption, has become a fully integrated and settled member of his community, a devoted husband and father, a small but successful businessman who has retrieved once and for all the sense of belonging to his mother country. He refuses to peddle the fascination and lure of his traditional civilization as an exotic commodity for credulous tourists, as John Dalton, the white man with a umXhosa heart (Mda 2000: 8) but with a British mind, suggests. Dalton's plan to re-create a fictional pre-colonial world in a "cultural village" to be offered to foreigners (Mda 2000: 286) meets with the stern opposition of Camagu: "That's dishonest. It is just a museum that pretends that it is how people live. Real people in today's South Africa don't lead the life that is seen in cultural villages. Some aspects of that life perhaps are true. But the bulk of what tourists see is the past ... a lot of it an imaginary past" (Mda 2000: 247-248). He is in favour of using Xhosa tradition to sell tourists the ecological attractions of the village, but also determined to preserve its vital culture as living, dynamic and authentic: "I am interested in the culture of the amaXhosa as they live it today, not yesterday. The amaXhosa people – he claims – are not a museum piece. Like all cultures their culture is dynamic" (Mda 2000: 248).

The banal and oversimplistic polarity between nature and culture, constructed within the Western imagination as dichotomical and irreconcilable, nurtured by the myth of progress identified with technological advancement and economic growth, is definitely called into question in *The Heart of Redness*, which foresees and encourages a critical and responsible process of negotiation between tradition and modernity, proposing a site of encounter and dialogic interaction that eschews the vagueness and ambiguity of a hybrid, amorphous and aseptic third space.

When the protagonist, at the end of the novel, asks Dalton to work together for a different future – "This rivalry of ours is bad. Our feud has lasted for too many years" (Mda

2000: 277) he claims – it is such a new site of partnership and collaboration that it is tentatively delineated. Camagu’s journey into the heart of ‘redness’, through the rediscovery of his roots and traditions and a close communion with nature, has ‘educated’ him in new ways and determined his growth as a man and as a responsive and caring citizen of the world. Mda’s point is that too often Western culture, with its profoundly individualistic and auto-referential bias, fails to provide a partnership education based on respect for the other and for the land we inhabit. “You know nothing about love, learned man”, Qukezwa significantly shouts at Camagu, “Go back to school and learn more about it!” (Mda 2000: 194). As Eisler suggests, a true partnership education requires a “multidisciplinary and integrated approach to helping human beings acquire the tools, knowledge, skills and dispositions they need to live their lives in empathic and gender-balanced ways in harmony with each other and with nature” (Eisler 2013: 44).

From this perspective it is undeniable the role played by literature in educating the individual as a conscious, critical and active agent of social change. The writer is thus invested with the responsibility of demonstrating “that a partnership future is not a utopia or no place, but a pragmatopia, a possible place” (Eisler 2014), a role Zakes Mda has fully endorsed and exercised in his literary works with conviction and determination.

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