

Original Paper

Folklore Writing by South African Diasporic Writers

—Taking Zakes Mda’s Novels as an Example

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Abstract

As a diasporic writer, while suffering from “island consciousness” that resulted from the conflicts of heterogeneous cultures, Zakes Mda had the opportunity to re-examine his home country as both an insider and an outsider. By deeply rooting his writing in the African continent and focusing on African folklore, Mda opens up space for another discourse to express his ideals and conscience as a diasporic intellectual, and he conveys the voice of Africa to the world. Through folklore writing, Mda not only expresses his identification with national culture, but also explores the charm and value of global indigenous culture in a modern situation within the framework of global culture and expresses his concern for human existence in a broad vision.

Keywords

South African literature in English, folklore writing, Zakes Mda

1. Introduction

Since the end of the nineteenth century, South African literature in English has become internationally known, especially in the 1980s and 1990s. It has developed into an influential branch of world literature and presents a diversified and thriving scene. The persecutions of colonial and racist rule, as well as their legacy of the post-apartheid era, forced many writers to flee abroad and become “expatriate writers” (Zhu and Yuan 140). In these heterogeneous cultures, most of them can neither abandon the culture of their home country nor fully integrate into the local culture. They are in a dilemma in terms of cultural acceptance, value selection, and writing position, which is like being trapped on an island, hence Shengqin Cai describes the ambivalence of these diasporic writers in literary creation and literary criticism as “island consciousness” (ii). The black writer Zakes Mda is one of them. While suffering from island consciousness, Mda tries to overcome the difficulties resulting from cultural conflicts and to rebuild his relationship with African culture through literary creation. By

deeply grounding his writing on the African continent and focusing on folklore, Mda opens up a discursive space to express his ideals and conscience as a diasporic intellectual. While defining “Africanness” which refers to the deep recognition of people of African ethnicity to the history and culture of the African continent and their deep attachment to their native land (Zhu and Li 164), Mda’s folklore writing conveys the voice of Africa to the world.

Folklore is a general term for the custom and living habits gradually formed within an ethnic or a social group in the long-term practice of social life and is passed down from generation to generation. As one of the important representations of the “collective unconscious,” folklore is a basic force deeply embedded in people’s behaviors, languages, and psychology. It is a cultural carrier of the most dominant characteristics. Zakes Mda’s thick description of folklore in novels is to express its implicit connotation by virtue of its explicit characteristics. In his novels, Mda concentrates on folklore aspects such as oral traditions, religious beliefs, traditional handicrafts and so on, and endows them with symbolic meaning, making them the carriers through which the underclass to fight against colonial hegemony, construct their self-subjectivity, and seek national identity. Additionally, Mda also combines the inheritance of folklore with the destiny of ordinary people and explores the inheritance and development of traditional folk culture in the modern world through the interaction of “folk” and “lore,” revealing the close relationship between people and folklore. Not only does Mda express his identification with national culture through folklore writing, but he also explores the charm and value of the global indigenous culture in the modern situation within the framework of global culture and expresses his concern for human existence in a broad vision.

2. Folklore Writing as Identification with National Culture

Mda was forced to flee to Lesotho when he was sixteen because of political persecution, and he later studied and worked in different countries, becoming a diasporic writer. In 1994, when apartheid was abandoned in South Africa, Mda returned to the country he had been dreaming of, expecting to contribute to the construction of the new South Africa, but he found that he had become “a permanent outsider” (Mda, *Memoirs* 152) because of political corruption. Gaining no opportunity to put his talent and working experience into full use, he went into self-imposed exile again, returning to the United States like a “migrant worker” (*Memoirs* 13), a transient in a foreign country. In an interview in support of the black writer Thando Mgqolozana, Mda confessed that he resists European literary festivals dominated by white literature, because in front of white audiences, “You feel like you’re a dancing monkey...You are some figure that is being scrutinised and studied. Some amazing animal” (Smith). Being ostracized in his home country and despised in a foreign country, diasporic writer Mda is like duckweed, rootless, able to transfer freely among different cultures, but still unable to take root in any culture. It is hard for him to define his cultural identity.

Cultural identity is always highlighted in communication, confrontation with and integration into different cultures. The colonial and racist rule of western culture entered the inherently benign body of

South African culture in a tough and brutal way, resulting in the decrease of sense of security and the disorder of spiritual consciousness of the South African people. The destruction and degradation of traditional culture by Dutch and British colonial rule and apartheid stimulated writers' cultural self-consciousness to justify a national culture. Rooted in African traditional culture but immersed in the influence of western culture for a long time, African diasporic writers' literary creations can neither fully domesticate the western writing tradition nor thoroughly inherit the African literary tradition. They become "sandwiched people." As if trapped on an island, they suffer from "island consciousness," a sense of isolation and alienation. This spiritual dilemma further stimulates intellectuals to review the profound connotations of national traditional culture and to re-establish the national cultural image. In this case, folklore writing by Mda constitutes one of the ways of expressing his identification with the national culture.

According to Freud, man has his first experience of fear when he is separated from his mother, and this fear stays with him all his life. Under the influence of external forces such as education and civilization, it remains in a dormant state. When there is a setback, he has a strong desire to return to his mother (354-370). The same is true of Mda. The psychological stimulation of external encounters and the internal accumulation of cultural memory refresh Mda's attachment to the national culture. He gradually develops a desire to return to his motherland. This yearning for return points to both geographical space and national culture. Thwarted in his plans to return to South Africa, Mda chooses to renew his connection with national culture and to rebuild his own spiritual world through literary creation, like other diasporic writers such as Alex La Guma, Peter Abrahams, Bessie Head, and Lewis Nkosi. Mda's highly autobiographical novel *The Heart of Redness* profoundly reflects his desire to return as a diasporic intellectual. The exile experience of the protagonist, Camagu, echoes Mda's own life experience. But unlike Mda, who has been suffering from the anxiety of identity, Camagu renews his connection with national culture through the practice of cultural revitalization, reconstructing his identity as a diasporic intellectual. In another novel *The Zulus of New York*, Mda once again embodies his desire to return through his portrayal of the protagonist Em-Pee. Unable to accept the barbarian dance performances deliberately choreographed by the colonial world, which aim to degrade the national image of Zulu people, Em-Pee tries to perform authentic Zulu dances to get rid of the stereotypical image of the black people created by western hegemony and thereby reconstructs his national identity and national image.

In vain, like Sisyphus, the voices of the Others are ignored and denied in the powerful hegemonic world. White people neither believe nor want to believe that the Zulus are civilized and rational people. Without an audience, Em-Pee is unable to continue his Zulu dance performances. He eventually realizes that "here in the land of the white man he is just a performing monkey" (Mda, *Zulus* 103). Having no choice, Em-Pee decides to go back to his homeland and devote himself to the development and construction of the country. Although Em-pee and Mda are in different periods of time, the efforts made by Em-Pee to rewrite the "single story" (Adichie) of hegemonic countries are intertextualized

with Mda's cultural practice of telling African stories and promoting the value of African traditional culture in the world. The life stories of Camagu and Em-Pee combine to reflect Mda's life course, outlining Mda's vision of reconstructing cultural identity and correcting the image of African culture. Stuart Hall argues that "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned in, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (112). The diasporic experiences of the past shape the special identity of diasporic writers. As a black South African writer who has accumulated rich cross-cultural experiences, Mda's standpoint as a "sandwiched" person offers him a double perspective with which to introspect upon his homeland as an insider and to observe South Africa from the sidelines as an outsider. The interweaving of emic and etic perspectives not only brings integrity and complexity to Mda's literary creation, but also inspires Mda to participate in the economic and cultural construction of his country in different ways. Despite describing himself as an outsider, Mda has been actively involving in the development of South Africa as an insider. While uncovering the value of South Africa's traditional folk culture through his writing, he actively explores the solutions to the problems that continue to exist in economic and cultural development. In *The Heart of Redness*, Mda takes the village Qholorha-by-the-sea as an example to explore how to combine the inheritance of traditional folk culture with rural development, and lead villagers to become rich in a modern approach. Some relevant government department has even modelled its policies on Mda's vision of rural development in this novel. It is clear that Mda does not indulge himself in the imaginative infatuation with the culture of his motherland and in feelings of self-pity in the imaginary world but pours his attachment to the culture of his motherland into writing and practice and turns it into a force to promote the development of his motherland. The close combination of folklore writing and social responsibilities endows Mda's national cultural identity with profound significance.

3. Folklore Writing as a Reflection on Modernity

The most prominent feature of Mda's novels is that he establishes a pattern of tension between a bonded pair of characters. For example, by comparing two characters with opposing cultural ideas, such as Dikosha and Radisene in *She Plays with the Darkness*, Ruth and Orpah in *Cion*, Bhonco and Zim, Camagu and Xoliswa Ximiya in *The Heart of Redness*, Tumi and Don in *Black Diamond*, readers inevitably find that for every character contrast, there is always one who sticks to traditional folklore and resists the influence of modernization, while the other resists traditional folklore and embraces modernization. The characters' choices of tradition or modernization influence the development of their relationship. This very metaphorical twin structure reveals Mda's reflection on the influence of modernity on tradition.

The great influence of modernity on human society makes it widely believed that modernity reflects disenchantment with traditional society, and therefore the present is separated from the past. As a presentation of tradition, folklore has become the opposite of modernity, and the relationship between the two is presented as backwardness on one hand and progress on the other, and even as ignorance and

civilization. People's misunderstanding of folklore has made it popular in social anthropology circle that "modernization will inevitably lead to the extinction of folk culture and traditional way of life...being back to the folk means to retrogress to the tradition and the loss of modernity" (Li 32). But as Max Weber argues, "the past always penetrates deeply into the present, even molding its core contours" (lii). Folklore carries the collective memory of the nation and contains people's respect for life, the unremitting pursuit of truth, kindness and beauty, and positive aesthetic spirit. Its aesthetic function plays an irreplaceable role in cultivating perceptual life style, reconstructing a sound personality, and resisting human alienation.

Nonetheless, Mda does not completely beautify African cultures, nor does he label them as attractive commodities to meet the purposes of popular culture. He objectively presents the huge impact of the pursuit of modernity on individuals through the said twin structure and explores the path to a harmonious coexistence of modernization and traditional culture. Typically, in *The Heart of Redness*, Mda uses this structure in its extreme form. Zim, the representative of Believers, renews the cleansing rituals and body decorations of ancestors to proclaim his own adherence to traditional beliefs. His cousin Bhonco, the representative of Unbelievers, ridicules the traditional folk culture represented by Zim as a backward and regressive way of life, and the traditional ideas Zim insists on contradict the modernization pursued by Unbelievers. The relationship between the cousins develops to the point of acrimony. Similarly, Ruth in *Cion* sticks to the traditional way of quilt-making and resists the influence of modernization, while her daughter Orpah enthusiastically embraces modernization and actively innovates the design of the traditional quilt. The relationship between them is strained by their separate adherence to tradition and modernization. In these two novels, the contradictory relationship between factions and generations that blood cannot separate, but that disagree with each other about modernization and the development of the community actually embodies the paradox of folklore and modernity. The problems between the protagonists are not only about how to relieve interpersonal contradictions but also about how to adjust attitudes toward traditional folklore and modernity.

In South Africa, a country that was once doubly colonized, the lingering impacts of colonial history and the infiltration of neocolonialism in the new era make the representation of modernity more complicated. In the Black empowerment movement, a few blacks who received a western education and "edification" of western culture become social elite. After gaining power and wealth, most of them become opinion leaders of the community, exerting on their own compatriots a racist ruling pattern, akin to that of the white racists, and excluding the underclass from local development projects like the white people did earlier. Bhonco's daughter Ximiya in *The Heart of Redness* is a typical representative. As a middle-school principal who enjoys villagers' admiration and respect, she regards traditional culture as a "shame" and a throwback to the past. She embraces western culture as the norm and strongly supports the business development plans of foreign companies in the local area, which would inevitably exploit the natural resources, and thereby destroying ancient cultural relics and excluding the underclass, who are the bearers of traditional culture. Tumi in *Black Diamond* and Radisene in *She*

Plays with the Darkness also represent those who try to get rid of the traditional way of life and who actively pursue the modern western way of life. Both become “black diamonds,” that is upper middle-class blacks enjoying the pleasure brought by modernization. Evidently, the promises of modernity are selectively offered to the few black elite, like Xoliswa Ximiya, Tumi and Radisene, who are pushed to become agents of neocolonialism, a pattern consistent with what David Atwell argues is a modernity in South Africa that is inextricably linked to colonialism: “for most black South Africans, therefore, modernity’s promises have been fraudulent and inherently contradictory” (4).

Driven by these few beneficiaries of modernity, neocolonialism gradually infiltrates the community. The traditional way of life is disrupted. Folklore gradually fades out of people’s daily lives, inevitably resulting in the cultural amnesia of the whole black community and leading to the homogenization of the community but not to diversified folk cultures. Ximiya, who worships America and everything about it, cannot get rid of the scarification that symbolize African tradition. Tumi is crazy about pursuing a modern lifestyle but cannot give up her attachment to traditional ethnic food. Radisene loses himself pursuing money in the big city and becomes estranged from his sister, who clings to the traditional way of life. These protagonists wander between modernity and tradition. They can neither completely integrate into western culture nor give up the cultural genes deep in their bone marrow. The pursuit of modernity which is characterized by western material wealth and way of thinking does not help people build their ideal home but throws them into confusion about their identity.

The problem facing people is how to bridge the differences between modernization and traditional culture and make them coexist harmoniously. Modernization is the inevitable development of the times and of human beings. Modernization and the desire for it are the most pervasive and striking characteristics of the age. Any attempt to exclude modernization will be ineffective. Like the grandmother in *She Plays with the Darkness* who has to accept that the exotic pigeons share food with native chickens, people must accept the coexistence of modernity and tradition. The two should coexist and characterize the era. The possible solution to this problem can be found in *Cion*. Orpah accidentally tears her mother’s treasured quilt that symbolizes tradition but unexpectedly uncovers its priceless inside. Inspired, Ruth attempts to accept Orpah’s innovative designs and comes up with her own way of quilt-making by using modern cutting tools and trying new patterns. She begins making money from quilt-making. This metaphorically expresses Mda's view of the relationship between tradition and modernity. What he emphasizes is that only by breaking the original state and adding new rational factors can tradition continue to exist. In *The Heart of Redness*, Mda further explores the coexistence of tradition and modernity from the perspective of Camagu, a member of the black elite who has been educated abroad and has a rich work experience. As a bystander returning from exile, Camagu tries to mediate the contradictions between the Believers and Unbelievers and updates their views on economic development and traditional culture. He attempts to combine traditional folk culture with modern tourism and leads the villagers on the road to prosperity. He revitalizes the local economy while dynamically protecting the local folk culture. Under Camagu’s leadership, people at the bottom, who

were once excluded from development plans, empower themselves and become the main drivers of local economic development. Traditional culture, such as the legend of the prophet, once considered shameful, helps Qholorha-by-the-sea to embark on the path of modern cultural tourism development. The inversion of the relationships among the protagonists in the framework of Mda's twin structure shows that traditional folk culture should not be historicized into a fixed form. Only through continuous change and development can it adapt to the needs of modern society and continue its vitality. Modernization is a combination of economic development and cultural development. Only when cultural and economic development are compatible can the process of modernization proceed smoothly. From the transmission of ideas to the implementation of practice, these protagonists deeply integrate the inheritance of traditional folk culture with modernization, thus indigenizing modernity and giving new life to traditional folklore.

4. Folklore Writing as an Expression of Universal Care

As a product of people's understanding of the world in which they live, folklore is the most representative endemic knowledge. When adapting to modernization, it also becomes the way to transmit local voices in the era of globalization. However, just as Wang Min'an argues, "endemic knowledge" is a relative concept. Compared with a knowledge system involving a broader scope, any knowledge system is endemic, in other words, there is neither absolute endemic knowledge nor absolute universal knowledge (Wang 42). What Wang wants to emphasize is that any culture possesses "universality" and "endemicity" and that the diversification of values is of great importance. These dual characteristics of culture offer writers a macro vision as well as multiple standpoints. Therefore, through the thick description of endemic knowledge, Mda actively seeks the commonality of the meaning of folklore symbols and express his concern for vulnerable groups and their cultures in a deep and broad vision while revealing the uniqueness of ethnic culture. Thus, his folklore writing is endowed with both nationalism and cosmopolitanism.

During the reign of white racists, the apartheid system confined black people to a remote and barren "Negroland," deprived black people of their rights and interests, and disparaged them as "savages, brutes, illiterates" (Fanon 88). The combination of external geographical space restriction and internal spiritual suppression trapped black people in a psychological plight of self-denial and self-degradation for centuries. Their national culture became something they could not bear to look at, an unspeakable pain. For this reason, Ndebele argues that "the racist system of South Africa has systematically denied the oppressed majority any meaningful opportunity for creative involvement in the entire arena of cultural practice" (118). And this spiritual deprivation robs people of their subjectivity and sense of cultural participation. When former South African President Thabo Mbeki proposed his "African Renaissance" in 1998, he presciently stated that "the beginning of our rebirth as a continent must be our own rediscovery of our soul" (299). Mda also said in an interview that "in the post colony our priority should be to reconstruct our cultural and historical heritage in our own image" (Ndlovu). The

rediscovery of the soul and the reconstruction of a cultural image complement each other. Both not only advocate the recognition of the value of African traditional culture, but also stress the importance of cultural participation in reconstructing individual subjectivity and a national cultural image.

The word “folklore” is a combination of “folk”, people, and “lore”, a body of traditions and knowledge on a subject held by a particular group. The composition of this word shows that “folk” and “lore” depend on each other. Through folklore, individuals get the foundation of life. And through the identification of individuals, folklore establishes both an interpretation system and authority to guide people's material life and production practice; it also offers support for the formation of morality and values. The two influence each other. Mda is a writer who understands the importance of people's initiative in the development of folklore and the significance of folklore in shaping people's spiritual world. He focuses his writing on people at the bottom of society and shows how they obtain self-redemption and re-establish their subjectivity through participation in cultural activities. In *Ways of Dying*, Toloki is abandoned by his family and ostracized by society. He cannot get spiritual nourishment from public folk activities, but rather by rebuilding his subjectivity through self-created folk custom. In a chaotic period when people have become numb to the frequent occurrences of death, Toloki tries to create a sad atmosphere for the funeral with his sad looks and innovative moans, turning the cemetery into a sad ritual space, which helps the community remember the deceased and strengthens the sense of group identification. People's recognition of his mourning restores his self-awareness. In the companion piece to *Ways of Dying*, *Cion*, Toloki further combines mourning rituals with dance based on oral narration, elevating mourning to performance. He transforms himself from a professional mourner into a true performer, a mediator of emotional expression. Dikoshia in *She Plays with the Darkness* is also ostracized by her relatives and ridiculed by the villagers. When she realizes that she cannot find emotional comfort in the community's collective folk activities, she goes to Bawa Cave to heal herself in self-created rituals.

Through folklore creation, Toloki and Dikoshia regain their identities as independent and autonomous individuals and become a part of the community again. These protagonists embody how ordinary people in desperate situations explore their creative ability and rebuild their subjectivity through folklore creation. David Atwell attributes the process of re-establishing self-subjectivity through artistic creation and ritual construction to the “power of non-instrumental art,” which helps “to awaken listeners to their precariousness to stir up affective capacities, and to remind them that despite the brutalisation that is their daily lot, they are still agents of culture” (194). In the face of adversity, these people at the bottom never bow to the opposing forces, but instead rebuild their subjectivity as independent and autonomous people through active cultural participation. They are not only their own cultural agents, but also the guardians and creators of traditional culture. Mda emphasizes in an interview with Nokuthula Mazibuko that his “African Renaissance” is not with a capital “R” led by governments and cities, but a “renaissance” driven by ordinary people on the margins of power (130). Mda's depoliticized folklore writing fully reveals the importance of people in the development of

culture, which further shows his concern for the underclass.

Mda does not confine his vision to South Africa but bases his novels in the spatial background of South Africa, Ghana, Lesotho, Zimbabwe, and America, for example. While paying attention to the fate of the underclass and their cultural psychology, Mda also expresses his pity for the decline of the indigenous culture of the disadvantaged ethnic group. In the novel *Cion*, Mda tactfully traces the tragic history of black slaves through oral narration with the clue of the traditional quilt and shows the plight of people of color in the United States, revealing the historical significance of African folklore in modern society. Otherization is the construction of others by colonists according to the so-called needs of civilization to justify their invasion of native peoples. This fundamentally makes the relationship between the self and the other antagonistic. In Mda's novels, the culture of the disadvantaged ethnic group is not an obstacle to the existence of the self but is unique and worthy of respect and learning. It must coexist with other dominant cultures on an equal basis. Mda's concern for vulnerable people and the culture of disadvantaged ethnic groups is a kind of universal care that surpasses national and regional restrictions. As a diasporic writer, Mda grounds his novels in the African continent and embodies "Africanness" through folklore writing. He confirms the right of speech of his nation and the sense of national identity through strong self-reference. His folklore writing is not only the result of the conscious pursuit of the original image, but also a breakthrough in modern and contemporary African literature. His description of folk culture promotes a return of literature to its ontology in creating concepts. This kind of literary atavism is not only driven by the subconscious perceptual activity, but it is also the result of the rational thinking of upper consciousness, which not only caters to writers' creative pursuit of novelty but also conforms to the desire for reviewing national culture. In the international context in which western culture occupies more and more cultural space, Mda shows the "formal signifying"¹ that competes with the white-dominated literary tradition in South Africa, at the same time highlighting the localized characteristics of literature. To a certain extent, his folklore writing dissolves the "anxiety of influence"² caused by the literary texts created by white writers and provides for later writers a writing experience worth learning.

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Notes

Note 1. This term first appeared in “The ‘Blackness of Blackness’: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey” by Henry Louis Gates. When discussing the intertextuality of formal symbols, Gates quotes Ralph Ellison: “In a refutation of Irving Howe’s critique of his work Ellison states: ‘I agree with Howe that protest is an element of all art, though it does not necessarily take the form of speaking for a political or social program. It might appear in a novel as a technical assault against the styles which have gone before.’ This form of critical parody, of repetition and inversion, is what I define to be ‘critical signification,’ or ‘formal signifying,’ and is my metaphor for literary history.” This term is quoted here to show that Mda’s folklore writing exhibits characteristics that differ from those of white literature, he constantly defines his literary creation by rewriting and revising the methods of expression of the works of his predecessors.

Note 2. This term first appeared in *The Anxiety of Influence* by Harold Bloom. Bloom believes that John Milton, Walt Whitman, and Ralph Waldo Emerson are the sources of influence in British and American poetic traditions, and that they have had a great influence on later poets. Later poets might have worried about how they could get rid of these shadows, and make their poems appear uninfluenced by these predecessors, but remain influential poets. “[T]he anxiety of influence” refers to writer’s psychological anxiety about the traditional influence of predecessors.