

Marius Crous
Marius Crous lectures in the
Department of Language and Literature
at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan
University in Port Elizabeth.
E-mail: Marius.Crous@nmmu.ac.za

“A battle between lust and loathing”: The interplay between masculinity and femininity in Zakes Mda’s *The Madonna of Excelsior*

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In this essay the emphasis is on the interplay between masculinity and femininity and in particular that of white masculinity versus black femininity, as well as the role played by black female sexuality in the formation of masculine identity in a rural setting in apartheid South Africa. The essay also looks at the representation of the female body and the role of the female body as site of contestation of socio-political assumptions about masculinity and femininity. The text under discussion is Zakes Mda’s *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002), which is based on real life events that occurred in the small Free State town of Excelsior in the 1970s.

Key words: masculinity, femininity, Zakes Mda, *The Madonna of Excelsior*

Introduction

In a discussion on masculinities and masculinism Brittan (2001: 52) observes that “masculinity does not exist in isolation from femininity” and that masculinity will always be “an expression of the current image that men have of themselves in relation to women.”¹ This is a development of the opinion held by Connell (2001: 31), namely that, in principle, “women and men [are] bearers of polarized character types.” The following reading of Mda’s novel focuses on the interplay between masculinity and femininity, and in particular the role of female sexuality in the formation of masculinity. Taitz (2002) points out that Mda portrays “sexuality to be a powerful force” and that it shows in particular how a black woman like Niki uses her body as “a weapon and the only tool she has with which to resist [being rendered powerless and victimised by men].”²

The narrative is presented in two parts: The first part focuses on life in Excelsior in 1971; whereas the second part focuses on life in the town, post-1994. As the opening sentence of the novel suggests, what happened in 1971 still has an effect on present-day life in this rural community – and immediately places women in a very central position in the novel: “All these things flow from the sins of our mothers” (1). This line becomes like a refrain throughout the text and in the final sentence, the narrator inverts the syntax: “From the sins of our mothers all these things flow” (268), which not only acts as a narrative device to conclude “all these things” as described, but acts

as some kind of frame for the text. Ironically, “sins” have always been associated with women and with female sexuality ever since the account given of Eve in the Bible.

Traits, characteristics and characters

The first description of the interaction between the two major female characters in the novel, Niki and her daughter Popi, and the group of men who had a major influence on their lives in the past – the second chapter is set in the present – is offered to the reader through the eyes of Niki as focaliser. The setting is a dance party at Adam de Vries’s house (6) and shows these “pillars of the local Afrikaner community” (8) at play. From the description of “all the revellers” (7) we learn that they have influential positions within the rural town of Excelsior: the head of police, prosperous farmers, the reverend of the local Dutch Reformed Church and the mayor.

Significant also is the identification of traits, characteristics and dress code of each of the respective male characters, since it acts as a major characterisation device: Sergeant Klein-Jan Lombard dances as if he participates “in a military drill”; Groot-Jan Lombard is described as his “doddering father”, whereas the Reverend Francois Bornman is significantly described as one-eyed. This was caused by his failed suicide attempt (84), but serves as an indicator of his moral blindness and hypocrisy. He is one of the men who was charged with miscegenation, but blamed it on the Devil. His viewpoint belongs to the Middle Ages when the devil was said to have appeared in the guise of a temptress. Meaningful, however, is the fact that the devil is disguised as “the black female” (87) who is set on tempting the male Afrikaner. A distinct link is made between sexuality and politics in this regard and the inability of the white men to control their lust is disguised as a ploy from black women (probably as tools for the Movement) to defeat the Afrikaner. Ever since Stephanus and Tjaart were “seized by the fiends of lust” (42) and Stephanus asked Niki to “[do] things with [him]” (50), Cornelia Cronje has shared this opinion of the reverend, namely that black women in particular are set on “lur[ing] [white men] into a deep sinful hole” (120). The impression is created that black women are associated with sin and evil, which places them in direct contrast to the Afrikaner – constituted as primarily male who has a “Great Fellowship” (30) with God. The Afrikaner, according to Reverend Bornman, is the chosen race with a greater divine purpose (88, 164), and the black women used their evil sexuality to test the faith of the Afrikaner as part of “God’s grand plan” (88). This shows how, during the heyday of apartheid, religion was used to cover up misdemeanours; even the lack of sexual control amongst white men.

From the description of Johannes Smit we see that he is a “very prosperous and very hirsute farmer with a beer belly” (7), which is somewhat of a stereotypical description, since he likes to visit the bar of the Excelsior Hotel and drowns his sorrows in beer (242). Niki also observes Adam de Vries, a “pint-size” man who is completely

overshadowed by his wife, Lizette.³ It is, however, of interest to note that Adam, who is physically smaller than the other men, is the one who has to defend them in court. He is the intellectual and learned man among the physically stronger and larger men, which explains why he was elected as mayor. His name, similar to that of the first man in the Biblical account, refers back to his historical roots in the town with his grandfather being one of the “founders of [that] town” (8).

Reference is made to “the late and lamented butcher, Stephanus Cronje” (8) who, as was suggested above, played an enormously important role in the lives of Niki (as her seducer) and Popi (as her father). The reader is also introduced to another male character who is representative of the younger white generation and who influences both Niki and Popi’s lives throughout the text, namely Stephanus’s son and heir, Tjaart Cronje. Up till that moment, Niki has not seen Tjaart “since he was seven” (8).

The close bond between Niki and Tjaart was established when she worked as a nanny for his mother, and she used to carry him “in a shawl on her back” (9). During their pretend game of horsey-horsey it soon becomes evident that Tjaart was sexually aroused by his closeness to Niki’s body and often he “induced an erection and worked himself up with unseemly rhythmic movements” (9).⁴ The closeness of the body of the black woman initiates Tjaart into sexual awareness. As a result, she becomes his first primary object of desire, something that is underpinned by Mmampe’s remark: “White men have always loved us. They say we are more beautiful than their own wives. We are more devastating in the blankets” (62). Ironically enough, this erotic fascination is also shared by Tjaart’s father who, when Johannes Smit makes lecherous remarks to Niki, “bark[s] at Niki to get into the bakkie” (49) and rescues her from Smit’s attentions. His action is deliberate because he wants to use her for sexual gratification, mostly out of a sense of jealousy and because the sight of her naked body has continued to haunt him since the incident in the butchery.

The relationship between Tjaart and Niki

This incident in the butchery is a central event in the novel and acts as a catalyst for the erotic fascination with the forbidden body of the black Other. It is in the butchery, the property of Stephanus Cronje, that he subconsciously claims Niki’s body as another one of his possessions. Niki is accused of “hiding something” (40) under her clothes and forced to “strip” by Cornelia Cronje. Not only does Cornelia force her to remove her brightly coloured outerwear (“pink overall”, “her mauve dress”) but also her intimate underwear (“white petticoat”, “fawn bra” and her “knickers”). This stripping process anticipates the lifelong struggle that follows hereafter for both Niki and Popi, right up until the end of the novel when both Niki and Popi find calmness of mind (268). The white woman as employer is powerful enough to humiliate Niki, and, due to a lack of proper labour legislation at the time, to threaten her with “instant

dismissal” (41). In the violent society where policemen, as representative of the law and justice, tortured people from the Movement “[for] a confession” (137), the white woman also has the power to do so when she threatens Niki with “lock[ing] her up in the cold room with all the carcasses” (41). In the South Africa of the 1970s white women were just as instrumental in sustaining the machinery of apartheid as were men, as is evident from this incident. The humiliation of Niki is, however, later reciprocated when she takes Stephanus as her lover and makes love to him “[o]n Madam Cornelia’s own metal antique bed” and under her own “downy duvet” (53), thus penetrating the most intimate space belonging to her white oppressor and the person who humiliated her.

A major consequence of this incident in the butchery is the effect that it has on the sexuality of the two white men. Their erotic gaze is compared to Niki being “[raped] with their eyes” (42) and sparks off a chain of events that would change the course of events in *Excelsior*, not only politically but also morally. It leads to prominent figures in the community being accused of contravening the Immorality Act, to Stephanus’s suicide (73) and Reverend Bornman’s attempted suicide (84) and even causes John Vorster to “[instruct] Percy Yutar to withdraw the case” (222) because it would affect the country as a whole. This shows how the different components of apartheid society, namely the church, the judiciary and the national government, dovetailed into one another. Niki, according to the narrator, was never even aware that “a whole government was under threat because of her body parts” (103). This remark looms large in its irony: the mighty masculinist apartheid regime, sustained by the white minority, was under threat because its supporters desired the female body of the black majority and not even draconian laws such as the Immorality Act could prevent that.

The bond cemented between Niki and Tjaart is shown to continue throughout the novel, and her mother constantly reminds Popi that it is “not a good thing to fight Tjaart” (184). In times of hardship Niki often thinks about the young, supportive Tjaart, “[a] generous giver of cakes” (112), who shared the exquisite food of the white household with her. Her reaction when she hears that Tjaart “is being sent away to fight real wars in Suidwes and in Soweto” (133) is meaningful, since it comments directly on this bond between the two of them: “I care about all my children, Viliki [...] not only those of my womb” (133). Popi feels that Tjaart has been “h[olding] Niki’s compassion to ransom for so many years” (133). This feeling of closeness between Niki and Tjaart suggests that Niki sees herself as Tjaart’s surrogate mother. Ironically, during apartheid there was often a close bond between the black nanny and the white child she had to take care of, but once he was usurped into the machinery of state, he forgot about that close interaction or as Popi explains it: “[I]t is possible that this Tjaart Cronje [Niki] [seems] to care so much about does not even know that [she] [exists]” (133). The obvious explanation for Niki’s affection, however, is that she

knows that Stephanus is Popi's father – something Tjaart also acknowledges on his sick bed (262) – and that Tjaart is Popi's half brother.

Stephanus and Johannes – the bearers of phallic power

In contrast to Tjaart for whom she has always shown her affection, Stephanus is used as a tool with which to have her revenge on Cornelia Cronje. Considering the context of a racially divided society such as South Africa, it is fascinating that she as a black woman could have such a hold over a white man like Stephanus Cronje or even over Johannes Smit before him. From the outset she believes that to Johannes Smit she is nothing more than “a masturbation gadget” (19). Initially Niki was unwilling to participate in Smit's “harrowing games” (15) in exchange for money, but her friends “assured her” of his innocence and his impotence (he is called “Limp Stick” and “Sleeping Horn” (18)). Smit realises the power of money and abuses his position as affluent white male to get sexual favours from the young black girls. The power of the white male landowner is depicted as being of such unfathomable proportions that he is able to abuse these young girls as a form of amusement, using them as mere sexual objects to gratify his desire.

The symbol of his authority, “a whip in the hand” (14), suggests that he will use violence to attain his goals. The whip is also a symbol of the phallus, the “ineluctable bond between male sexuality and power” (Segal 2001: 203), but in the case of Johannes Smit it is a substitute phallus, because we learn from the text that he suffers from premature ejaculation; something that the young girls are aware of. They make mocking remarks about his “manhood [that] always fails him” (17). Despite this, during one of these so-called games, he manages to “[enter] her” and “[rupture]” and “[haemorrhage] her maidenhood” (19). This suggests that it is no innocent sexual game on the side of a sexually inept man, but a clear case of rape. This act of violence is an attempt to establish his dominance, particularly over Niki, the unwilling object of his sexual fantasies. His impression of the deed is that it was an initiation for her into womanhood or sexual maturity. Illustrative of his lackadaisical attitude is the remarks he makes to Niki: “You seem to forget that you are my sleeping partner,” said Johannes Smit with a dirty smirk on his face. “Me and you, we go a long way back. To our days in the sunflower fields. Surely you cannot forget that you ate my money. I gave you enough chance to get rid of your wildness. Tonight is the night” (48). The reference to the “[eating of his] money” suggests that she was nothing more than a prostitute to him, whom he paid for her sexual services. In the rural context of the text this also suggests that the only way for her to get money to buy food to eat, is to give in to his sexual molestation. Furthermore, the impression is created that she had to make herself available to him whenever he felt like having sex with her. In front of Stephanus Cronje, probably to boast about his sexual prowess, he calls Niki his “padkos –

[his] provision for the road” (49), which confirms the point that to him she is a mere sex object who has to be at his disposal at all times. The use of the food metaphor suggests that the sexual encounters are something of a snack for the road. It provides him with quick sustenance. Niki is some form of nourishment and entertainment to make the journey home shorter and more enjoyable. During their final encounter in the novel, Johannes is the emissary sent by Tjaart to fetch Niki and Popi to his house (260), because Tjaart wants to “make peace with [Popi]” on his deathbed. Aware of this, Johannes uses the opportunity to “declare a truce” (261) and in a nonchalant manner asks for Niki’s forgiveness (262). The impression is created that she should forget about their sexual encounters of the past and that even the rape incident could be seen as some minor event from the past (“Bygones should be allowed to be bygones” (261)), whereas Niki points out that he “stole [her] girlhood” (262).

As one of the white farmers who had fun “way[laying] black girls in the field” (15), it comes as no surprise that Smit later participates in the “partner-swapping orgies” (53) between the white men and the black girls of Excelsior. Whereas she wanted to kill him earlier because he was a rapist, to him she was not only a desired and forbidden object, but also a trophy with which to boast before his friends (“Even if you scored a bull’s eye, I had Niki first. Before any other man” (62)).

Assertion of masculinity: Niki and Pule

The sexual encounters between Niki and the white men have a direct impact on her marriage with Pule. From the relation between Niki and Pule the reader gains some insight into the image of black masculinity at this time as depicted in the text. On the day of the wedding the relatives and friends of the couple indirectly comment, in a series of satirical songs, on the marital prospects of the couple. Ironically, phrases such as “Pule was going to die of hunger” (21) and Niki, “a woman of soaring beauty and dimpled smiles” (21) prove to be prophetic in the novel, since it comments indirectly on the hardships that Pule is to suffer because of his beautiful wife and the “secret desires” (22) that the white men have for her.⁵ Pule is portrayed as a hard-working miner (28) and provides for his family so that Niki can lead a comfortable life. The narrator points out that such a lifestyle was only possible if you were married “to a man who burrowed in the earth for the white man’s gold” (28). The process is twofold: the white man benefits abundantly from the hard labour of the unskilled black man, and in the process the black man benefits financially, to a lesser extent, but has to leave his wife “unguarded” against sexual predation, imagined or real.

The highlight of Niki and Pule’s apparent marital bliss is the birth of a son and heir, Viliki. The trouble sets in when Pule becomes suspicious of Niki and begins to “[assign] a motive for her actions” (34). When she does not fulfil her marital duties of cooking “meat and rice for [Sunday] lunch” (33) he immediately jumps to the conclu-

sion that she saves the meat to feed her lovers. Meat serves as a metaphor of affluence and abundance to be enjoyed on a special occasion such as Sunday lunch, but indirectly the reference to meat also comments in a sexually derogatory manner on Niki: she is relegated to a piece of meat to be devoured by her lovers, just as Johannes wanted to eat her as *padkos*. The only way that Pule can deal with his suspicion is to accuse her of “sleep[ing] with [her] white masters” (34) and violently “push[ing] her away and slap[ping] her”.

From Pule’s viewpoint he realises that there is a racial imbalance at stake here, because he is no match for a rich, white man. He can only react in a violent manner, and as Connell (2001: 44) remarks, such conduct is a way of “claiming or asserting [one’s] masculinity.” What makes the violent attack even more startling is the fact that Pule reminds her of her rapist, Johannes Smit, to such an extent that she even imagined Smit’s “overwhelming smell” (35) in their home. Similar attacks repeat this cycle of domestic violence and even though Pule shows some remorse and “promise[s] that he would stop blaming [Niki] for things she knew nothing about” (36), it tends to continue. A major result of their domestic fights is that Viliki is not brought up to grasp the harmful effects of marital violence and to him it is “[a] spectacle” with which to impress and entertain his white friend, Tjaart.⁶

It is clear that Pule bases his sense of human worth on the amount of money that he makes as a mineworker (39). He believes that his regularly sending Niki money gives him the right to abuse her emotionally (by staying away for long periods of time) and physically (by attacking her and throwing things around). He does, however, point out to her that even though he sends her the money, she is “gallivant[ing] around” with money that “was dripping with his sweat” (60). From the perspective of the community his conduct is beyond reproach, especially since he is such an excellent provider for his family (“unlike many other men, Pule supported his family”, 39). The only way in which the neighbours can respond to the “crass displays of wealth” (40) that accumulate in Pule’s household is to envy them for that and to suggest that Niki should quit her job. She no longer needs to work in the butchery because she is sufficiently well off merely to stay at home and “eat Pule’s money” (40), a similar expression that is used by Smit in a different context, suggesting a sense of greed associated with financial reward. It suggests how males convert economic power into gender power and exercise their contemptuous social control over their wives and households.

The presence of “a coloured baby” (60)⁷ in his house and his wife’s unwillingness to divulge the identity of the father results in Pule withdrawing into “a world of silence” (61) and drinking excessively. He does not know how to respond emotionally to the presence of the child and decides to drink his sorrows away. Ironically, this is the same way in which white men such as Tjaart and Johannes deal with their anger (242). Despite his disgust with the baby, it is striking that he does not resort to

violent action, as is usually the case when he is involved in an argument with Niki. He is blaming himself for neglecting Niki and leaving her to fend for herself, although the narrator points out that other women could have used that excuse (61). Despite his withdrawal from his family, he still continues to send them “money and beautiful clothes” (62), as an attempt to show that he has forgiven Niki. But since he feels an accessory to her infidelity, he appeases his conscience by continuing to share his wealth with his family. His forgiveness is centred on his newly found faith because he reforms himself and becomes “a born-again Christian” (64), finding comfort in the “arms of salvation” (64). Religion gives him a sense of purpose in life, just as working in the mine was a means to a goal, namely to provide a better life for his wife and child. Since Niki has subsequently given birth to a Coloured child, Pule realises that he will be unable to do anything to the white man who impregnated his wife, and he has to find peace somewhere for his angry and troubled mind. Niki also realises that Pule can never confront Stephanus Cronje, because Stephanus “was well known for drawing his gun at the slightest provocation” (61). This portrayal supports the idea put forward by Cock (2001: 43) that guns are “a key feature of hegemonic masculinity” and are “central to the way many men act out their masculinity.”

In Stephanus’s case it serves both as weapon with which to protect him and his family, and a symbol of his power and authority over black people: “If [a] customer insisted that he wanted a refund, Stephanus Cronje would whip out his gun and ask the customer to disappear from his sight” (61).

Pule’s re-entrance into the life of his family is as a result of his illness (“the mines had now eaten his lungs” (134)), and he returns to his family to die there in peace. In this regard the use of the metaphor associated with eating suggests a different type of avarice: In his case the white bosses’ avarice for gold has eaten away his body. His illness represents the exploitation of cheap black labour in the mines and shows how generations of black South African men were robbed of their humanity by doing demeaning work in the gold mines, only to enrich a few white capitalists (Moodie 2001: 299). The digging for gold provides his family with a better way of living, but in the end it is gold that left him “[drained] of all flesh and blood” (135). Whereas Popi welcomes the return of “our father” (134) as she calls him, thus emphasizing the irony associated with her paternity, Viliki is not prepared to accept him back. His father deserted him seventeen years ago (134) and he is still angry that his father unfairly associated him, the “child of his [father’s] blood”, with his mother and her “sins” (134). As the man in the patriarchal household, it was Viliki’s duty to protect his father’s home in his absence, but he failed to do so, and this explains why he is also “hit by stones that should have been aimed only at his mother” (134). He thus was not only saddled unfairly with an impossible burden (that of protecting his mother’s sexuality), but made to assume an adult role while still a child – both aspects of young black males’ lives (vis-à-vis white as well as older black males) during the apartheid era.

Pule represents the older black male who worked in the gold mines under the apartheid regime, but who does not share in the post-1994 liberation of the country. He, like many of his generation, was diagnosed with “phthisis” (134) and died before the advent of the new democracy. Pule represents the older African male who was often perceived “to be complicit with apartheid” (Xaba 2001: 109), whereas the adult Viliki, with his participation in the Movement exemplifies an “anti-authority” inclination (Xaba 2001: 109) and challenges the hegemonic white state. In contrast, someone such as Sekatle, the “rich businessman” with his “new Mercedes Benz” (186) who “had worked for ‘the system’ before liberation” (180, also 135, 242) continues to thrive in the new South Africa. He joins the Movement and later becomes the new mayor of Excelsior (246) and “employ[s] his sister as a clerk at the registry” (249), a clear case of nepotism. The extent to which he would go to benefit financially and gain political power is clearly illustrated by his abuse of the Baipehi and their need for land (186). Whereas the destitute see him as “a man who stood with the people”, and who serves as an example of what could be termed “heroic masculinity” (Connell 2001:25), it is evident that he is merely power hungry and abuses the new system for his own gain – as he did in the past with the apartheid state. Interestingly, his sister Maria, who was one of the women implicated with the Excelsior 19, is reinstated in a prime position of power by these dealings of her brother, because he “transformed [her] RDP house into a gleaming palace” (187) and manages to create a position for her at the council, despite her being “barely literate” (249). Disillusion with post-apartheid society and with the men who rule over that society is clearly implied when Viliki expresses concern that the “Mandela legacy of tolerance [would not] last” (242) and that people like Sekatle “were turning into black Tjaart Cronjes” (242), suggesting that they profess to be sympathetic to the cause of their own people’s struggle, but in reality are racist, power hungry and self-centred.

Post-apartheid (white) masculinity

Viliki, Niki and Tjaart Cronje form an interesting triangular relationship throughout the novel, whereas the two young men form a definite binary opposition. This is an interesting narrative device, which distinctly supports the following remark by Morrell (2001: 25):

Since all masculinities influence one another and are never discrete and bounded entities, elements of white masculinity can still be seen in many other masculinities, primarily in the emphasis on achievement and appearance, which are features of a commoditised society. Yet masculinities that formerly were oppositional [...] are now jostling for ascendancy.

During the apartheid years Tjaart is portrayed as a military right-winger who has to fight “terrorists who were infiltrating the Free State farms from Lesotho” (133), a war incited by the propaganda machine of the Nationalist government in order to destabilise its neighbouring countries. Viliki joins “the mysterious underground” (128) simply known as the Movement and as a result of his activities for them, has to suffer torture at the hand of the Special Branch (137), after Sekatle betrayed him. Viliki becomes one of the so-called “terrorists” who infiltrated the country and is indirectly one of the enemies against whom Tjaart comes into combat. After the liberation of the country, Viliki is rewarded for his services to the Movement by being elected as a city councillor, following the 1994 elections (165). The council subsequently elects him as “the first black mayor of Excelsior” (171). Ironically, Tjaart is also elected to the same council, as representative of the right-wing Freedom Front, yet retains his job in the family business.

From the portrayal of Tjaart in the post-apartheid years we learn that he is opposed to affirmative action (172), that he is disillusioned with the apartheid government (172), and that he blames some of his fellow Afrikaners like Lizette de Vries for “[selling] the country down the drain” (173), fights for the right to speak Afrikaans during council meetings (178) and criticises the new council for being unable “to govern the town in a civilised manner” (187) and forcing the “white citizens of Excelsior [to] subsidise [black] people” (193). Tjaart still exemplifies the stereotypes traditionally associated with the Afrikaner and he also shows a reluctance to accept the changes associated with the new dispensation. He tries to enforce his cultural identity onto others and is protective of his linguistic identity as an Afrikaans speaking person. Furthermore, he still believes in the God-given ideal of the Afrikaner as the chosen race and supports the establishment of an Afrikaner homeland and “plan[s] for the return of the Afrikaner to his rightful place” (233) by “regain[ing] his power” (243). He is also angered by the loss of political power of the Afrikaner and affirmative action is to him a direct indication of this loss of power. When he realises that his only supporter in the struggle, Johannes Smit, has also deserted the ranks, he “altogether [loses] control” (255) and “foam[s] at the mouth” (255). His collapse symbolises the demise of the old apartheid order and the room becomes symbolic of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Firstly there is the “group of elders in black suits” (256) who gathers around the bed and comments, by means of Gys Uys, on the past atrocities against “[our] children”, but also about “[their] wealth and [their influence]”, as well as the consequences of affirmative action for the younger generation. Subsequently Popi and Niki pay him a visit and he acknowledges Popi as his half sister (262) and reconciles with her. Although Popi has finally accepted her identity as “a coloured person” (259), Tjaart’s reference to her being “a lady” and “[a] beautiful lady” (263) reinforces her acceptance of her identity and helps her to accept it completely.

Post-apartheid (black) masculinity

In contrast to him we have Viliki who becomes the first black mayor of Excelsior (171), claims himself an RDP house (176), while insisting that as a mayor he “deserved a second house in order to supplement his meagre income from the council (177). He refuses to forgive Sekatle for “doing all those filthy things to our people” (181) and for neglecting his duties as mayor because he was “bathing in the sweat of the Seller of Songs” (197). Eventually Viliki is expelled from the Movement for bringing it “into disrepute” (212). Initially Viliki creates the impression that he represents the young black success story of the new dispensation, but it soon becomes apparent that he is merely power hungry and wishes to enrich himself. His attitude is shared by the members of the Movement who also serve on the council when they refer to the fact that they had sacrificed enough during the struggle and now it was their turn to “eat the fruits of [their] labour” (177). The eating metaphor recurs, suggesting avarice and enjoyment of that which is readily available, without recourse to the consequences. The narrator presents a less sympathetic picture of Viliki and he plays a much more minor role in the novel than Tjaart.⁸ It is only during his brief visits to Adam de Vries’s office (222) that he engages in discussion on political issues. In this instance, the narrator’s sympathy lies undoubtedly with the disillusioned Afrikaner presented by Tjaart and that explains why we gain more extensive insights into the nature of the Afrikaner male, as presented through the eyes of Mda.⁹ Mda represents both black and white masculinity in the novel and shows that both are flawed and can be implicated in one another’s flaws. He suggests that despite past harm, there is the possibility for the “next generation” to progress beyond the flaws of the past and reconcile as members of a new society.

Another aspect of masculinity that is explored by means of Viliki is men’s attitude towards masturbation and menstruation. This is of interest from a sexual point of view. The radical change brought about in his life from being a powerful councillor living a reasonably comfortable life to that of a drifting musician, roaming the rural areas, is caused by the Seller of Songs, one of the children borne out of the miscegenation case of 1971. Before her arrival on that particular Sunday, Viliki was in bed, “enjoy[ing] his fingers” (196).¹⁰ His self-centred, solitary masturbatory activities allow him to make love to “any full-bodied figure he had fancied in the street” (196) and in his imagination he is able to reach out to the “half-naked sirens” (196) in the magazines. Another interesting aspect about his sexuality that is presented in the text is the ease with which he accepts the Seller of Songs’s menstruation (197). Whereas she, from a traditional perspective, calls it “her bad time of the month”, he rebukes her for calling menstrual blood “her filth”. Illustrative of his modern attitude towards menstrual blood is his decision to “[touch] it and let it slide between his fingers” (197), whereas she herself feels a sense of disgust. It is probably convenient for him as a man to go on about the reproductive, albeit divine nature of menstrual blood, since as a

man he does not have to suffer the monthly inconvenience of having a period.

By contrasting Viliki and Tjaart as representatives of masculinity in the new South Africa we gain some interesting insights into the post-apartheid South African male as portrayed by Mda. In the case of Tjaart there is loyalty to his language group and a disdain for others. He clings to what Popi describes as “the Anglo-Boer War mentality of the Afrikaner” (189) and wants a separate homeland for his people (172). According to the narrator there is an “immers[ion] in anger” (213) on his side because he feels betrayed by his leaders. Only at home can he be in power (214) because after the demise of apartheid, he feels, he has joined the ranks of the powerless. Tjaart, as a young white male is forced by the apartheid regime to join the army as conscript, or as one of the elders in the novel, Gys Uys observes: “we used these children to fight our wars [and] then we discarded them” (257). Connell (2001: 17) describes South Africa in the 1970s – the time in which the first part of the novel is set – as a “highly militarised state with a panoply of repressive instruments to deal with those who did not agree with the direction of government policy” (Connell, 2001:17). The type of masculinity associated with military conscription is, according to Thompson (2001: 100), one that emphasizes “the machoistic (sic!) qualities of assertiveness, bravery and enduring pain.” The aim of military conscription was given as fighting for “the survival of Western civilization and Christianity in southern Africa” (Du Pisani 2001: 166).

Of nannies and the sexual development of white boys

In *The Madonna of Excelsior* the portrayal of the different male characters and their sexuality is closely linked to their experience with the bodies of the black women in their immediate environment. Black women not only play a vital role in the sexual development of the young white man (as represented by Tjaart) but rather play a meaningful role in the lives of adult white males as objects of desire forbidden by political sanction. The ideological message posited by the text is that white men during the apartheid era (as in the case of Johannes Smit) abuse young black women for their own sexual gratification. The abuse is regarded as a rite of passage among white men in the rural areas to be sexually initiated by black women, an attitude similar to that held by the slave owners in the past.¹¹ From a socio-economic perspective the women realise that “[they] can make a lot of money from [these] foolish white [men]” (18) and it makes them more powerful to abuse the sexually obsessed men for their own financial gain.

As a continuation of the association of black women with the position of nannies in white households, an interesting case in point is the character of Groot-Jan Lombard, an old man, who participates in orgies held in the barn. Illustrative of this scenario is the following description: “[The woman with the baby] sat on Groot-Jan

Lombard's lap and ceremoniously took off his shirt. Then she yanked at the hair in his armpits. With each jerk he bleated like a goat. The pleasurable pain *was all he would ever get from these sprees*. It was before the wonder of Viagra was invented" (54, added emphasis). Even though he is "[t]ottering with a walking stick" (74) and is described as "a true hero of the Afrikaner people" (148), he also participates in the orgies and regresses to the state of a young child that needs the ministrations of a black nanny. It is a purposefully inserted detail by the author that his "date" for the evening is a mother with a young baby. Or is it rather a case of the white man who never outgrows his forbidden desire for the body of the black, female Other whom he first encountered in the role of his nanny?

The power of female sexuality

Another point with regard to masculinities issues in this rural context is the realisation by black women – as exemplified by Niki – that one of the ways of undermining the power of the white madam is to seduce her husband sexually. The black woman knows that her forbidden body bodes "[t]hreatening pleasures of the future" (42) and she capitalise on this in her favour. In pre-1994 South African society the white man epitomised political and economic power and control, but it is ironic that these men are powerless when confronted by black female sexuality, or as the Reverend Bornman puts it more poignantly, "[t]he devil made the Afrikaner to covertly covet the black woman while publicly detesting her" (87). Submission to black women, however, has to happen in secrecy: in uninhabited places such as "a big barn built of corrugated-iron sheets" (52), in the "sunflower fields" (48), "[in] the grass" (50), in "a light delivery van" (90) or in "a car [parked] under the trees" (92). Despite the proclivity for sexual intercourse with black women, it has to occur on the margins of society because it has to remain a secret. The racist stereotype of the supposedly uncontrolled, perceived "animal-like" sex drive of black people is undermined by the depiction of the uncontrollable sexuality of the white men who have sex in the grass, and among the haystacks in the barn. Fanon (1967: 49) observes that "white men do not marry black women" and blames black women for wanting to escape their sense of inferiority by marrying a white man. One could, for the purpose of this novel, amend it as follows: "White men only want black women for sex and not to marry them: one's nanny remains one's servant and will never be one's wife."

In contrast to these lascivious, exploitative and sexist male characters in the novel, the author also introduces the character of Father Frans Claerhout, who incidentally provided the paintings reproduced on the cover of Zakes Mda's novel. The titles of the respective chapters also allude to paintings or features in Claerhout's work (e.g. *Women, donkeys and sunflowers*, *All these madonnas*, *The wedding*, *The pan*, *She is holding the sun*, to mention but a few). The title of the Mda's novel is explained in the chapter

entitled “All these madonnas” (11), where Niki is brought to “[the] old white man” (12) in order to pose for his painting of the Madonna. This is also a pivotal scene in the novel as such, because the narrator points out that “[i]t was not the first time a white man had seen her naked” (12). The posing for the painting sets in motion the narrator’s recollection of the events that occurred in Excelsior when the white men in the town exploited the young women as sexual objects. Father Claerhout’s interest in the bodies of the young women is merely for the sake of his art works and even his depiction of a nun “with bare breasts and black nipples” (80) is not as encoded with voyeurism as would be the case with the other white males in the town of Excelsior.¹²

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Notes

1. “Masculinism” is defined as “the ideology that justifies and naturalizes male domination. As such, it is the ideology of patriarchy. Masculinism takes it for granted that there is a fundamental difference between men and women, it assumes that heterosexuality is normal, it accepts without question the sexual division of labour, and it sanctions the political and dominant role of men in public and private spheres” (Brittan 2001: 53). Haywood and Mac an Ghaill (2003: 154) suggest that this concept “compare[s] the continuity of the underlying processes of manhood to the historical variability expressed in ‘male styles’.”
2. From a literary perspective this novel is even more significant since the narrator and focaliser is black, but comments on white masculinity. This is indeed an interesting development on the issue of the authenticity of such depictions. Illustrative of this are comments such as the following made by Gordimer: “There are some aspects of a black man’s life that have been put impossibly beyond the white man’s potential experience, and the same applies to the black man and some aspects of a white man’s experience”; and: “As a black man, the one thing he cannot experience is whiteness” (Wagner 1994: 118–9). Compare also the comment made by Achebe in this regard: “I am not saying that the picture of Nigeria and Nigerians painted by a conscientious European must be invalid. I think it would be terribly valid [...] [But] no man can understand another whose language he does not speak” (cited in Wagner 1994: 120). One could ask the question: Is Mda’s somewhat one-sided portrayal of white men as racist and sexist in this novel not politically incorrect? Compare also Weber’s remark (2004) on Vikili’s role as “mouthpiece on politically charged subjects” in the novel.
3. Adam de Vries plays a major role in the post-1994 life in Excelsior, as is evident from his friendship with Viliki. He is derided by the right-wingers for “deceiving the Afrikaner” (243). Through his involvement in the Excelsior Development Trust he tries to involve both black and white in the financial upliftment of the town. His wife, Lizette, becomes the first white female mayor (206) of Excelsior and the decision of both Pule and Vikili to support her is given as one of the reasons why they were kicked out of the Movement (212). This suggests that the Movement is not set on reconciliation but that it is more a question of wanting complete political power. This is underpinned by the appointment of Sekatle as mayor. Goodman (2004: 65) describes Sekatle as “someone who has appropriated the discourse of the Movement for his own ends and is using it to increase his constituency and consolidate his political power.”
4. Compare in this regard the following remark by McClintock (1995: 85): “The sexual history of boys often demonstrates that their initiation into the sexual life was first at the instance of women older than themselves, often servants. Freud agrees: ‘It is a well known fact that unscrupulous nurses put crying children to sleep by stroking their genitals.’ Tjaart’s reference to the “forbidden quarry that lurked beneath [the] nannies’ pink overalls” (42) supports this assumption. Compare also the

remark that “[y]oung Afrikaner boys were eager to taste what their fathers were eating on the sly” (94).

5. It is interesting to note the covert warning contained in the following remark by the narrator: “Old Pule who had been married before. And was deserted. Or did he desert?” (28).
6. The frying pan, used by Pule’s first wife, a string of girlfriends and now by Pule (37) acts as a metaphor for their marriage. The frying pan “yoke[s] her to all the previous women in [Pule’s] life” which suggests that she is but one of a string of women abused by him who had to cook for him using that particular cooking utensil; a reminder of their imprisonment in the kitchen. Only when she leaves the pan behind will she be freed from Pule and his past. In the final chapter of the novel, she acknowledges that the pan “brought Pule very much alive in the shack” (267).
7. The identity crisis experienced by Popi as a coloured woman in a black community calls to mind the suffering experienced by the author Bessie Head, as well as some of her main characters in her works. As a coloured woman she went into exile to Botswana to escape apartheid racism and experienced xenophobia first-hand in Botswana.
8. Mda is rather critical of the new black elite in post-apartheid South Africa and his portrayal, in particular of Sekatla, is similar to what Ngugi (1993: 91) writes about post-colonial politics and culture in Kenya: “The result of [the] economic, political and cultural alienation of the majority from their post-colonial rulers has been a perfect replica of colonial practices.” According to Mda in *The Madonna of Excelsior*, the same culture of silencing one’s opponents and acting in a greedy manner to enrich oneself that were associated with pre-1994 South Africa persists in post-apartheid South Africa society. Lebogang Mashile’s poem, “Kedi’s song” (2005: 8) comments on the refusal of the people of Excelsior to speak about the events about thirty years ago. Compare the lines: “These women sweep the whispers beneath their children’s skins/ Suckled on hushed voices / Shaded by history’s sins / Even as her voice is captive, Her skin will always sing [.]”
9. There is a reconciliatory and accommodating attitude displayed towards the Afrikaner – and the disdain for English-speaking South Africans (“The English, common wisdom stated, were hypocrites” (223)) in the novel. This is an interesting topic that warrants further exploration but does not fall within the scope of this project. Taitz (2002) quotes Zakes Mda who mentions that as a writer he is “naturally a social critic” and that his critique is “tempered with sensitivity to the fraught nature of race relations in post-apartheid South Africa”, which explains his critical stance on people who “pretend that they are socialists” (241) and “tramp[le] on the human rights of their own people” (241). Compare also Viliki’s “gripe about the lack of cleanliness” (253) and the lack of care in post-apartheid South Africa. In an interview with Kachuba (s.d.) Mda discusses this issue and concludes: “I am a writer and my own values will come through. I cannot divorce myself from this work. I cannot be objective. I do not try to be objective [...] I reflect their [the other side] perspective as well, to understand their fears, some of which are true fears. I tried to do that here when I depicted these Afrikaners [...] I tried to be more compassionate, to treat them with compassion and not to say they were bad people because they did bad things [...] It’s a balanced portrayal of the situation in South Africa today.”
10. Ironically, Viliki’s masturbation reminds one of Johannes Smit’s abuse of Niki, using the image of her as “a masturbation gadget” (19).
11. Compare for instance: “They (young Afrikaner boys – MC) went out on hunting expeditions for what they called swart poes. In the fields. In the veld. In the byways of one-street towns. In the farm villages. And in the kitchens of their very homes, where maids and nannies cooked them their dinners” (94). This stereotypical depiction of the young Afrikaner boys in particular is, of course, also offensive to black women, since it reduces them merely to sex objects (sexual organs?).
12. This cursory analysis of the role of Father Claerhout in my discussion on masculinity in the novel does not do justice to Mda’s excellent intertextual interplay with Claerhout’s paintings and needs to be explored fully. Compare Jacobs (2009) for an insightful reading on this.

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