



**HEART OF DARKNESS – HEART OF REDNESS:  
*HEARTACHE AND PAIN*  
*IN TWO COMMONWEALTH NOVELS***

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**Abstract**

Our study is conceived as a comparative analysis of Zakes Mda's postcolonial and postmodern novel *The Heart of Redness* and Joseph Conrad's canonical and colonial novella *Heart of Darkness*, from the viewpoint of a literarily encoded anthropology of the body. In both texts, body marks and body pain are prominent and recurrent motives, carrying along important cultural meanings, related to several classic themes of colonial and postcolonial literature: the birth and becoming of cultural identity and awareness, culture shock, cultural contacts, enculturation versus deculturation, and cultural memory, as a vehicle and repository of myths, history and (body) image stereotypes.

**Keywords:** *colonialism, postcolonialism, body pain, body marks, corporeality, "redness" versus "darkness", identity, memory, cultural contact, cultural stereotypes (self- and hetero-images)*

In February 1975, the Nigerian novelist and literary critic Chinua Achebe, a visiting professor at the University of Massachusetts (Amherst) by that time, gave a fulminating anti-imperialistic and anti-canonical lecture (turned into an article in 1977) entitled "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*". A classic of the postcolonial polemical writing ever since, Achebe's lecture, with its avalanche of acid comments on one of the most influential novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, caused much of an academic scandal in the late 1970's.

In the light of Chinua Achebe's postcolonial reading of Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* was "an offensive and deplorable book", the most biased canonical work ever, which best illustrated the psychoanalysable imperialistic "desire – one might indeed say the need – in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest." (251) Achebe denounced Conrad's patronising attitude and "antipathy to black people", as well as the ethnocentric tendency – common in Victorian England, but also in other parts of Europe and America – to make "the other" fit a

paradigm of incomplete/ deficient humanity, hence Conrad's "dehumanization of Africa and Africans" and "depersonalization" of a whole "portion of the human race."

Abandoning "artistic good faith" and acting as a "thoroughgoing racist," Conrad not only took over, but also took further and disseminated the negative imperialistic clichéd images of "the dark continent," as opposed to the positive stereotypical images of the civilised West: on the African side – darkness, "frenzy," concupiscence lack of articulated language and anthropophagy; on the Western side – a need for things to be "in their place," "liberal" appropriateness and "decency." This imagological dimension of Conrad's work, even more than the disguised imperialistic position and xenophobia behind it, was considered by the African critic to be the dangerous and harmful lot bequeathed by canonical *Heart of Darkness* to the West, for it was precisely this lot of "prejudices and insults" – promoted under the authority of the canon – that have made a whole "section of mankind" suffer "untold agonies and atrocities." To conclude, in the light of Chinua Achebe's critical reading of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the Victorian writer proved unable to escape the ideological and imagological patterns of Western imperialism; the reader who had expected from an experienced traveller like Joseph Conrad an honest ethnographic-like account, got instead a parade of popular fantasy, racial prejudice and cultural stereotype, and all that happened for want of an in-depth perspective on colonialism and because of a limited understanding of cultural diversity: "Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth." (Achebe 261)

This brief evocation of Chinua Achebe's 1975 lecture on Conrad (most likely the worst review Conrad has ever received) is meant to preface our comparative analysis of two Commonwealth<sup>1</sup> books – the aforementioned colonial short-story or novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899; 1902 in volume) and *The Heart of Redness*<sup>2</sup> (2000), a postcolonial novel by the South-African writer

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<sup>1</sup> We have chosen to use the phrase "Commonwealth literature" for its commodity, though we share Salman Rushdie's reserve as to the adequacy of the formula (Salman Rushdie, "'Commonwealth Literature' Does Not Exist", in *Imaginary Homelands*, Essays and Criticism 1981-1991, Granta & Penguin Books, London, 1992, pp. 61-71). However, the alternative formula "Third World Literature" does not seem more adequate or less unbiased.

<sup>2</sup> Considered as Zakes Mda's best novel so far, *Heart of Redness* was awarded the 2001 Commonwealth Writers Prize. In 2008, the American academic Andrew Offenburger accused Mda of plagiarism because of his intense use of J.B. Peires' *The Dead Will Arise* as a source of historical documentation in his *Heart of Redness*. Mda defended himself by saying that what Offenburger had taken for plagiarism was actually intertextuality permitted by the Postmodernist canon. Mda had already acknowledged,

Zakes Mda – from the viewpoint of the cultural role and significance of body representations, body pain and body marks in the making and becoming of personal and collective identities. This project begins with Achebe's postcolonial criticism of Conrad on account of Chinua Achebe's being, within the frame of reference of the present study – that is postcolonialism –, the first to insist upon the prevalence of the corporal dimension in Conrad's perception and description of "the other". As seized in *Heart of Darkness*, the reality of "the other" – be it Marlow's or Conrad's own – is, obviously and beyond Achebe's polemic intention, a corporeality:

Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; (...) but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement that was as natural and true as the surf along the coast. (19-20)

And further: "I made out, deep in the tangled gloom, naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eyes, – the bush was swarming with human limbs in movement, glistening, of bronze colour." (64)

Such outer/ surface views of "the other" and intense awareness of physical presence are particular to first cultural encounters, as travel writings fully testify. Victorian travel accounts and travelogues are no exception to it. To illustrate the Victorian typical xenophobic reaction to racial and cultural difference we shall quote *in extenso* a paragraph from Dickens's "Noble Savage", emblematic for the present discussion:

I call him a savage, and I call a savage a something highly desirable to be civilised off the face of the earth. I think a mere gent (which I take to be the lowest form of civilisation) better than a howling, whistling, clucking, stamping, jumping, tearing savage. It is all one to me, whether he sticks a fish-bone through his visage, or bits of trees through the lobes of his ears, or bird's feathers in his head; whether he flattens his hair between two boards, or spreads his nose over the breadth of his face, or drags his lower lip down by great weights, or blackens his teeth, or knocks them out, or paints one cheek red and the other blue, or tattoos himself, or oils himself, or rubs his body with fat, or crimps it with knives. Yielding to whichever of these agreeable eccentricities, he is a savage – cruel, false, thievish, murderous; addicted more or less to grease, entrails, and beastly customs; a wild animal with the questionable gift of boasting; a conceited, tiresome, bloodthirsty, monotonous humbug. (Dickens 199)

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from the very first edition of the novel, his indebtedness to Jeff Peires (see the Dedication on the first page of the book).

Significantly enough, here also physicality prevails and, as it happens in Conrad's descriptions of the African, a particular stress is laid on body motion and body marks. A certain similarity between the two Victorian portraits of the "savage" is salient:

He [the black fireman] had filed teeth, too, the poor devil, and the wool of his pate shaved into queered patterns, and three ornamental scars on each of his cheeks, (...) an impromptu charm, made of rags, tied to his arm, and a piece of polished bone, as big as a watch, stuck flatways through his lower lip. (Conrad 52-53)

The corporeality of "the other" has, then, two main ways of fully expressing itself within the Victorian "savage" stereotype: through disordered, intense and ineffectual muscle activity and unnecessary, self-inflicted body pain. Alien (American, African, Melanesian) beliefs, morals, customs, corporal techniques and decorations, or artefacts remain outside the Western hegemonic concept of culture, and their meaning, function or relevance in the making and assertion of personal and collective identities is ignored, their contribution to the very process of the *anthropopoiesis* – denied.

The negative "savage" clichés of the colonial era merge in robust, colourful and well drawn portraits: the denizens of the dark continent have untrained minds and a reduced capacity to reason (Conrad 58-59), they have no conception of time (Conrad 58-59), they are hyper-energetic and lustful, obsessed with superstition and witchcraft (Conrad 57), "brutes" and man-eaters (*passim*). Conrad's art of the portrait, based on heavy strokes, repetition and emphasis, enhances the feeling of corporal, material presence.

The stylistic devices and narrative strategies serving up the predominantly physical descriptions of the African "other" are, in fact, heavily exploited throughout the text. The impression of corporeality is intensified by Conrad's resorting to collective portraits in which "savage" humanity eludes individuation. Body parts fuse disharmonically into a monstrous – because sliced, fragmented and redundant – organic structure:

But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the drop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. (Conrad 51)

The apparent trespass of physical barriers between bodies – which stand for definite, given, limited and unalterable forms – creates a feeling of the uncanny and a serious obstacle to the perception of the African as similar to the individualistic Westerner. Otherness itself is expressed through distortions in the

perception of the human bodies, which goes from hallucinatory to nightmarish visions: “they had faces like grotesque masks – these chaps.” (Conrad 20)

Specific to first encounters are also the hesitant and rudimentary exploration means of the most conspicuous form of human presence, which is the physical appearance. The subject’s sense organs are assailed by the overload of information; the African is seen, heard, even smelt: “they [the cannibals that made up Marlow’s improvised crew] had brought along a provision of hippo-meat which went rotten, and made the mystery of wilderness stink in my nostrils. Phoo! I can sniff it now.” (Conrad 50) Meanwhile, the physical distance is carefully preserved<sup>1</sup>; as Kurtz has not given due respect to this colonialistic imperative, otherness/ “darkness” has contaminated him. Consequently, when the limit between oneself and “the other” is accidentally reduced – as in the helmsman’s death episode, when Marlow is surprised and somehow ashamed to discover that a real emotional bond has been created – distance has to be restored. The skipper would try, after the “poor devil’s death, to put things right,” by recreating the cultural and emotional barrier – who was, after all, that agonising man? “a savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara” (Conrad 73) –, and the physical distance too, if we think of Marlow’s desperate efforts to wash the dead man’s blood off his body. His former opinion of the fireman had to be reinforced, because it was the only “colonialistically correct” position to assume:

He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there *below* me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind-legs. A few months of *training* (emphasis added) had done for that really fine chap. (Conrad 52)

So here is “the white man’s burden”: the duty to *train* “the other” *below*. Marlow finally managed to present a Victorian pragmatic explanation and excuse for his transitory weakness:

Well, don’t you see, he had done something, he had steered; for months I had him at my back – a help – an instrument. It was a kind of partnership. He steered for me – I had looked after him, I worried about his deficiencies, and thus a subtle bond had been created, of which I only became aware when it was suddenly broken. (Conrad 73)

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<sup>1</sup> In a radical criticism of Conrad’s doubtful political correctness keeping the other, literally, at arm’s length may be interpreted as part of a general process of physical and cultural insulation of the evaluating subject from the object of his prejudiced observation, or even in terms of the master-servant relationship.

This episode, depicting the narrator's emotional oscillation between empathy and condescendence and his perseverance in getting entangled into his own clichéd arguments and attitudes towards "the other", gives the whole measure of Conrad's ironical treatment of the imperialistic stereotypes. Hesitation between more or less disguised xenophobia and more or less displayed sympathy, by no means specific to Victorian England, characterised much of the cultural and psychological climate that favoured the advent of a science of human diversity.

Born under the ideological umbrella of the colonial enterprise, cultural anthropology strongly influenced the Western literature of the age (Griffith 24), and functioned, over the following century, as a decanter of feelings and attitudes towards otherness. For the moment, though, the Victorians were prevalently cultivating their anthropological curiosity of physical variation. In the company and under the influence of "prehistoric man" (Conrad 51), completing thus, on an organic level, his regression, Kurtz himself has undergone a physical mutation that may be considered as the most eloquent (the most visible, in any case) body symptom of his African "disease":

(...) the lofty frontal bone of Mr Kurtz! They say the hair goes on growing sometimes, but this – ah – specimen, was impressively bald. The wilderness had patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a ball – an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and – lo! – he had withered. (Conrad 69)

This scene has as a counterpart an equally ironic episode in the beginning of the short-story, in which Marlow, undergoing a current procedure in the medical examination of Europeans on their way to Africa, has his skull measured by a physician: "in the interests of science" (Conrad 16-17), he is told. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was, after all, the epoch of physiognomic and phrenological studies (Cf. Griffith 159-61); somatic features were held to tell the tale of the human heart and give the whole human measure of the individual and of his origin.

Going further, since the African is depicted in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* mainly as a disquieting physical presence, all pain the narrator Marlow evokes is mainly body pain. Two scenes are relevant from this point of view: the already commented upon death of the helmsman and "the grove of death" (Conrad 24-25, 28) near the Central Station. Conrad's reputation as an anti-colonialist is partly due to this episode at the Central Station, where familiar images of the exploited African "other" – starved, overworked and closely fettered – remind of the American "other" as he used to be pictured in the missionaries' writings at the dawn of the European colonisation enterprise:

Six black men advanced in file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. (...) I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots

in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking” (Conrad 22), and further: “All their meager breasts panted together, the violently dilated nostrils quivered, the eyes stared stonily up-hill. They passed me within six inches, without glance, with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages. (Conrad 23)

Generally, the natives’ emotions – unhappiness, grief or even despair (Conrad 61-62) – have physical causes and are expressed in full ostentation on a somatic level. Here is a scene of agony in what Marlow himself describes as a “gloomy circle of Inferno”: “Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment and despair. (...) and this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.” (Conrad 24) Farther, the helmsman’s death provides an even more naturalistic representation of the wounded body:

The man had rolled on his back and stared straight up to me; both his hands clutched the cane. It was the shaft of a spear that (...) had caught him in the side just below the ribs; the blade had got in out of sight, after making a frightful gash; my shoes were full; a pool of blood lay very still, gleaming dark-red under the wheel; his eyes shone with an amazing lustre. (Conrad 66)

The true dimension of the African “other,” however, the paramount argument invoked by the Westerners to account for the evolutionistic gap between “savagery” and “Barbary,” on the one hand, and “civilisation,” on the other, was human cannibalism, assumed, since ancient times, to be a general practice with remote peoples. The disquieting representation of the men-eater Caribbean in Christopher Columbus’s *Journal*, overlapping the ancient memory of Herodotus’s *Anthropofagoi*, still haunted the European imagination in the age of the colonial empires. (Kilani 221-22, 233) Cannibalism is then, in *Heart of Darkness*, as elsewhere in Victorian literature, the ultimate and supreme stereotype of otherness and, as with the cases discussed above, it has much to do with the human body and its representations. Going back to the novella, though Marlow is careful enough to remind his listening/reading public that his crew have been starving for some time, they seem nevertheless to have the unrestrained, ogre-like appetite that is expected from a savage, a creature cherishing an instinctive self- and body-centred view of the world:

Their headman, a young broad-chested black, severely draped in dark-blue fringed cloths, with fierce nostrils and his hair all done up artfully in oily ringlets, stood near me. (...) ‘Catch ’im,’ he snapped, with *a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp teeth* (emphasis added) – ‘catch ’im. Give ’im to us.’ ‘To you, eh?’ I asked; ‘what would you do with them?’ ‘Eat ’im!’ he said (...) I

would no doubt have been properly horrified, had it not occurred to me that he and his chaps must be very hungry. (Conrad 58)

“The other” is depicted, through an ambiguous combination of imagological inertia and deliberate irony, as a being ready to inflict pain and also to abide it, in order to gratify physical needs and to defend primitive attachments (such as the natives’ loyalty to Kurtz), and this happens because the limit of the “savage’s” concern and emotion, judged from the outside or from what an anthropologist would call an “etic” perspective, is his/ her own body or – let’s call it – his corporeality.

To conclude this first part of the paper, we shall recall the fact that the whole book actually lies under the sign of a complex body metaphor: the “heart” is, first and foremost, the core of the body, emanating vital energy and concentrating the human sense of the self, while “darkness” comprises, among its many connotations functional within the symbolic context of Conrad’s novella, a strong racialistic value. “Darkness” – as it has many a time been decoded – stands for the depth of the tropical forest, the descent into the personal and collective subconscious or the journey to the prehistoric roots of mankind. From the perspective of an anthropology of the body, however, “darkness” may evoke skin blackness, and the “heart of darkness” may be interpreted as an allusion (be it prejudiced) to the essence of black, African identity or – using a French term that will label, in postcolonial times, a whole ideology – to *négritude*.

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In front of the first rank, along the river, three men, plastered with *bright red* earth from head to foot, strutted to and fro restlessly. When we came abreast again, they faced the river, stamped their feet, nodded their horned heads, swayed their *scarlet* (emphasis added) bodies (...). (Conrad 96)

The above quotation is intended to serve as a bridge between Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness*. It is, at first glance, just another sample of Conrad’s intense imagery, translating, into the language of the literary discourse, the European’s (Conrad’s/ Marlow’s) synesthetic experience of the African “other”. Within the poetical economy of the novella, however, it is the first visual image that offers a weighty chromatic alternative to the African blackness/ “darkness”. For the Western reader, the force of this image lies not so much in its visual impact, as in the Western cultural implication behind it—wrongly infused into a foreign context, but beyond control, because... enculturated.

Both black and red / “scarlet” are key colours in European Christian demonology and, as such, they carry along strong negative connotations in

Western cultures, relating to death, pain, violence, moral trespass and, of course, otherness. In Conrad, ochre body painting is as much part of the African otherness as skin blackness, and the visual, dynamic representation of “horned” “scarlet bodies” carries—for good or for wrong—the whole burden of Western anxiety and prejudice against the African *alter*, most often perceived as an inferior *alienus*. As the title of his novel suggests unequivocally, Zakes Mda appropriates this representation of the European “other”, or hetero-image, and turns it, through a change of angle that brings about an upside-down perspective, common in postcolonial and postmodern literature, into a positive (hall)mark of the African identity and, on the representation level, into a self-image.

Zakes Mda belongs to a new wave of postcolonial African writers, whose literary (and even social and cultural) profile is different from that of their predecessors of the Chinua Achebe generation. Keeping pace with the historical and socio-political changes, they have gradually detached themselves from the original chief roles of the postcolonial African writer: pioneer and champion of the struggle for Independence and emancipation, advocate, teacher (Achebe, “The Novelist,” *passim*) and *porte-parole* of his/her people. Political dissidents, (civil) war correspondents and ethnographers of their own cultures, the African novelists of Achebe’s time had been mainly and foremost first generation intellectuals educated in the colonizer’s schools, who conceived their literary mission in terms of “writing back,” to paraphrase Salman Rushdie’s famous catchword. It was, in fact, in this context that Chinua Achebe’s harsh criticism of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* took place. Less involved in political activities than their forerunners, writers of Zakes Mda’s generation have focused instead on the search for alternatives of literature writing—within, as well as beyond the Western canon—and on assessing new and genuine ways of international expression for the African identity.

That Zakes Mda had in view Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as an intertext is more than obvious from the very title of the novel: “The inclusion of a deictic and a change of a morpheme results in the title *The Heart of Redness*, where darkness is substituted by the contingency of redness,<sup>1</sup> and the deictic ‘the’ imparts a degree of specificity that is lacking in Conrad’s amorphous, all-pervasive and ominous title, *Heart of Darkness*” (Sewlall 332). The South-African writer apparently conceived his literary response to Conrad’s canonical text by starting from the classic opposition between nature and culture, as the dialectic relationship of the two titles seems to suggest. To the natural “darkness” of the African skin (Chinua Achebe, in his vitriolic retaliatory attack on *Heart of Darkness*, gruffly remarked: “Certainly Conrad had a problem with niggers. His inordinate love of that word itself should be of interest to psychoanalysts. Sometimes his fixation on blackness is equally interesting ...” [*An Image* 252]) and the “darkness” standing for the depths of the human psyche, Zakes Mda opposes “redness” as a metaphor of African traditional culture and identity. The

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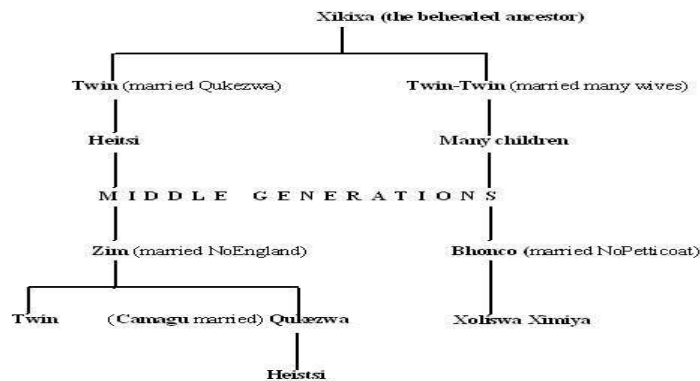
<sup>1</sup> For salient chromatic contrasts between Mda’s and Conrad’s texts, see Fincham, 198.

custom of people from traditional societies to cover/decorate their bodies with ochre, with its complex aesthetic, practical, evocative and often apotropaic function, gives the true colour of African skin. While blackness or race is only “skin-deep” and moreover a negative label imposed from the outside, the ochre redness standing for culture belongs to the essence of the Africanness and is fully assumed.

As a matter of fact, in *Heart of Redness*, Zakes Mda develops a whole rhetoric of the skin; the body, on the whole—through movement and sensory activities (including physical pain)—becomes an efficient vehicle of cultural messages, and through its wounds and scars—a repository of social memory.

In many traditional cultures, such as the South-African amaXhosa evoked by Zakes Mda, pain is but rarely purely physical. If body injury occurs or is induced, the bare physical fact is often accompanied by a cultural interpretation: it might be divine disgrace, or witchcraft, or due punishment for an old offence. Likewise, pain wakes the initiate up to a new, mature, self-conscious existence: amputations, scarifications, genital surgery, body painting are all techniques of the *anthropopoiesis* (Remotti 304-06) and of cultural identification. The symbolical traces—be they physical or spiritual—of an old pain are the living memory and testimony of one’s personal and ethnic history. As Edward Said justly remarked, “Many of the most interesting post-colonial writers bear their past within them – as scars of humiliating wounds (...)” (29). This is true for both Chinua Achebe and Zakes Mda.

Going back to the novel itself, two narrative threads are laboriously interwoven in Zakes Mda’s *Heart of Redness*: a series of historical and imagined events happening in the 1850’s, when the amaXhosa, under the stress of the British conquest, passed through a severe cultural crisis, and respectively a somehow classic story of modernization versus resistance to change at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The two temporal plans are linked through the uninterrupted history of a Xhosa lineage, living, for many generations, in the Qolorha-By-Sea village in the extreme south-east of the country.



To understand the true nature and the culturally significant value of such a connecting technique, it is important to remark that, from a historical point of view, a lineage implies a type of solidarity very different from that of a Western family. The family is ephemeral: children grow, parents die and the family disappears, being replaced by another family when the children get married and become parents in their turn. A lineage, on the other hand, goes on, generation after generation, surviving the birth-death cycle of the nuclear and even extended family (Kottak 404). Meanwhile, the lineage ancestors, instead of being lost in the oblivion that often follows one's physical death, take their celebrated places in the reliquaries, contributing to the group history and mythology. By alternating chapters approaching events and characters from the past and chapters dealing with contemporary situations and people, as well as by using the present tense for both narrative threads, Zakes Mda abolishes temporal barriers and brings the ancestors into a generic, mythic, eternally present time of the typical Xhosa lineage.

One of the plot threads—the pre-colonial and colonial narrative—evokes a tragic series of events taking place in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, in the South-African regions inhabited by the Xhosa people. Powerless witnesses of a massive drought and of an endemic disease that decimated their cattle, pushed from the outside by the Dutch and British colonizers (these latter posing as their allies), the 1850's Xhosa people faced an unprecedented economic, social and cultural depression. Confused, in search for answers and solutions, they turned to religion, but the spiritual world of the amaXhosa of the time, as that of their neighbours, the Khoikhoi, under the pressure of forced acculturation, had become a hotch-potch of Christian and traditional beliefs that eventually turned into an explosive mixture. As often happens during a crisis, the prophets' voices rose above the general hubbub, the loudest of them all being the voice of the teenage prophetess Nongqawuse. She foresaw the salutary return of the ancestors from the dead, with unimaginable riches, as soon as a general purification rite—including the total destruction of the Xhosa herds and cultivated fields, seen as defiled and spiritually toxic—would be performed by the whole community. Nongqawuse's prophecy divided the amaXhosa into two conflicting groups: *amathamba* ("the believers") and *amagogotya* ("the unbelievers"). It is against this background, inspired by J.B. Peires's historical account of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Xhosa hecatomb, that Zakes Mda projected the imaginary mythical-like story of the inimical brothers Twin and Twin-Twin (Xikixa's twin sons), heads of the Believers' and of the Unbelievers' party respectively, their family strife standing, in fact, for a symbolic image of the suicidal civil war devastating the 1850's Xhosa communities.

In its turn, the post-colonial narrative line focuses on the endless debate upon the opportunity of modernizing Qolorha-By-Sea into a sea resort. The two elders and remote cousins Zim and Bhonco, descendants of the inimical brothers

Twin and Twin-Twin and current chiefs of the Believers and respectively Unbelievers factions, continue the old family strife, by taking sides: Bhonco—in favour of the emancipation and development of the region, Zim—against the modernization process and the preservation instead of an unaltered, natural landscape as well as of the old Xhosa and Khoikhoi cultural tradition and identity. The arrival of the former political exile Camagu in Qolorha-By-Sea and his decision to remain there and get involved into the social and economic life of the village, led to the escalation of the old disputes between Believers and Unbelievers, with Zim and Bhonco as their game leaders. The apple of discord is no longer, in the present case, a young prophetess' eschatological premonition, but the dilemma of Westernization, encountered by all conservative traditional societies: whether to welcome change and abandon tradition or else remain truthful to one's own culture and renounce obvious material advantages. Globalization becomes the new hobby horse of the post-colonial African cargo cults.

So, the Unbelievers' fight for emancipation is essentially a position against African "redness" and even – as one of them has suggestively put it, by recalling and synthesising the Victorian prejudiced chromatic images of the African "other" echoed in Conrad's novella—against the "darkness of redness": "“ They [the Believers] want us to remain in our wildness!’ says the elder. ‘To remain red all our lives! To stay in the darkness of redness!’” (Mda, *The Heart* 71) As Hilary P. Dannenberg puts it, “By paralleling a nineteenth century colonial invasion with a contemporary economic assault, Mda suggests that Western economic progress and the forces of globalisation should not be automatically embraced as bringing benefits, but should, like colonialism, be treated with extreme caution and suspicion, because they pose as much of a potential threat as they appear to offer benefits to local culture” (173).

Three are the episodes in Zakes Mda's *Heart of Redness* that are particularly eloquent from the viewpoint of the role played by pain and body marks in the making of personal and group identities, and that consequently will make the focal points of our analysis hereafter: Bhonco's scars, NomaRussia's illness and the beheading of the apical ancestor, Xikixa.

The book opens upon Bhonco's tears of perpetual mourning—“Tears are very close to my eyes' says Bhonco” (Mda, *The Heart* 3), recalling somehow Toloki, the professional mourner from Zakes Mda's first and best-known novel, *Ways of Dying*. This is the more remarkable as, apart from other Unbelievers who “spend most of their time *moaning* about past injustices and *bleeding* for the world that would have been had the folly of belief not seized the nation a century and a half ago”, “Bhonco does not believe in *grieving*”(emphasis added) [Mda, *The Heart* 3]. His are not tears of “pain”, we are told, but tears celebrating beautiful things (3, 6-7). Diverting tears from their primary function—to express pain—is, in Bhonco's case, more than a means to sublimate the ethnic memory

of a painful past, through aesthetic contemplation. His chronic tear-shedding gets its full meaning when put in relation to the symbolic rhetoric of body pain in the history of his whole lineage, back to his great-grandfather, Twin-Twin, and his great-great-grandfather, Xikixa.

The narrator (identifying itself as a general “we”, standing, like in Zakes Mda’s other novels, for the collective conscience of the community)<sup>1</sup> tells how, during the Xhosa witch craze of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, at the time of Mlanjeni (the great popular prophet preceding Nongqawuse’s advent), Twin-Twin’s senior wife was suspected of witchcraft and how her husband, trying to stand in her defence, fell himself prey to public rage:

A group of zealots grabbed him and dragged him to the donga below Kala’s homestead. There they flogged him with whips. They beat him until he was almost unconscious. (...) Twin-Twin’s *weals* opened up and became *wounds*. After many months the *wounds* healed and became *scars* (emphasis added). But occasionally they itched and reminded him of his flagellation. (17)

The heavy part for Twin-Twin, however, was related not so much to the physical ordeal he had gone through, as to the heartache and spiritual sufferance doubling his bodily torment, caused by the fact of his having acquired the wounds at the hands of his twin brother’s fellow Believers. The marks imprinted by the whip in Twin-Twin’s flesh symbolically attest the increasing breach in the solidarity of a family group, and, by extension, the global historical drift and the deculturation crisis of the local peoples. As proved by the future history of his lineage, Twin-Twin’s itching scars were not his personal affair: “Bhonco carries the scars that were inflicted on his great-grandfather, Twin-Twin (...). Every first boy child in subsequent generations of Twin-Twin’s tree is born with the scars. Even those of the Middle Generations, their first males carried the scars” (13). They carried, instead, like a kind of cultural genes, the painful historical memory of brotherly hatred and humiliation. Written on the skin, both pain and memory are eternalized and become a responsibility and a burden of the whole split lineage: “At the time he [Twin-Twin] did not know that his progeny was destined to carry *the burden of the scars* (emphasis added)” (17). When Bhonco is upset or challenged by people from Zim’s party, his scars—literally embodiments of pain—ache and itch, reactivating the family loyalties and resentments, and connect him and all the other first-born of the lineage alike, to the implacable logic of history.

Scars, as much as “redness”, cannot and may not be wiped away. This becomes pretty clear at the end of the novel, when Bhonco’s wife, NoPetticoat, becomes—against her family’s will—a Believer (which is an advocate and guardian of “redness”), while his only daughter, Xoliswa Ximiya, a well-

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<sup>1</sup> For the “communal narrator” in Zakes Mda’s novel, see Fincham, 201.

educated young woman who has adopted Western ways, acquires, against all expectation and all wish, the emblematic scars of her male ancestors:

She, daughter of Ximiya, will soon turn her back on this village. (...) The sooner she lives this heart of redness, the better. But this is not the end of Xoliswa Ximiya's troubles. She wakes up one day and finds that the scars of history have erupted on her body. All of a sudden, her ancestors' flagellation has become her flagellation. She rebels against heathen scars. She refuses to believe that they are part of an ancestral vengeance. (...) The Unbelievers were shocked to hear of the scars on their daughter's civilized body. (...) Everyone (...) believed that the curse of the scars had finally been broken. (261)

NomaRussia's illness and death represent another symbolic projection, through a body metaphor, of the diseased or endangered reality of the ethnic group. The beautiful woman by that name makes the object of Camagu's quest throughout the novel. Like a mythical African mermaid luring the traveller off his course, NomaRussia—the untouchable woman, because hard to find and impossible to get—catches Camagu, the returned exile, under the spell of her mourning song. His yearning for her, turning gradually into an obsessive dream, makes him leave the crowded streets of Johannesburg and direct his steps towards the remote Qolorha, far back into the “heart of redness”:

In his dream he was the river, and NomaRussia was its water. Crystal clear. Flowing on him. Sliding smoothly on his body. Until she flowed into ocean. (...) When he failed to catch her, he tried to catch the dream itself, to arrest it, so that it could be with him forever. It slipped through his fingers and escaped. He chased it, but it outran him. (60)

Embodying indigenous womanhood itself, NomaRussia's illness is a woman's disease, perceived as such in both Western and African key—defined by the former as cervical cancer, by the latter as the curse and due punishment for an unbecoming, lecherous behaviour. Camagu meets her only in the last chapters of the book, just to see her agonize and die, close to and together with her former lover, Zim, the chief of the Believers' faction (252-67). In fact, this closure is the final act of a slow process that, by degrees, has dissolved and split Camagu's obsession for NomaRussia, the quasi-mythical figure, into his earthly twin interest for Qukezwa (Zim's wild daughter, standing for traditional, conservative Qolorha) and Xoliswa Ximiya (Bhonco's refined, well-educated daughter, standing for an emancipated, urbanized Xhosa community). Camagu's final option to remain by Qukezwa's side speaks for itself: “They deserve each other, he and Qukezwa” says a resentful Xoliswa Ximiya. “They will wallow in *redness* (emphasis added) together” (261).

Related to the general rhetoric of the human body, connoting pain, womanhood, life, death, and a whole range of other anthropological values besides, blood accompanies the metaphors of the heart in both *Heart of Darkness* and *The Heart of Redness*. Actually, blood represents the closest possible association to body pain, and it is intensely exploited by Conrad in the scene of the helmsman's violent death and in several other episodes of the conflict between Marlow's crew and the natives in the Congolese jungle. Nevertheless, the fullest symbolical potential is touched in Zakes Mda's novel, where blood transcends the "heart of redness" metaphor, connecting the apparently separate stories of Twin-Twin and NomaRussia and prefacing Xikixa's history.

The last case approached in the present study, that of Xikixa, the apical ancestor of Bhonco's and Zim's lineage, is a sample of the colonialistic macabre, midway between tragedy and black parody:

[...]Twin and Twin-Twin (...) chanced upon a British camp hidden in the gorge. A small group of British soldiers were cutting off the ears of a dead umXhosa soldier. (...) Then, to the horror of the men watching, the soldiers cut off the dead man's head and put it in a pot of boiling water. 'They are cannibals (...),' hissed Twin-Twin. The British soldiers sat around and smoked their pipes and laughed at their own jokes. Occasionally one of the soldiers stirred the boiling pot, and the stench of rotten meat floated up to the twins' group. (...) 'It is our father!' screamed Twin. 'They were going to eat our father!'(19-20)

One of the British soldiers explained the twins, in perfect isiXhosa, that they had actually misinterpreted the intention of the British: "We are civilized men, we don't eat people. (...) These heads are either going to be souvenirs, or will be used for scientific inquiry" (20).

Staged with privileged post-colonial and emic lucidity, this eloquent incident reflects, by using a reversing mirror effect, the stereotypical "savage" cruelty scenes of the colonial age—such as Marlow's appalling vision of heads on stakes near the Inner Station (see also Fincham 193), in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*—, entailing a transitory interchange of the subject-object roles between the European colonizer and the African native. Meanwhile, passing through the symbolical beheading of the lineage ancestor—a pertinent metaphor for the disintegration of the indigenous traditional identity and of the old African lifestyle, and the instauration of the new Western cultural paradigm of the touristic "souvenirs" and scientific skull measurements—, the human body becomes an object of symbolical negotiation between cultures, but also a well-suited and ingenious alphabet for the Empire's "writing back".

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