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### Contesting Anthropomorphism: Ecocritical Analysis of Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller*

#### Abstract

The majesty and sheer size of whales have always enchanted and fascinated human mind resulting in many fables, legends and stories of human encounter with this huge mammal of the ocean. The curiosity about these massive creatures has led to a flourishing industry of whale watching in modern times. Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller* deals with the lonely existence of Whale Caller, his inevitable but tragic attraction for the whale which he names Sharisha and his ill-fated relationship with a woman named Saluni.

This paper will attempt an ecocritical reading of *The Whale Caller* and will question man's interference into the animal world and will further interrogate the very assumption of man to have understood the emotions and behaviour of the non-human world. The paper challenges the human tendency towards anthropomorphism as it critiques Whale Caller's notion of reciprocity of love by the whale Sharisha.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Anthropomorphism, Environmental justice, Ecotourism

Whales anciently seemed to partake of ocean's mysterious, radical, ambiguous otherness: to symbolize divine power, whether benign or

threatening....Like modern primatology, cetacean studies are one of those areas where assumptions of species distinctiveness, and particularly the superiority of human mental powers to those of nonhuman species, are most vigorously challenged.

---Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World*

Ecocritical analysis of Zakes Mda's novel *The Whale Caller* brings to focus the sensitive relationship of humans with other species (whales in this case) and how humans have consciously or unconsciously harmed the non-human world. Buell's observation regarding the mythical assumption about the whales brings to the fore the point regarding human binaries that we create to define the self and the other and whales though have always invoked human fascination have remained the other. Postcolonial and non-western literature plays an important role in upholding environmental ethics and environmental justice. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin argue in their book *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* that European colonizers essentially saw natives and animals as one; as being those who essentially needed to be tamed and civilized:

Postcolonial studies has come to understand environmental issues not only as central to the projects of European conquest and global domination, but also as inherent in the ideologies of imperialism and racism on which those projects historically -- and persistently -- depend. Not only were other people often regarded as part of nature -- and thus treated instrumentally as animals -- but also they were forced or co-opted over time into western views of the environment, thereby rendering cultural and environmental restitution difficult if not impossible to achieve.

(Huggan and Tiffin 2010:

6)

Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller* raises significant questions regarding the human and the animal and also about the human understanding (or the lack of it) of the animal. In a grim and tragic story of struggle, suffering, uncertainty and quest for love; Mda unravels human frailties and how human beings invariably fail in understanding animals and end up harming them instead of serving any good to them. Mda as a creative writer risks this projection of the non-human world which is fraught with multiple possibilities of meaning. Pondering over this notion of representation/misrepresentation Sarah E. Mcfarland writes in her article "Animal Studies, Literary Animals, and Yan Marrel's *Life of Pi*":

There is a great risk in misrepresenting nonhuman creatures, however, either as proxies or as objects for human emotional or cognitive projection. A significant number of texts use animal characters for allegorical purposes, project anthropomorphically onto their lives, or otherwise erase any nonhuman experience from the textual world.

(Sarah E. Mcfarland: 153)

Primitive man had shared a harmonious and balanced living with the natural world where he was at peace with himself and the world around him, he respected nature and in return nature graced him with abundance. The connectivity of the primitive man with his nature is established very early in the novel when the whale caller can see his ancestors into the eternal ocean:

When the Whale Caller is in a happy mood he can see the weather-beaten fishermen shrouded in the mists of time, taking their catch, while others are gutting the fish or drying it on the rocks. He can see even deeper in the mists, before there were boats and fishermen and whalers, the Khoikhoi of old dancing around a beached whale. Dancing their thanks to Tsiqua, He Who

Tells His Stories in Heaven, for the bountiful food he occasionally provides for his children by allowing whales to strand themselves.

(Zakes Mda 2005: 4)

The Khoikhoi bereaved when the whales got stranded in great numbers and they wept their hearts out on the wastage of natural resources. They harvested the blubber for oil and used the bones of the whales to construct their huts, making use of nature and its resources to the maximum. This glimpse into myth and history makes the readers aware of the connection that Khoikhoi people had with nature which modern African people had failed to establish.

The novel introduces the readers with a dysfunctional society in the post-apartheid South Africa symbolised through the characters of Whale Caller and Saluni who have led isolated existence throughout major parts of their lives. The novel is often perceived by critics as a triangle of love between Whale Caller, Saluni and the Whale Sharisha, but my contention is that the novel far from being a tale of love between a human and a whale registers man's own insecurities and follies of his own anthropomorphic assumptions; hints of which can be found very early in the novel. The reader gets acquainted to the past life of Whale Caller and how he got "anointed" as the "Chief Horn Player" of the "Church of the Sacred Kelp Horn". On one occasion of the service of Baptism which was being performed on the sea the whale caller was busy playing his kelp horn when the congregation got surprised by the sudden and unexpected appearance of a whale which "surfaced about a hundred metres from the baptism" and although not having enough knowledge about the whales the Whale Caller was essentially "intrigued" by "the notion that it was his horn that had drawn it to baptism" (9) and a little later when the whale started to move away from the shore the whale caller blew his kelp horn to which the whale supposedly responded and stopped and "lob tailed" also. Because of this sequence of events the Whale Caller got "convinced that through his kelp horn he had the power to communicate with it. This

discovery excited him no end, and he remained at the beach blowing his horn long after the rest of the congregation had gone home.”(11) From this moment of epiphany when he realizes that he can communicate with whales the whale caller undertakes a journey of learning the skill of blowing kelp horns. He spends the next thirty five years of his life honing the skill of blowing and making kelp horns. During this time he leads the life of a wanderer and drifts from one place to another practicing on his kelp horn:

After thirty- five years he finally returned to his home village of Hermanus and with his meagre pension rented a two-roomed Wendy House in the backyard of a kindly widower. The village had grown into a beautiful holiday resort. But it had not lost the soul of the village of his youth....Other houses belonged to retired millionaires who had decided to live here permanently. It had now become impossible for an ordinary person to buy property at his childhood paradise.

(12-13)

Commercialization has taken Hermanus in its grip by the time the Whale Caller returns to his village. Rich outsiders have taken hold of the place living their lives in luxury and enjoying the scenic and serene beauty of the place. In the post-apartheid Africa the Whale Caller finds that even whale watching has developed into a pastime for the tourists who were visiting this beautiful village of Hermanus. Whale watching paved way for commercial “whale criers” but the Whale Caller was proud to be a Whale Caller and not a whale crier who simply alerts the tourists about the “presence and the location of the whales.” (40) He derived immense pleasure and satisfaction from his self-professed passion which he tried to reciprocate by calling out to the whales. His long absence of thirty five years from the place has erased his memory from the mind of the people as they “wondered who the tall and brawny stranger in the blue dungarees was” (13). The Whale Caller was not

a part of the changing face of his village Hermanus and thus he gets gripped by a sense of alienation in the present surroundings as he “felt like an intruder”:

He is mortified as he walks on the pavement near the parking lot. And it shows in his gait. The crowds have already gathered. They are the usual tourists with floral shirts and funeral faces. As if someone forced them to come here. Binoculars and cameras weighing down their necks. Sandals flip-flopping like soft coronach drumbeats as the feet trudge in different directions. Fat Americans, timid as individuals, but boisterous and arrogant in groups....All clicking away at the slightest provocation. Following everything that moves on land and sea with camcorders.”

(17)

The above passage speaks volumes about modern man’s dependency on technology where nothing gets stored in the “inward eye” to be recollected at a later time but everything is captured through the cameras and camcorders. It also tells about the indifference of the tourists, a culture where tourism is taken up as a fashion and not as a passion and one is reminded of the lines from Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock when T.S. Eliot writes “women come and go talking of Michelangelo”. The text calls these tourists as “the whale watching invaders” who have all landed up at Hermanus as the “town is celebrating its annual Kalfieees--the Whale Calf festival.”(17) The town wears a festive look as it has got converted into a commercial hub where every consumable item is on sale from food to clothing to jewellery and toys.

Having spent a major portion of his life observing the whales and calling out to them through his Kelp horn the Whale Caller can make out the arrival of the southern right whales by their sounds as he is able to “feel the vibrations even as he sleeps on his single wooden bed. The high pitched sounds are carried by the wind, with the smells of the sea riding on

them.”(39) On awakening the next morning the Whale Caller readies himself in his new tuxedo and heads towards the sea with his kelp horn in his hands to welcome Sharisha; the whale. On reaching the sea he is overcome with joy to see that “There is indeed an invasion of the southern rights. The Whale Caller can count up to twenty of them, including calves...” (40)

The conviction of possessing the ability to communicate with the whales through blowing of kelp horn gave a sense of empowerment to the Whale Caller. In a world where neither he was cared for nor his existence made any difference the Whale Caller was sucked into the thought of being loved by the whale Sharisha, as this thought of having the power to communicate with her gave him the sense of worthiness and importance in a world ruled by selfishness, exploitation and materialism. There are several instances in the novel where the Whale Caller miserably fails to understand the whale Sharisha and ultimately leads her to her final doom as she gets beached in the shallow waters:

She is too mesmerised to realise that she has recklessly crossed the line that separates the blue depths from the green shallows....But certainly she is less than a hundred metres from the shoreline. Perhaps less than fifty. Her stomach lies on the sand. He stops playing.”

(216)

There are several instances in the novel when the whale caller fails to understand the behavioural patterns of Sharisha, the whale. Having witnessed the mating of Sharisha he expected Sharisha to be back with a young calf but when she does return the whale caller is worried by her lethargy and when he sees a “gaping wound on her side” he immediately concludes “that it had been caused by a ship’s propeller .... Perhaps Sharisha did have a baby after all. Perhaps it was entangled or sliced to pieces by the same boat that wounded the mother.”(129)

When the Whale Caller is unable to rejuvenate the spirits of Sharisha then without understanding the true cause of her lethargy, he decides to lure and arouse her senses by “public display of public eating”(137) and to achieve this he arranges for furniture, silverware, cutlery, wine and seafood. He formally dresses himself and Lunga Tubu’s voice provides a perfect backdrop to the occasion. He observes that something unusual is happening with Sharisha and it is only then that he realises that he is about to witness Sharisha the whale giving birth to her young one:

The Whale Caller can hear deep bellows that carry in waves under the water to where he sits with an unfinished meal. Sharisha sinks under water and disappears for some time and then emerges again. There is a struggle happening here, and it dawns for the first time on the Whale Caller that he is about to witness a birth. He nearly punches himself when he realises that all along her lethargy was due to the fact that she was with child...How silly of him to have expected Sharisha to return with a young one after only six months, and how truly silly not to realise that there was no living young one yet because she was still carrying it in her womb! (138-139)

The seaside village of Hermanus comes alive at this moment to witness this rare sight of a whale giving birth to a young one. The tourists gather to capture this in their cameras and a moment associated with nature and its cycle of life becomes a public spectacle as the humans follow the animal through their gaze:

The struggle continues until late in the afternoon. Just before dusk the child is born under water, but close enough to the surface for the spectators to see the tail coming out first, and then the whole body...The midwives are very protective. They help the young one as they all follow Sharisha to a

sheltered bay at a nearby estuary where she nurses the baby and for the first time it suckles.

(140)

The above episode is proof enough that the Whale Caller lacks the true understanding of the whale Sharisha although there is no denying the fact that over the years he has developed a deep association with the whale. Even after the birth of the calf he devotes his days largely observing Sharisha and her calf singing and frolicking in the sun bathed sea. The Whale Caller demonstrates understanding and care for the environment that he lives in. He is very much aware of the fact that his Hermanus is in the grip of “tourism frenzy” (186) and everyone wants to reap the benefits. One day he accidentally comes across a bag full of perlemoen and immediately realizes that it is the work of a poacher and thus angrily confronts the man telling him that “it takes eight years for the perlemoes to mature”. Mda goes on to unravel how tourism industry is benefitting big companies while the poor starve for food:

“Big companies are making money out of these perlemoens. The government gives them quotas. What about us, sir? ... How are we expected to survive?”

(191)

The man further goes on to explain how poaching and other illegal practices involving natural resources are thriving in Hermanus and Mda’s text brings this into focus to highlight how poaching is not only detrimental to the concerned environment but can further widen the gap between the rich and the poor and in a long run can harm the very fabric of the society as the poor take on the corrupt practices of the rich and the influential to climb the social and economic ladder:

Well known poachers have become rich, building double storey houses in dusty townships. Why must he be the only one who remains poor for the rest of his life?

....There are established racial hierarchies in the illegal abalone trade. Coloured folk sell their harvest to white men who pay about two hundred rands a kilogram. The white men sell to the Chinese men for about a thousand rands a kilogram. The Chinese ship the abalone to the Far East where they get about two thousand five hundred rands a kilogram for it. And these are the old prices.

(191-192)

The illegal Abalone trade is a case in point which highlights the nexus between the poachers and the rich traders and even more ironical is the observation regarding racial hierarchies even in this illegal trade of poaching. Mda through his imaginative power of story-telling lays bare the intricacies of this illegal trade which otherwise is beyond the knowledge of common man who never would have bothered to know about the viciousness of the trade. Serenella Iovino in her book *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology Resistance and Liberation*; expands the use of the words ‘resistance’ and ‘liberation’ taking it beyond the prerogative of human usage to be “shared with the environment, the landscape, and all their eco-social bodies”. She writes:

The harmful intersections of contamination, criminal activities, and political life, tell us how dangerous it has become to ignore that the landscape in which we live are—at all levels—permeable to each other. A dying ecosystem, a disrupted territory, the increasing cancer rates in places where vulnerable people share the same fate of vulnerable land and life forms: all these phenomena are eloquent in expressing the way the personal

(namely, the human) is constantly mingled with the impersonal (namely, an extended nonhuman).

Serenello Iovino 2016: 5-6)

Although Serenella Iovino is writing in the context of Italy, but her observations can rightly be used to understand the South African environmental scenario and Mda's text as well where we find an intermingling of human and the non-human. The novel also deals with vulnerable and isolated individuals who have drifted away from community life. Saluni finds some solace in the company of the so called "bored twins" but ironically meets her end when she is literally stoned to death by these little girls who were left to themselves while their parents went to the town to earn a living. Likewise the Whale Caller becomes the reason for the death of Sharisha as he calls out to her on his kelp horn.

The novel ends with the tragic death of the whale Sharisha and through the moving and grim moment of her death Mda highlights the insensitivity and foolishness of politicians who do not possess any scientific information about whales nor do they have any knowledge regarding the process of their rescue but nevertheless they miss no chance to hog the limelight even in moments of crisis the situation is made worse by media people who want better ratings for their channel and for this politicians are the best bet as they "make better sound bites":

Politicians arrive: city fathers and mothers; mayors and members of parliament from rival political parties; hacks and hangers-on. They all want a photo opportunity with the whale. Cameras click away. Television crews interview the politicians instead of the emergency workers and scientists who have spent the night trying to rescue the whale. Politicians make better sound bites and will not mess up the news programme with facts.

(221)

Mda's *The Whale Caller* is a warning to human beings to understand and respect nature and not to control nature which ultimately can be very disastrous. Man has to learn to draw a line between him and nature or otherwise it can bring doom to both. Towards the end of the novel the whale caller understands his own folly in having compromised the safety and security of the whale Sharisha in order to bring peace and solace to his own heart; to have the comfort of having total control over the whale as he reflects that "If he had not selfishly called her with his horn to heal wounds inflicted on him by Saluni she would not have come to such a terrible end".(229) With this realisation a sadness grips the mind of the whale caller as he remembers Saluni and starts playing her song on the kelp horn and soon his attention is caught by the appearance of Sharisha's calf responding to his kelp horn and it is at this moment that he decides that "He must not enslave the young one with his kelp horn".(229) He is overwhelmed by the desire for expiation and decides to take "his kelp horn as an expiatory offering"(229) to Mr. Yodd.

After the tragic death of Sharisha the whale; the Whale Caller understands his folly in having enslaved the whale by his kelp horn and decides never to return to his beautiful village of Hermanus and becomes the symbolic Penitent of Hermanus who "will walk from town to town flogging himself with shame and wearing a sandwich board that announces to everyone: I am the Hermanus Penitent". (230) The Whale Caller to some extent is found guilty of anthropomorphism as he appropriates his own feelings to the megafauna thus betraying his own lack of understanding and knowledge about the same.

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