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Epistemic (dis)belief and (dis)obedience: Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness* and the decolonial ecological turn

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Abstract

The Heart of Redness (2000) by Zakes Mda deals with an epistemological conflict and exposes the hideousness of colonial epistemology in dismantling indigenous belief systems and commodifying South African land and ecology. The novel revisits the decisive event of cattle killing in 1856–57, following Nongqawuse’s prophecy, and juxtaposes it with the cultural and epistemic clash of two factions, Believers and Unbelievers, in the post-apartheid era. The present article analyses the unresolved breach between the Believers and the Unbelievers and notes how the latter’s appropriation of Western modernity’s notion of progress and civilization perpetuates the interventions of capitalist forces, aggravating serious threats to land protection and indigenous ecology. The article focuses on Mda’s critique of the South Africans’ compliance with the colonial models of civilization and probes how the novel emphasizes delinking and repudiating the patterns and perceptions of development normalized by Western modernity. In so doing, Mda’s novel foregrounds the necessity of indulging in what Mignolo (2009) terms “epistemic disobedience” and endorses critical decolonial thinking and praxis to counter covert forms of colonial oppression and capitalist objectification. The article extends the notion of “decolonial turn” (Maldonado-Torres, 2008; Grosfoguel, 2007) by arguing that the novel elucidates a “decolonial ecological turn” to combat extractivist agendas and exploitative policies, preserve indigenous ecology, and foster alternative ways of sustainable collective living.

Keywords: Ecology, episteme, belief, decolonial, capitalism, modernity

Introduction: Episteme, ecology, and (de)coloniality

Zakes Mda, one of the most respected contemporary writers on the colonial and postcolonial trajectories of South Africa, is critically acclaimed for his perspicacious engagement with the causes of national empowerment, self-determination, and environmental justice. Mda’s commitment to South African social concerns started with his plays, especially with his

association with the Maratholi Travelling Theatre, which encouraged the involvement of rural communities through “participatory techniques” (Dolce, 2016, p. 62), and then continued through his novels in myriad forms. Depicting his firm ideological commitment to probing the intricacies of the South African cultural ethos and its “moments of historical transformation” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2), Mda’s novels such as *Ways of Dying* (1995) and *She Plays with Darkness* (2004) have foregrounded the layered and inextricable epistemological formations of colonialism in the native culture of South Africa. *The Heart of Redness* (2000), Mda’s third novel, also succinctly deals with a conflict of epistemologies, uncovering how that became instrumental in suppressing the South Africans’ indigenous belief systems and consolidating the Western colonial epistemic ethos, in turn leading to a commodification of the South African land and ecology. Analogous to prominent postcolonial thinkers such as Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Franz Fanon, Mda, through this novel, shows how the British colonization has unleashed a “cultural bomb,” (Thiong’o, 1986, p. 186) disrupting indigenous knowledge structures and cultural cohesiveness and more acutely perpetuating vicious policies of aggression on their land and ecological resources. As Fanon (1963) notes, the colonists’ possession of land jeopardized the physical and existential wellbeing of the colonized people and relegated them to a position of subservience in their own country. Land, as a primary source of livelihood, acquires “the most essential value” for the native people down the centuries, and to lose it denotes a denigration of their fundamental “dignity” and respectable mode of survival (Fanon, 1963, p. 9). Land acquisition and ecology subtly mobilize the Western reinforcement of power and epistemic superiority over the oppressed indigenous ‘other’. In this frame of mind, Mda’s novel offers a critical rendering of the pervasiveness of the Western episteme and the political and ecological dangers of imbibing it in modern-day South Africa.

Mda juxtaposes the infamous cattle-killing of 1856-1857 in colonial and post-apartheid times in *The Heart of Redness* to chronicle the discord that struck in the nineteenth century, paving the way for the entrenchment of the colonial episteme and the long-term damage that resulted. In the mid-1850s, a sudden dissemination of lung diseases in cattle from the Cape Colony to Xhosaland happened. Consequent to this, a young prophetess named Nongqawuse proclaimed that she envisioned the resurrection of the dead ancestors and the purification of the society from the clutches of white men if the cattle were sacrificed. As declared by Nongqawuse, the collective sacrificial act would recuperate the glory of Xhosaland, culminating in the birth of a new world. This apocalyptic message, centered on the indigenous beliefs of purgation and renewal (Peires, 1989), proved to be detrimental to the Xhosa society. The dead did not arise, and instead of a collective regeneration, the Xhosa society disintegrated with internal animosity and distrust. After being unified, Xhosa society was divided into two groups: Believers and Unbelievers. The situation worsened as an estimated 40,000 Xhosa starved to death and an equal number left their homes seeking food and employment in the colony (Klopper, 2011, pp. 92–93). This turmoil strengthened the grip of British colonization and facilitated the colonial government and white settlers in annihilating the indigenous population and confiscating the remaining land of independent Xhosaland. Jeff Peires argues in this context: “The impact on the Xhosa [...] is difficult to express in words. Their national, cultural and economic integrity, long penetrated and undermined by colonial pressure, finally collapsed” (1989, p. 321). It is worth noting that Mda’s revisiting of this catastrophe in South African history intends to emphasize its repercussions in disenfranchising natives from their traditional knowledge systems and indoctrinating them to accept Western colonial versions of modernity, civilization, and progress.

The present article thus aims to study Mda's *The Heart of Redness* as an insightful foray into the epistemic confrontations that once beleaguered the Xhosa society and destroyed the indigenous ecology and are continuing to shape "the philosophy of life, the philosophy of biology, [and] the philosophy of nature" (Grosz, 2011, p. 60) in the modern-day Qolorha village of the Eastern Cape. This article analyses how Mda locates the cultural issues of post-apartheid South Africa in the "power structure" (Quijano, 2007, p. 168) systematically solidified by colonialism and its concomitant Western-centric anthropogenic activities. Delineating the unresolved breach between the Believers and the Unbelievers of Qolorha, Mda highlights how the latter falls prey to the "totalising and expansionist epistemology" that emerges under colonial modernity (Lehuede, 2021, p. 4) and internalizes the hierarchical assumptions of Western capitalism. The Unbelievers' compliance with the colonial episteme functions as a catalyst in facilitating the capitalist ventures in South Africa that use land for commercial aggrandizement and extract the existing ecological resources. The article focuses on the novel's discourse to delink and repudiate the normalized patterns and perceptions of Western order and thus indulge in what Mignolo (2009) terms "epistemic disobedience." The internal rifts that dismember Xhosa society and continue unrelentingly can only be mitigated if colonial epistemologies are transgressed and denounced to a "point of non-return" (Mignolo, 2009, p. 173). The assumption that "there is no other way to imagine the world unfolding and becoming known" (Coudry & Mejias, 2019, p. 203) than what the Western Enlightenment and rationality have propagated must be abandoned. In this frame of decolonial thinking, the article argues that Mda's novel calls for comprehending the "actions or effects produced by both humans and nonhumans" (Iheka, 2018, p. 3) and thereby envisaging a decolonial turn to preserve the indigenous ecology. Here, the "decolonial turn" emphasizes the epistemic significance of the enslaved and colonized pursuit for humanity and advances the undermining of the universal exclusivity of Western narratives, decolonizing the Western canon and epistemology (Maldonado-Torres, 2008, p. 7; Grosfoguel, 2007, p. 211). Here, the article extends Grosfoguel's concept and elucidates how the narrative takes a decolonial ecological turn as an elementary step to redeeming South Africans' allegiance to colonial epistemology and promoting sustainable and collective living.

Colonialism, epistemic anxiety and (dis)belief

The narrative of *The Heart of Redness* captures the viability of the colonial project as entangled with a clash of epistemic belief and disbelief in the Xhosa community. Beliefs refer to personal values that shape individuals' behavioural approach and inform decisions about particular knowledge acquisition (Bandura, 1986). In the context of knowledge production, epistemic beliefs designate "individual representations (beliefs) about knowledge and knowing" (Mason & Bromme, 2010, p. 1). Epistemic beliefs can be broadly understood as how an individual defines, interprets, evaluates, and constructs the structures of knowledge (Hofer, 2001, p. 354). Individual or collective cognitive resources, ideological conditioning, or practical experience generate and are associated with these beliefs. Similarly, epistemic disbelief is a doxastic attitude in which an individual regards a specific set of propositions and a specific method of knowledge formation as false or refrains from passing judgment on them. Richard Feldman (2003) describes this epistemological positioning as "when you consider a statement, you can adopt any of three attitudes toward it: belief, disbelief, or suspension of judgement" (p. 13). An individual's belief or disbelief in any knowledge system or form and the process of acquiring or denying it thus constitute an essential avenue for assessing perceptions, prejudices, political motivations, and psychosocial dispositions.

The novel delineates how the traditional Xhosa community nurtures and fosters their beliefs in the indigenous myths, supernatural legends, and oral stories as ways “to know” and develop “general comprehension, reason, and learning” (Schommer, 1990, p. 499) for ages. Ancestral wisdom and visionary prophecies have been the confirmed sources of their gaining and practicing knowledge, thus constituting their epistemic beliefs. Proverbs, myths, and stories serve as “the storehouse of native wisdom, of philosophy, and a code of behaviour” (Pobee, 1976, p. 4). Prophets and diviners have played a significant role in preserving the Xhosa community’s communal knowledge. There are references to Nxele, who preached about “Mdalidephu, the god of black man” (Mda, 2000, p. 15), and the liberation of the blacks; Mlanjeni, adulated as “the Man of the River” for his extraordinary power to converse with nature and the “spirit world” (Mda, 2000, p. 14); and Tsiqwa, famous for his oracular abilities to connect with the cosmic entities (Mda, 2000, p. 22). The beliefs of the Xhosa people in divination and planetary order are first thwarted by their cultural encounter with the discourse of rationalization and logic infiltrated by the Western white settlers and then by the failure of Nongqawuse’s prophecy.

The Xhosa society’s division into Believers and Unbelievers reflects the breakdown of collective beliefs in the cultural myths and prophecies that have prevailed for generations as knowledge repositories. As the names suggest, the Believers unflinchingly obey the prophecy, killing their cattle and burning their crops. The Unbelievers, with their doubt on Nongqawuse’s prophetic authority, refute her proclamations, claiming Nongqawuse is “just a foolish girl” (Mda, 2000, p. 76), who aggravates doom for the community. Some even accuse her of conspiring with the British to destroy the Xhosa people, condemning the cattle-killing movement as “a cold blooded political scheme to involve the government in war and to bring a host of desperate enemies” (Mda, 2000, p. 135). This reflects how the Unbelievers are susceptible to colonial anxiety and risk in the realm of epistemology, where their “epistemic anxiety is an emotional response to epistemic risk: the risk of believing in error” (Newton, 2022, p. 324). When an individual experiences epistemic anxiety, his or her cognitive behavior is largely perceived as epistemically risky. Epistemic anxiety alerts subjects to the possibility of reasonable errors and stimulates them to take steps to prevent these possible negative outcomes. The Believers, with their faith in ancestral wisdom and divination, hope that “a black race across the sea, newly resurrected from the dead, is surely coming to save [them] from the white man” (Mda, 2000, p. 84). On the other hand, the Unbelievers, being epistemically anxious and considering the Believers’ rationale as risky, express their discomfort and resentment with such revivalist myths. When “no miracles and wonders” (Mda, 2000, p. 129) happen on the promised day of resurrection in June 1856, rage and bitterness become the inevitable outcome between them:

Believing brothers fought against the unbelieving brothers. Unbelieving spouses turned against believing spouses. Unbelieving fathers kicked believing sons out of their homesteads. Unbelieving sons plotted the demise of believing fathers. Unbelieving fathers attempted to kill believing sons. Siblings stared at each other with eyes full of blood. (Mda, 2000, p. 86)

The Unbelievers’ epistemic anxiety serves as the driving force behind what Juliette Vazard, inspired by C. S. Peirce, refers to as “real doubt,” a form of epistemic disbelief that is “motivated by practical interests and which acts as a reason for mental and physical action” (Vazard, 2021, p. 6922). The consequence of this disbelief takes a more devastating turn when the Unbelievers repudiate the traditional cultural knowledge of salvation and gravitate

to form a “strange alliance” (Mda, 2000, p. 85) with the assurance of modernity that the British colonizers offer.

The epistemic rift, initially represented by Twin and Twin-Twin, the two children of Xikixa, reverberates through their descendants. Symbolically delineated through the “duplication of the names” (Dolce, 2016, p. 64) of several characters, the novel emphasizes how the differences in the belief system that began in the nineteenth century gets embedded at the structural level and replicated in post-apartheid South Africa. For the Unbelievers, the irrationalities of the Xhosa’s cultural epistemology need to be abandoned, as those put the future of their society at stake. They think that the beliefs in communal redemption, prophets, diviners, and healers need to be replaced by logical and progressive ways of thinking. Jennifer Nagel provides a persuasive account of epistemic anxiety as a “force” (2010, p. 408) that pushes subjects to gather evidence and think cautiously in specific settings, such as when the pragmatic expenses of an erroneous assumption would be significantly high. The Unbelievers feel ashamed of the Believers’ abiding faith in indigeneity and supernaturalism, and this contempt drives them to devalue their cultural uniqueness as cultural backwardness. They disregard the Believers’ epistemic belief in traditional healing, which is “one of the most significant cultural institutions in the country” (Decoteau, 2013; Thornton, 2009, p. 18) and has been associated with spirituality and cultural protectiveness. Twin-Twin, the Unbelievers’ representative, initially expresses his scepticism about the British intentions of acquiescence over South African land and law, but eventually comes to believe in their epistemology of civilization and development. Land, which has always been conceived as a spiritual embodiment and nature as a living reality, has now lost its primacy. When the white settlers begin grabbing the land, the Unbelievers are convinced that this is “a very small price to pay for the wonderful gift of civilization” (Mda, 2000, p. 85). The “incommensurability” between the Eurocentric version of progress and traditional Xhosa beliefs (Burchardt, 2017, p. 275) precipitates a state that José Medina terms “active ignorance.”

Active ignorance occurs when the subject actively participates in consolidating his or her ignorance and justifying it with specific reasons. It is challenging to overcome this ignorance as it requires a reconstruction of epistemic beliefs, approaches, and habits (Medina, 2013, p. 39). In this novel, the Unbelievers involve themselves in “active ignorance” by deliberately refraining from traditional values, customs, and practices. The Unbelievers not only demean the Believers but also castigate their indigenous knowledge systems and conceptions, advocating that those have only entangled the country in a regressive condition. The present-day Unbelievers, represented by Bhonco and his daughter Xoliswa, portray the past as “shameful” and the South African myths as “embarrassing” (Mda, 2000, p. 88)—which have retracted society from the path of progress. The Unbelievers build varied “defence mechanisms” (Medina, 2013, p. 39) by continually referring to the cataclysmic effect of the epistemic beliefs of the Believers and deliberately forgetting the heinous land seizures and oppressive acts perpetrated by the British. It is as if they inculcate their “ignorance” about the insidiousness of the Western epistemologies and comply with them. This is manifested in “the memory ritual” that the Unbelievers carry out in post-apartheid South Africa to reiterate the follies of indigenous beliefs so that they can estrange themselves from those and participate in the program of modernization administered by west-oriented capitalist organizations. In other words, the novel recounts that the protracted epistemic disbelief of the Unbelievers culminated in a state of active epistemic ignorance that thrived on “actively held false outlooks” (Kassar, 2018, p. 300) against the traditional systems and their allegiance to colonial structures.

Coloniality and epistemic obedience

The Unbelievers' conviction in the Western episteme of progress makes way for the perpetuation and practice of coloniality in the form of capitalist expansions. Mda's chronicling of the modern-day conflicts over land and development in the Qolorha village testifies to how a section of the South African masses, flaunting West-oriented educational values, depict an "epistemic obedience" to the colonial dynamics. Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007) demarcates coloniality from colonialism by stating that the latter refers to "long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism" (p. 243) and continues determining the parameters of cultural flows, political relations, subjective aspirations, interpersonal identities, and knowledge production. The grip of coloniality operates in such an invisible way that subjects unwittingly "breathe coloniality" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243) in everyday interactions, encounters, and experiences. In Mda's novel, the Unbelievers in post-apartheid times embody and enact the matrices of coloniality in a complex manner.

Bhonco, the son of Twin-Twin, has inherited his father's epistemic disbelief towards the indigenous way of thinking and emerges as an unswerving campaigner for modernization. Bhonco despises the indigenous cultural ethos—the "redness"—that he considers has warped the country into unrelenting backwardness. For him, the historical past is always burdensome, a traumatic memory that has hurled his country into years of deterioration. Reiterating the failure of the Believers to understand the long-term futility of Nongquwuse's prophecy, Bhonco holds grudges against their penchant for traditionalism. By discarding indigenous epistemology and comprehending the new knowledge of modernization, Bhonco wants to get rid of the "darkness of red" (Mda, 2000, p. 71). His aversion is expressed in his detestation of the traditional attire and red ochre, which he feels typify the outdatedness of the Believers and their inability to move on with time. It is quite strange to find that Bhonco starts hating the "red ochre" that women smear on their bodies and use to colour their "isikhakha skirts" (Mda, 2000, p. 71) and develops a fascination for the western suits. Further, he is extremely satisfied to see his Westernized daughter, Xoliswa Ximiya, take up the job of a schoolteacher and assert her identity as a progressive, educated woman in the village. This conceptualization of modernity—relying on the denigration of indigenous knowledge and cultural articulations—demonstrates how "modernity as a discourse and as a practice" has been intricately linked to coloniality (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 244) in the Global South. It is the Unbelievers' transgenerational obedience and appropriation of the colonial episteme that constitutes Bhonco's definition of progress and development. His passion for progress is informed by the Western hierarchical thinking that conceives of indigeneity, ecology, and non-human forms as the 'others' subordinate to humans. The "fundamental legitimation" of this dialectical thinking in which nature serves as an instrument for human needs inevitably goes back to the Enlightenment philosophy (Bowers, 1993, p. 25). So, the proposal to build a casino and water-sports paradise by a Europe-based company from Johannesburg is applauded by Bhonco and his peers as a splendid opportunity to raise the country's finances and move towards a better life. Bhonco's aspiration for development is evinced in his outrageous declaration:

We want to get rid of this bush which is a sign of our uncivilized state. We want developers to come and build the gambling city that will bring money to this community. That will bring modernity to our lives and will rid us of our redness. (Mda, 2000, p. 92)

Led by Bhonco, the Unbelievers refrain from bothering about the capitalist intentions of the company as much as they stay heedless about the ravages that such enterprises would aggravate on the biodiversity of Qolorha village. They neither value the aesthetics of the natural beauty of Qolorha-by-Sea nor consider the loss of indigenous trees, beaches, and fertile land as significant. This serves as a focal point in the narrative in which the Unbelievers' 'obedience' to colonial epistemology and its corollaries (Mignolo, 2009) immerses them in a cognitive framework "shaped by colonial logic" and makes it difficult to conceptualize or consider any other way of thinking (Dominguez, 2021, p. 552). This, in turn, reinstates the structural asymmetries at all levels and endangers the sustainability of land, the environment, and natural resources.

The "epistemology of coloniality" (Dominguez, 2021, p. 552) has been entrenched in such an omnipresent and multifaceted way that marginalization and exploitation are normalized (Castro-Gomez, 2005), and the masses are beguiled to believe the façade of civilizational narratives. With their assurances in the development project, the Unbelievers in this novel also expect that this will civilize the otherwise depleting village by facilitating employment, obtaining electricity, improving roads and communication, and harnessing an economic boom for all. What is important to note is that the Unbelievers' notion of development, inspired by Western capitalist dispositions, prioritizes human benefits, and delegitimizes nature and ecology as unsubstantial phenomena and categories. In one of his interviews, Mignolo refers to this as the "economic dimension of coloniality of power" that has assumed different forms such as mercantilism, extractivism, plantation economies, and labour and land exploitation for ages (Lopez-Calvo, 2016, p. 180). This one-sided vision of economic development is contested by Zim, the son of Twin and a staunch Believer in South African traditional culture. Intensely connected with the natural world, Zim pinpoints that a casino of such magnitude can never be accomplished without destroying the forests, disturbing the bird life, polluting the rivers and the sea, and jeopardizing the lustrous ecology (Mda, 2000, pp. 118–19)—an irreparable loss that Qolorha would incur. A similar cautionary note is provided by Camagu, a black South African who, after spending most of his life in the United States of America, comes back to his native country in 1994 and then, led by some extraordinary circumstances, reaches the village of Qolorha. Camagu is fascinated by Qolorha's ecological exuberance, a "place rich in wonders" where "rivers do not cease flowing, even when the rest of the country knells a drought" (Mda, 2000, p. 7). This signifies how Mda "reappropriates the African landscape by providing his chief protagonist, Camagu, with mystical, erotic dreams about rivers" (Fincham, 2011, p. 41), symbolizing his epistemic responsibility in his pursuit of individuality and resultant integration into the Qolorha community. On one of the occasions, Camagu, trying to pacify a heated argument between the Believers and the Unbelievers shares that his experience of casinos in "other parts of the country" (Mda, 2000, p. 117) has not been favourable at all. Instead of creating jobs, Camagu notes, the casinos bring more ruin by enmeshing the poor ordinary masses into disruptive activities and coercing them in hideous ways (Mda, 2000, p. 117).

However, the Unbelievers, enchanted by the spell of a glamorous transformation, fail to decipher the ingrained menace and covert forms of oppression that such anthropogenic developmental schemes conceal. A capitalist project in Qolorha would devastate the ecological resources, causing new forms of inequity and imbalance to emerge. The colonial capitalist attitude towards land and ecology has always been encoded in the nexus of productivity and profitability (Coulthard, 2014; Norgaard and Reed, 2018). Complying with

“capital’s conditions of productions” (O’Connor 1994, p. 8) and developmental paradigms, the Unbelievers devalue the interdependence of humans and nature, disregard the conservation of the indigenous ecology, and thereby collaborate in building a ‘metaphysical empire’ of coloniality and capitalism. Thiong’o (1986) observes that the ‘metaphysical empire’ overwhelms the colonized psychologically, inculcating in them a contempt for the “past as one wasteland of non-achievement” (p. 3) and stimulating them to cherish imperialism and its forces as the only “cure” (p. 3). The production of this “metaphysical empire” vis-à-vis epistemic, cultural, and capitalist domination becomes a surreptitious way of authorizing over the colonized subjects—compelling them to codify themselves as “localized, thrown out of civilization as an outcast [and] confined to custom” (Mamdani, 2013, p. 3). The Unbelievers’ derogating of their pasts, histories, and interdependent ways of living and appraising the foreign capitalist infiltration as salvaging are illustrations of the operationalizing of this metaphysics of coloniality that territorializes through conditioning the natives’ minds and upholding triumphant pictures of a modernized civilization.

Epistemic disobedience and decolonial ecological turn

In Mda’s novel, the metaphysical empire of coloniality is confronted by the Believers, and most conspicuously undermined by Qukezwa, Zim’s daughter. The Believers possess a high ecological sensibility and cherish an intrinsic connection with traditional culture. Contrary to the Unbelievers, the Believers are neither ashamed of the past nor subscribe to the colonial epistemology of progress at the cost of losing land and disparaging nature. Zim and his daughter representing the Believers in the novel, are staunchly against the dichotomic views of colonial modernity that categorize nature only in utilitarian terms and express their discontent against the aspirations of the West-based company in the village. Zim tries to convince the Unbelievers that the company’s plan to build a casino/resort reflects their deeper vested interests in replacing the village’s indigenous ecology with a “beautiful English garden” and countryside (Mda, 2000, p. 203) that would flaunt Western civilizational perspectives under the rubric of Western-oriented globalization. According to the Believers, this would further erode indigenous ethos and communal integrity by “making subjects [who] are socially located on the oppressed side of the colonial difference think epistemically like those in dominant positions” (Grosfoguel, 2007, p. 213). This epistemic governance imbedded in and engineered through the ecological expansionist model resonates with what John Vidal (2018) designates as the ‘green grabbing,’ in which markets are developed for transactions over land in former colonies and new modes of ownership are established by reconfiguring the laws of authority over and access to resources (Fairhead et al., 2012, p. 239). The restructuring of ownership inescapably alters the existent human-nature relationship in the region, incurring ecological and epistemological dominance and injustice. On the one hand, this leads to various forms of cultural imperialism in which the “market” is sanctioned “as the primary organizing principle of life” and development conforms to the “transformation of backward, traditional, cultural practices” into West-directed modern practices in order to facilitate growth and production (Marglin, 2003, p. 71). On the other hand, the appropriation of land by Western corporations ensures their autonomy and “accumulation” of resources, leading to the “dispossession” of the existing subjects or claimants who then become “proletariats separated from land and nature” (Glassman, 2006; Kelly, 2011). When the Believers refute collaborating with the Unbelievers in appreciating the plans of a magnanimous casino complex, their endeavour is to protect their land as well as articulate their disavowal of the masked colonialist epistemology that is being fostered through the assimilationist developmental agendas of big capitalist organizations.

The repudiation of the colonial and capitalist frames of thinking is enacted most compellingly by Qukezwa, who, through her intensive sensual and aesthetic capabilities, demonstrates the reinvigorating interdependence of the human and natural worlds. Qukezwa is the opposite of Xoliswa in embracing Xhosa's social norms and celebrating an inclusive view of communal development in which nature, ecology, and indigeneity are prioritized. Nurturing an abiding faith in the Xhosa traditional beliefs and cultural knowledge practices, Qukezwa embodies and champions the vitalities of the indigenous ecosystem. She develops expertise in split-tone singing, one of the particularities of the Xhosa community, and exhibits her keen passion for understanding the intricate rhythms of the natural world, manifested in her extraordinary ability to communicate with birds and animals. Contrary to Xoliswa, whose epistemic affiliation with the Western schemes of advancement makes her aspire to support the gambling complex, and elitist lifestyles and condemn the Believers as "sentimental old fools want to preserve birds and trees, and an outmoded way of life" (Mda, 2000: 67), Qukezwa's love for trees, the sea, rivers, and all non-human species enunciates that there is a need to delink the dominant epistemic patterns to obtain holistic growth. In her striving to preserve the natural wonders of Qolorha village, Qukezwa elucidates that while "modernity is presented as a rhetoric of salvation, it hides coloniality, which is the logic of oppression and exploitation" (Mignolo, 2007, p. 162), and to debunk it, the marginalized voices need to call for an epistemic disobedience.

Mignolo defines "epistemic disobedience" as a form of disobedience that challenges dominant ideologies and structures and the power equations and rationalizations attendant to those. This necessarily involves questioning the hegemonic knowledge system, critiquing the universalization of singular epistemic frameworks, and offering mechanisms to probe the importance of local or situated knowledge. Qukezwa, in this novel, demonstrates her disobedience to the overriding colonial order, first by valorizing the indigenous ecological values and ancestral customs, and second by cutting and vandalizing the 'foreign trees' in the village of Qolorha. Qukezwa's celebration of indigeneity and mission to safeguard the ecology of Qolorha epitomize her staunch defiance of colonial systematicity and assertion of decolonial praxis. In her encounters with Camagu, Qukezwa has triggered in him an urge to discover and experience the sensualities of nature and its bounty. Camagu learns from Qukezwa that nature is not a lifeless entity merely for human needs but possesses an ontological existence. For instance, in one of the interactions, Qukezwa educates Camagu about the sanctity of nature and the need to acknowledge its livingness: "You didn't cleanse yourself when you first came here. You must drink water from the sea when you are a stranger, so the sea can get used to you. Then it will love you" (Mda, 2000, p. 139). With his renewed knowledge of nature and culture, Camagu can now grasp the root differences that inform the Believers' and the Unbelievers' worldviews. The Believers find "song and dance and laughter and beauty" in the naturalness of Qolorha, whereas the Unbelievers see only "darkness, witchcraft, heathens and barbarians" (Mda, 2000, 219). While the Unbelievers accept the colonialists' epistemic sovereignty, the Believers strive for decolonial methodologies.

Qukezwa's chopping of alien trees becomes her most compulsive way of registering protest against capitalist advancements and accentuating the imperative of a decolonial ecological turn. Qukezwa's act bewilders Camagu, as he initially fails to map her intentions until he comes to listen to her trial in the local court of Qolorha. As an astute defender of indigenous nature and collective livelihood, Qukezwa refrains from apologizing for her "crime of chopping down a tree" (Mda, 2000, p. 213). Wrapped in her red blanket (signifying

the ‘redness’ of her culture) and with indomitable courage, Qukezwa candidly states that “I [have] cut the trees and I shall cut them again” (Mda, 2000, p. 214). Qukezwa’s firm stance surprises the court elders, who interrogate her for reiterating this act for the second time. Previously, Qukezwa had cut down the inkberry tree for its poisonous elements that were and would be destroying the indigenous plants. In her explanation, Qukezwa stridently testifies that she has chopped the trees because they are “foreign trees” and have been imported from countries like Central America and Australia (Mda, 2000, p. 216). These trees symbolize the silent and peaceful infiltration of foreign powers, an insidious way of establishing their stronghold in the ecological cartography of Qolorha. By cutting these foreign trees, Qukezwa undermines the white settlers’ control over environmentalism in South Africa. It is her emphatic way to denounce the “oppressive normative structures and the complacent cognitive–affective functioning that sustains those structures” (Medina, 2013, p. 3) in the cultural and ecological world. Qukezwa, through this defiant act, attempts to drive home to her community “the imperative for a [decolonial] ecological education,” without which a nation or culture can never sustain or prosper (Sewlall, 2007, p. 381).

In furnishing a critique of colonial modernity’s conceptualization of ecological premises, Malcolm Ferdinand (2022) emphasizes subverting the hegemonic ecological definitions. The need of the hour, according to Ferdinand, is to perpetuate decolonial ecology, “an ecology of the enslaved, an ecology that maintains continuities with the indigenous communities, an ecology that has been forged in modernity’s hold: a decolonial ecology” (p. 13). In short, decolonial ecology legitimizes the voices of those who have been colonized, marginalized, and suppressed, thereby rendering its connection with the political histories of “antislavery, anticolonialism, and environmentalism” (Ferdinand, 2022, p. 128). An adaptation of decolonial ecology is reliant on decolonizing the mind, recuperating indigenous histories, and channeling ethical ecological practices to ensure the flourishing of planetary sustainability (Trisos et al., 2021, p. 1207). Inspired by Qukezwa’s rebellious steps to safeguard her community and conserve Qolorha’s ecological sanctity, Camagu emerges as a splendid example of a decolonial practitioner. Overcoming his frustration and psychosocial dilemmas of straddling two cultures, Camagu, in the latter part of the novel, establishes his epistemic disobedience by actively joining the Believers in protesting the capitalist enterprises and endorsing “alternative plans for the development of the village” (Mda, 2000, p. 238). Camagu painstakingly tries to make the Unbelievers understand the ramifications of private proprietorship once the company from Johannesburg acquires its rights over Qolorha’s land. Here Camagu essentially takes a decolonial turn and opens up “the sources for thinking and to break up the apartheid of [ecological] domains through renewed forms of critique” (Maldonado-Torres, 2008, p. 7). Further, he plans for ecotourism, devising an environmentally friendly and ethical project that would ensure the autonomous livelihood of the Qolorha masses. Camagu envisions a self-sufficient and self-sustaining tourism industry that will help the community’s economic empowerment while also preserving the indigenous ecology. The kind of tourism that Camagu claims for is essentially decolonial, as it is not based on a mechanistic or dualistic view of development, but instead is connected to the indigenous cultural specificity and is comprehensive in nature—“that will benefit the people, that will not destroy indigenous forests, that will not bring hordes of people who will pollute the rivers and drive away the birds” (Mda, 2000, p. 201). This can be termed the “decolonial ecological turn,” which not only debunks the colonial-capitalist definitions of ecology and related knowledge systems but also substitutes them with a model of a local and indigenous ecosystem.

Contesting the interventions of the neo-imperialist ventures, Camagu takes a decolonial ecological turn in promoting ecotourism and establishing Qolorha as a national heritage site, one that would require the conglomerative efforts of the villagers and utilization of the “natural material that is found in the village” (Mda, 2000, p. 239). This heritage would stand as a perpetual embodiment of the community’s past, where the “wonders of Nongqawuse that led to the cattle-killing movement of the amaXhosa happened” (Mda, 2000, p. 233), but would never be an exotic illustration of the “imaginary past” (Mda, 2000, p. 248). Camagu envisions this heritage as a vital and dynamic representation of the ecological attractions of the present-day village of Qolorha, showcasing “the culture of the amaXhosa as they live it today, not yesterday” (Mda, 2000, p. 248). Camagu’s maturity attests to the necessity of a decolonial ecological turn based on the cultural historicity and spirituality of nature. For the triumph of Camagu’s project, the Unbelievers enchanted by the fetish of cosmopolitan gaudiness, need to acknowledge the existential significance of Nongqawuse’s prophecies that “arose out of the spiritual and material anguish of the amaXhosa nation” (Mda, 2000, p. 283), constituting an inevitable part of the communal historiography. Camagu’s dream, even if for the time being, comes true as the Department of Arts, Culture, and Heritage of South Africa declares Qolorha to be a national heritage site and dismisses the proposals for building a casino and a tourist resort. Thus, Camagu inspires the Qolorha people to reconsider development goals based on collective solidarity and ethical attitudes toward ecology, overturning the capital-driven imperialistic plan of a holiday paradise that has enamoured the Unbelievers. As a part of his alternative developmental model that would facilitate an indigenous ecological ethos, Camagu also sets up a cooperative of local women and foregrounds the traditional activities of harvesting the sea and making Xhosa clothing and jewelry. Camagu’s building of a cooperative exemplifies “a crucial step in South Africa’s development” in elucidating ways in which ecology can be nourished and deployed “to protect traditional ways of interacting with nature” (Vital, 2010, p. 310). This would in turn contribute to providing agency to bodies of localized knowledge and offering credibility to people on the periphery and the ecosystems they inhabit (Ingold, 2000), thereby unfolding possibilities of delinking and decoloniality.

Conclusion: Epistemic Responsibility

Mda’s *The Heart of Redness* can thus be considered an insightful depiction of the repercussions of colonialism in the epistemic and ecological structuring of South African society. By chronicling the colonial impingements on land, environment, and culture, and detailing its corruptive influences in the post-apartheid South African society, Mda seeks to uncover the layered functioning of the colonialist and capitalist epistemologies and ideologies that aid in “the endless accumulation of capital and the commodification of Earth’s resources” (Satgar, 2018, p. 52). Down the centuries, Western ecological knowledge has been deployed to expel people and accomplish settler-colonial conservation projects by denigrating or limiting access of the indigenous population to their own land and resources (Dowie, 2011). The process of disseminating and embedding this knowledge has been insidious, systemic, and continual, making it difficult to dismantle the varied “entanglements of empire and ecological destruction” (Ana et al., 2022, p. 1). In this regard, Mda’s novel obtains a perceptive analysis of how masses are driven to “epistemic obedience” and ushers in an understanding of how delinking the colonial episteme is indispensable for the sustainability of indigenous communities and the preservation of their ecological wealth. The dominant narratives of environmental hazards have propagated universalized explanations, sidestepping the underpinnings of colonial capitalism. This has been

instrumental for the “planetary emergency of the modern era” and the ongoing exploitative mechanisms of the Global North (Suzuki, 2021, p. 49). Uncovering the intricacies of capitalist oppression, Mda’s *The Heart of Redness* puts forward an alternative perspective on decoloniality. In so doing, the novel critiques the discursive formations of Western modernity and emphasizes the ontological need for recentering the epistemologies of the hegemonized and suppressed.

Mda’s intellectual rendering of South African cultural traditionalism and the intense experiential significance of indigenous values reflect his ‘epistemic responsibility’ towards cultural regeneration and the country’s fight for environmental justice. ‘Epistemic responsibility’ broadly denotes fostering unbiased perspectives, open-minded attitudes, revisionist approaches, discarding derogatory and preconceived assumptions, and valuing others’ knowledge (Lehrer, 2000, p. 124). Mda’s novel upholds that epistemic responsibility needs to be inculcated and carried out at a collective level. There is a need to decentralize “the West’s view of itself as the centre of legitimate knowledge” (Smith, 1999, p. 72) and reposit the non-Western and indigenous knowledge systems as valid and sacrosanct. Mda’s novel supports the establishment of decolonial ethics, which can harness progress and welfare outside the commodifying matrices of Western capitalism, by advocating a decolonial ecological turn vis-à-vis disobedience of Western paradigms. In this regard, Mda’s novel also echoes the primary objectives of South Africa’s cry against environmental racism and injustices. The South African environmental justice movement began in 1988, with “Earthlife Africa” being one of the foremost activist organizations that protested the exploitative drives steeped in the legacies of colonialism and enunciated indigenous people and ecology-centric developmental goals (Vital, 2010, pp. 310–11). Through the Believers’ faith in their ancestral past, Qukezwa’s defiance against white interventions on indigenous ecology, and Camagu’s organizing of resistance to corporate projects, Mda’s novel affiliates with South Africa’s call for environmental justice and foregrounds the need for the active participation of communities in welfare and development programs. Thus, by reinstating decolonial practices for the conservation of indigenous ecology and championing a meaningful planetary survival, the novel exemplifies “epistemic responsibility” in countering the structuralized politics of colonial and capitalist epistemology. In this framework, the novel is also intrinsically linked to an environmental justice perspective, demonstrating the importance of conservation in relation to its consequences on the livelihoods and economic well-being of local communities and highlighting the need for the safeguarding of biodiversity (Caminero-Santangelo, 2014, p. 109). The novel becomes Mda’s way of corroborating the processes of delinking and decolonizing, thereby attesting to Mignolo’s observation that “you can critique de-westernization but you cannot deny that is going on” (Lopez-Calvo, 2016, p. 181) at political, cultural, and epistemological levels.

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