A Postcolonial Ecocritical Reading of Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller*

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Abstract

Zakes Mda's novel *The Whale Caller* (2005) is a story about the extraordinary relationship between a man, a woman, and a whale. Set in the post-apartheid South Africa and involving issues like bestiality, animal conservation, and environmental degradation, the novel invites postcolonial and environmental reading. After laying out some of the relevant scholarly criticisms, this research article will engage four topics of interest to postcolonial ecocritics: the history of agricultural exploitation during the period of colonialism in South Africa, postcolonial tourism, whale conservation, and the challenge of global animal protection in relation to environmental justice. Throughout the study, the overlapping interests, as well as tension and conflicts, between the postcolonial and environmental criticisms will be underlined in order to show the possibility of interdisciplinary collaboration between the two fields. The research article will also shed light on the complexity and inextricability of the environmental problems and the global economic disparity, which have been brilliantly presented throughout this novel.

I. Introduction

The Whale Caller (2005), written by the South African playwright and novelist Zakes Mda, incorporates a number of environmental concerns ranging from wildlife and bestiality to tourism, consumerism and natural disaster. So far most criticisms and book reviews pay attention to the romantic interspecies relationship between the Whale Caller and the female southern right whale named Sharisha; some look more closely at the particular context of post-apartheid South Africa and the marginalized people whose lives dominate the storyline; a few draw attention to the magical realist mode of writing and the role of Sharisha as a liminal agent rather than just a whale; yet none seems to have read the environment, plants and animals in this novel in relation to the complex colonial-ecological history and current, postcolonial environmental problems. By looking at several issues of postcolonial-environmental criticism, colonial history, environmental causation, postcolonial tourism, wildlife conservation and environmental injustice, this research article will show how postcolonial criticism and ecocriticism are ultimately complementary and necessary to each other. It will also show that through *The Whale Caller* Mda has pitched the prime concerns of the two contesting fields together and by doing so has revealed the complexity and inextricability of the problems of the two fields, and the limitations of the two approaches in separation.

The Whale Caller is the story of the eponymous Whale Caller and a female whale named Sharisha. Their relationship develops after the periodic

visits of Sharisha to Hermanus, the coastal town renowned as a southern right whale watching site. While this unusual relationship goes on, Saluni, the village drunk, is attracted to the Whale Caller and is determined to possess him. This she succeeds, but their relationship seems to oscillate between passionate obsession and possessive resentment. Saluni is addicted to drinking and to the Bored Twins, mysterious twin girls whose angelic voices seem charged with magical power; while the Whale Caller is often distracted by the annual visit of Sharisha. After a while, Saluni becomes increasingly jealous; and when Sharisha starts to stand her ground—or sea-ground—at Hermanus instead of leaving for deeper seas in summer with the pod, the relationship between the human couple worsens. Being sorely disappointed in the Whale Caller and in her failure to become a celebrated singer, Saluni intentionally stares at an eclipse in order to blind herself. Afterward she and the Whale Caller set off for an aimless exile, only to find their romance quickly replaced by discontent and disillusion that spiral down into an unpredictable denouement for each of them in this eternal triangle.

II. Literary Review

Contesting or Complimentary Views: Postcolonialism, Ecocriticism, and Previous Responses to *The Whale Caller*

I would like to begin by outlining the existing debates about the relationship between the two fields. In "Environmentalism and Postcolonialism" (2005), Rob Nixon asks what it means to "bring environmentalism into dialogue with postcolonialism" (p. 196). They are two of the most dynamic fields in contemporary literary studies, but there seems to be a feeling of indifference or even mistrust between them. Nixon discusses some important disagreements between concerns of postcolonialists and ecocritics. For example, postcolonial critics tend to foreground hybridity and cross-culturation, while ecocritics have been drawn more to discourse of purity, virgin wilderness and preservation of uncorrupted places. Postcolonial scholars largely concern themselves with displacement and global or cosmopolitan framework, while environmental writings tend to give priority to the literature of place, usually national or local. Postcolonialism has been interested in excavating the marginalized past, history of pre-colonial societies; while environmental literature looks differently at history, seeking timeless, solitary moments of communion with nature more than indigenous cultures. Despite the differences, Nixon argues that these differences should be bridged and it is necessary to integrate environmental issues into a postcolonial approach to literature and vice versa. In order to do so, we must try to think more inclusively and explore writings that engage with environmental politics and conflicts between minorities, nation-states, and transnational macro-economic power (pp. 197-8, 205). Nixon is not alone in this proposition as other scholars have also voiced the need to combine the two

disciplines. According to the article "Literature and Environment" by the three eminent ecocritics Lawrence Buell, Ursula K. Heise, and Karen Thornber (2011), the two fields could be corrective of each other. The integration will reduce postcolonial critics' preoccupation with displacement and ecocritical preoccupation with the ethics of place. Besides, there are issues that both disciplines can work well together, such as land rights, environmental degradation in previous colonies, ecological devastation versus postcolonial trauma, and pollution (pp. 426-7).

Before now, a few scholars have tried to investigate ways in which *The Whale Caller* might be relevant to the arguments of both ecological and postcolonial critics. One of the most notable studies is *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (2010). In the second half of this book, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin discuss zoocritical reading of various literatures, both classic and contemporary. The section includes an investigation of "animal and human agency and cross-species contact, including sexuality and clashes between human and animal interests in postcolonised contexts" (p. 22). The two scholars' reading of Mda's *The Whale Caller* focuses on human's attitudes toward the whale, the sexual and spiritual dimension of the Whale Caller's love for Sharisha, and the highly problematic communication between the whale and human. The conclusion, coming up rather blandly to me, is that "the strongest of human emotions—love—is not and cannot be confined to our own species" and that "the rights of humans and animals are inextricably interwoven" (pp. 199-201). Another work that deals directly with postcolonialism and ecocritism is Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley's *Postcolonial Ecology* (2011). This work looks more closely at the historical and environmental aspects of colonialism, the exchange between the colonies and the empire, the cultivation of place through postcolonial literature, the forest fiction, and militourism. Jonathan Steinwand, a contributor of this ambitious collection, reads literature about cetaceans by Amitav Ghosh, Linda Hogan, Witi Ihimaera and Zakes Mda. *The Whale Caller* is read in particular as Mda's attempt to show the severed connection between the New South African people and the historical links to their ancestor, the often-blurred boundaries between routine and rituals of nature worship and 'civilizing rituals' of conspicuous consumption, and the "first-world environmentalist voyeurism facilitated by the whale-watching tourism industry" (pp. 190-1). Steinwand's conclusion, or rather final question, is whether the Whale Caller's refusal to have any further communication to do with Sharisha's calf in the end can be seen as a "total renunciation of sentimentalism" (p. 192). If so, this novel could serve as a "corrective to the sentimentalizing tendencies of environmentalism" (p. 185).

These two book chapters are immensely valuable studies on interspecies relationship and communication in Mda's *The Whale Caller*. However, in my view they seem to focus more on animal studies, animal agency, and

interspecies love and sex; leaving out crucial issues of the exploitation of the once-colonized territory of South Africa by the hegemonic power, both in history and at present, and the issue of global animal conservation where concerns of the two critical fields overlap. This paper, therefore, aims to fill in these gaps. To answer Nixon's and other scholars' challenge about bridging the two literary studies, I would like to examine ways in which ecocriticism and postcolonialism engage and interact with each other in the context of Mda's novel, and to explore tension generated in that process. My analysis thus focuses on four major areas where the two fields of studies intersect, which consist of the issue of colonialism and environmental causation, postcolonial tourism and the commoditization of whales, whale protection at personal and transnational level, and global animal conservation in relation to environmental justice.

III. Discussion

1. Colonialism and Environmental Causation

In contrast to scholars who eagerly pursue the animal questions and interspecies relationship in *The Whale Caller*, I am drawn more to another area which, although perceived as merely a backdrop—is directly concerned with postcolonial enterprise—the cultivation and plantation history of South Africa. This topic is only slightly mentioned in contrast to the gigantic charismatic creature like Sharisha and the two human characters. However, this issue is important because the change of agricultural pattern as a result of colonialism led not only to a permanent change of lifestyle of indigenous people, but arguably supported the power structure in which the white settlers could maintain the superior position as well. My line of argument is influenced by the idea of ecological impact of colonialism. One of the first scholars who drew bold relations between imperialism and ecology is Alfred Crosby, whose book *Ecological Imperialism* marks a watershed in the bio-historical studies. Saying that "perhaps the success of European imperialism has a biological, an ecological, component" (1986, p. 7), Crosby suggests that multiple ecological conditions, from the most fundamental factors like the pattern of trade winds, diseases, or even weeds and animals domestic to each region, could be of equal importance to the military advancement in the European exploration and imperialism. Apart from Crosby's argument, the idea of *environmental causation* has been of interest to researchers in environmental and postcolonial studies. Basically speaking, the term suggests the causality between imperial expansion and the fundamental environmental changes in the conquered regions all over the world. These changes include, for instance, alterations in agricultural methods and patterns through more advanced tools or technology, the intensive production of cash crops demanded by European markets, the more intense extraction of raw materials and natural resources, the expansion of urbanity, and the change in demographic structure of the whole region. These processes have

been discussed in Beinart and Hughes's *Environment and Empire* (2007); yet the authors warn readers against *environmental determinism* or an attempt to "explain human cultures, or the rise and fall of states, or empires, or conflict and rebellions… by recourse to immediate environmental influence" (pp. 11-2). I am thus cautious of this pitfall and acknowledge here that the European conquest was definitely not one single cause responsible for any given changes of landscape or disappearance of species in the African continent. What I would like to pursue, however, is how environmental factors might materialize into uneven development or unequal social and economic distribution between the European settlers and African people. My first topic in this section concerns the initiation of grapevine plantation and wine production in South Africa.

Wine lovers must have heard about South African wine because the country is a major producer; but they might not know that grapevine was not there before the Europeans arrived. According to "A Brief History of Wine in South Africa" by Stefan K. Estreicher (2014), thousands of cuttings of grapevine were imported from France and Germany in 1655 and first planted in South Africa by the Dutchman Jan Van Riebeeck, the first Commander of the Dutch East India Company (in Dutch, *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* or VOC). Before the arrival of the Europeans, the indigenous people in the southern and western Africa were the San and the Khoikhoi. The San, called Bushman by the Europeans, were hunters-gatherers and lived inland. The Khoikhoi, or Hottentots to the Europeans, were nomadic herders who lived along the coast. Some of them hunted to protect their herds and flocks, living a life of transhumant pastoralism (p. 505). As was the case of other colonized regions, the European successfully gained control over the tip of this continent via political, military, religious, and ecological means[1]. With the arrival of the white settlers, the lifestyle and livelihood of the native people in South Africa changed dramatically. Instead of hunting, herding, and foraging, many people came to contact with expanding settler farmers and become farmhands or laborers on colonial farms. Some of the plantations were devoted to wheat and other food in order to meet the needs of VOC ships. The grapevine plantation proved successful from the start, but the benefit rarely fell to the hand of the indigenous people. Protected by the VOC trading policy, which dictated that the VOC had full control over the production of all goods, including wine, nobody was allowed to conduct private business outside the Colony. Arable lands were sought after and estates were granted to more settlers specifically for wine production, more wine shoots, sometimes as many as 100,000, were ordered and imported together with winemaking equipment. Slaves were in great demand in the Cape Colony and they were imported from India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Madagascar and the African coast (Beinart and Hughes, 2007, p. 60; Estreicher, 2014, pp. 508-9, 513). All of these apparently brought about significant changes to the landscape, the people's occupation and the demographic structure of the

region. Despite some decline due to the abolition of slave trade, the *phylloxera* plague, and embargo in the apartheid era, South Africa is now the eighth largest world wine producer with about 3,500 primary wine producers (Estreicher, 2014, pp. 523-30). These export numbers sound very well for the South African GDP, but hidden behind them is the fact that the industry does not genuinely benefit the local people, or at least that is what Mda seems to suggest. In *The Whale Caller* new South African people are closely associated with wine industry and there seem to be two levels of dependence on it. As a consumer, one of the novel's major characters is practically a slave to alcohol. Saluni demonstrates the severity of addiction that is a key motif in the novel. She is alcoholic to the point that she drinks even methylated spirits mixed with water and her face has been "ravaged by spirits" (24). She has absolutely no financial security because of alcoholism and her excessive wine drinking is arguably the cause of her tragic ending. On the other hand, a number of poor people are depending on the industry in order to make ends meet. The novel explores the plight of the poor through the depiction of the parents of the Bored Twins—casual vineyard workers, working long hours for meager pay and sometimes getting a few bottles of wine instead of cash. Even when one of their daughters is very sick, the parents cannot stay with her at home but must go to work in the vineyard from dawn to dusk. "It is the fate of all 'piece-job' workers… no work, no pay; no pension; no sick leave; no maternity leave, let alone the luxury of paternity leave; no compassionate leave even if your loved one is dying" (p. 102). This is another form of slavery—the poverty-stricken, low paid, unprotected and non-unionized common laborers scatter in the country with little job security and welfare. All these only to feed the local and international wine markets; the majority of income would likely benefit land and business owners, presumably Afrikaners.

Beside the vineyard and wine industry in this region, another supreme colonial success is underlined in Mda's elaborate description of the abandoned colonial mansion now occupied by the parents of the Bored Twins. This mansion, rumored to be haunted, belonged to a bankrupt baron who murdered his family and committed suicide when the ostrich feather market collapsed when the World War I broke out. His enterprise is described here.

> [The baron] had sailed to the Cape of Good Hope to join the newly established settlement, then under the Dutch East India Company. His descendants had tried their hand at various trades until they found their niche, two centuries later, in ostrich farming. By the time the baron took over from his father the family had amassed untold riches from feathers that were in great demand by European and American fashion houses. He had built the mansion as a holiday home on the outskirts of the village of Hermanus. It was a replica of his other mansion in the Klein Karoo, where he had his ostrich farms. (p. 27)

Here Mda touches upon a business venture most promising and lucrative in the nineteenth-century—the ostrich, a bird native to the African continent. His mention of the distinctive Cape Dutch mansion, still a common sight in South Africa today, might remind us of the colonial construction or its legacy; but more interesting to postcolonial environmentalists is the issue of cross-regional exploitation in South Africa. When talking about wildlife in Africa, people probably think first about hunting; but there was actually a different mode of animal exploitation. According to Beinart and Hughes, ostrich proves an interesting case because it is the only significant success of European's attempts to domesticate wildlife species in southern Africa. Before 1860s there had been some demand for ostrich feathers for fans and hats, met by hunted ostriches; until Dr William Atherstone, an Eastern Cape scientist, found a way to incubate the eggs, which allowed reproduction and breeding.

> Intensive rearing was made possible by large-scale planting of lucerne as fodder, together with dam construction necessary in order to irrigate the crop. Since this big heavy bird could not fly, it was more easily farmed in small enclosures with high fences. The number of farmed ostriches climbed steadily to a peak of about 800,000 in 1910 [when] ostrich feathers sold from the Cape fetched £2 million annually. (2007, p. 72)

To illustrate how successful this business was, many settlers and local people even gave up their vineyard and turned their lands to alfalfa fields to feed the growing ostrich feather industry. Each ostrich in a farm can be plucked every seven or eight months, contrary to the previous method of gathering feathers from wild ostriches, which necessitates hunting and killing the bird for a crop of plumes ("Africa," 2014). Thus, one may argue that domestication of wild animals is probably a more sensible means to exploit them, especially when the species had been hunted almost to extinction, as was the case of ostrich before the middle of the 19th century. Nevertheless, we might still question the necessity of the enterprise and regard ostrich farming as another example of how the metropole fetched a fortune from the land and resources of the colonies to serve the demand of Europe. Both grapevine and ostrich farm also show how history of empire building and environmental manipulation are inextricable. Mda's brief mention of the two colonial enterprises could thus bring about a reappraisal of the ways European settlers have come to exploit the resources and cause significant environmental changes in South Africa, apart from issues more popular to scholars, such as excessive hunting of wildlife and diamond mining, which have led to serious environmental devastation then and now.

One last plant species that features prominently in this novel is tulip, but details of the history of colonial manipulation through this specific plant are not as widely published. The novel only mentions this specific flower as the

source of wealth of the Dutch ostrich baron in the 17th century. What is more interesting than the history of cultivation of this plant in the New World is Mda's elaborate description of it in the modern-day South Africa. This happens when the Whale Caller follows Saluni to the elegant Dutch mansion where the Bored Twins live. Noticing the dazzling colors of wild tulips, he remembers the story of the ostrich baron who inherited the bulbs from his ancestor, the tulip baron whose son exiled to the Cape of Good Hope to be a clerk in the Dutch East India Company. This son of the tulip baron—

> planted his bulbs in his little garden, and when his children—both those from his Dutch wife, and from Khoikhoi and Malay slave mistresses—were all grown up they dug out some of the bulbs and planted them in their little gardens. It happened like that over the generations, for almost three hundred years, until the time of the ostrich baron.
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> Tulips flower in spring, but these have developed erratic habits. They blossom any season they feel like blossoming, and they do it all at the same time, upstaging every other plant in the wild garden. And when they have decided to bloom, sometimes after hibernating for three years without a peep of colour from them, they are relentless. They spread all over the garden and are not deterred by the wild shrubs and grasses and the prickly pear and other cacti that otherwise reign supreme in the garden. But they never grow beyond what used to be the borders of the original ostrich baron's garden. (p. 105)

First, the excerpt addresses the interracial marriages or miscegenation, which might correspond with cross-bred species of tulips, described earlier as growing "in clusters of deep purple, white, pink, yellow and red. Some petals combine different hues. There are red petals with yellow edges and violet petals with white edges" (p. 105). The erratic habits of these hybrid tulips in the middle part of the excerpt, however, is interesting as much as puzzling. One could take such occurrence as an example of magical realism, but I want to suggest that such erratic patterns of blossoming might result from manipulation, such as cross-pollination, or of plant transfer from the old world and the old climate to answer capitalist demands. The tulips' inconsistency might also be seen as the plant's defiance against human exploitation, as they seem to evade our control and become wild and unpredictable. As a result, for example, Saluni will later be frustrated by the tulips hibernating in spring so that she cannot pluck some of them to brighten the Whale Caller's house (p. 126). On the other hand, Mda creates these tulips to reign supreme over other shrubs and grasses in the garden[2], yet they never grow outside the borders of the baron's garden. One might find it simply fantastical again that these tulips could observe the limit of the late baron's territory. In fact it is possible that they can grow only under certain condition within the baron's well-kept garden, but cannot survive the harsh climate and compete with native plants outside. Yet again, readers might

attribute the tulip's erratic behavior to the climate change, which has indeed affected flowering patterns as reported in scholarly journals and newspaper columns[3]. But just as we cannot claim that the "gale-force winds rampaging at one hundred and fifty kilometers an hour" and the "freak wave that hit Hermanus" (p. 207) in the last section of the novel are surely the results of the global warming; it remains for the most part unknown whether—or more likely, how far—the erratic behavior of tulips in this novel is a result of the global climate change. So far my first topic deals with the colonial history, colonial industry and environmental changes inflicted by colonial enterprises, which brought about changes in South African environment and people's livelihood. These, to a certain extent at least, have helped establish the hegemonic power and widened the gap between European settlers and indigenous people. In the next section, I will move on to a more current situation and investigate how the structure of colonial control still co-exists with environmental manipulation decades after the country gained independence from the western powers.

2. Postcolonial Tourism and the Commodification of Whales in *The Whale Caller*

As the previous section shows, the European settlers' arrival and settlement on the African coast from the 17th to 19th century had led to exploitation of African agriculture at the expense of the landscape, wild animals, and native occupants. After the establishment of the Republic of South Africa in 1961 and the dismantling of apartheid in 1990s, one might argue that colonialism has officially ended; several attempts have been made to correct or reconcile interracial conflicts in the past. The lingering effect of colonialism, however, remains acute in South Africa today in the form of neocolonialism. The term is used to explain the phenomena in which Western powers still "[maintain] maximum indirect control over erstwhile colonies, via political, cultural and above all economical channels" (Childs and Williams, 1997, p. 5). Mda's novel addresses the expansion of capitalism over South Africa—not through the expansion of markets or multinational corporations to employ cheap labor, nor the financial aids from monetary organizations—but through tourism, which is a paradoxical operation that both suppresses and empowers Third World countries at the same time. According to *Postcolonial Tourism* by Anthony Carrigan (2011),

> mass travel practices frequently exploit uneven distributions of wealth, remapping colonial travel patterns as increasing numbers of citizens from rich nations choose to visit much poorer states. Such rapid industry expansion has clear bearings on issues that are central to postcolonial studies in the era of corporate globalization. Tourism propels environmental transformation, cultural commoditization, and sexual consumption—all processes that are acutely felt in many countries still grappling with the

> legacies of western colonialism. At the same time, tourism is consistently welcomed across the postcolonial world as a much-needed source of job creation and foreign exchange, even if the power relations that condition these transactions are distinctly asymmetrical. (p. xi)

Here Carrigan sheds light on the dilemma of the 21st-century tourism in South Africa and elsewhere. Specifically in this novel's context, Western Cape—like many coastal towns in developing countries worldwide—is now a major tourist attraction. The community's economy heavily depends on affluent Western tourists. One may argue that revenue generated by tourism does not go to any European nations but circulates within the country, unlike the acquisition of resources through colonialism in the past. Even so, the expansion of tourism industry generates a level of dependency on the west and the capitalist monetary system. In *The Whale Caller*, the start of tourist period is felt in the sudden rise of costs of living even before whale watchers and tourists are present. "They will peak in two months... One feels their presence in the prices that suddenly rocket through the roofs of the stores and restaurants even before one sees their funereal figures wandering in a daze with binoculars and digital cameras weighing heavily on their necks" (pp. 130-1). Tourism does not only make living very expensive in Hermanus, the center of whale watching, but it also means a wider gap between people living in this tourist town and inland—"While the town of Hermanus is raking in fortunes from tourism, the mothers and fathers of Zwelihle are unemployed" (p. 86). Some of these poor inland provinces have been provided development in forms of electricity, telephone and water services through the black economic empowerment campaign. Yet, because of unemployment, they can hardly afford these luxuries and as a result many lose their houses, unable to pay service arrears. In other words, while tourism has benefited a handful of politicians and some local people, and arguably has helped the country progress materialistically, the extent that tourism becomes the backbone of the country's economy should raise concerns over uneven development and unequal income distribution, apart from environmental degradation and waste problem.

Not only do tourism and rapid urbanization have doubled-edged effects on the local people, but they also affect the very animal that generates tourists. Before discussing the problem of whale watching, it is a consoling fact that the situation of whales has much improved from the past since they were declared protected species in 1935. Detailed information regarding the history of whaling, whale's significance to several human industries and to the ecosystem, and its status as an endangered species is available in Joe Roman's *Whale* (2006). It is also in this book that the implication of whale watching, in contrast to whaling in the past, is elaborated. For a start, Roman suggests that "many conservationists argue that whales are now worth more alive than dead; that is, the value of seeing a whale brings in more tourist dollars than a dead one ever

could… In 1955, after thousands of people were attracted to a lookout at Cabrillo National Monument in San Diego to watch migrating grey whales, the first commercial trip was launched, at $1 per person" (p. 171). Despite being quite a recent industry, the trend grows rapidly and spreads across the globe, turning these once-remote marine mammals into dramatic spectacles for wealthy tourists. To local people, the whale-watching business could mean a long-lasting enterprise that requires little investment. Communities can benefit directly from their conservation of the whale and its habitats. For environmentalists, whale watching is supported as having less environmental impacts to the marine ecosystem in contrast to whaling or other marine recreations. The new practice is also looked up to as a positive means to generate educational and scientific benefits to visitors and local people.

So much for the commendable points, there remains the question whether whale watching can genuinely promote this animal's welfare in a long run. Mda seems skeptical about the enterprise and voices his criticism in the description of the peak of the whale-watching season. Everybody celebrates the arrival of the new calves in the annual Hermanus Kalfiefees, but attention is given to sightseeing, mercantile exchange, festivities, consumption, and spectacular sighting of whales rather than education or conservation of them. "The locals, who don't usually care much for whale watching, are also out in throngs. Some are out to flog their wares… Processions of tourists go though the ritual of dropping coins into enamel bowls or cold drink cans without paying much attention to the performances of the boys" (p. 17). Not much is mentioned about understanding or educating the public or the locals about whales, not to mention conservation. For tourists, afternoons are ideally spent at the lagoon filled with "deafening noise from the machines of motorized water sports enthusiasts;" at several beaches—"the Voelklip with its terraced lawns; the secluded Langbaai, popular with lovers and naturalists; the Kammabaai, a haven for surfers" (p. 43); or at restaurants that boldly advertise "foreign cuisine, ranging from India and Chinese to French and Italian" (p. 114). Southern right whales are simply an attraction—a commodity that draws in dollars to this seaside resort. Everyone seems to believe so except the Whale Caller who is forming a special relationship with Sharisha. He looks forward to the yearly arrival of whales and is always looking out for them from a cliff once they are there, without trying to translate his sighting into material gain. His gaze is not totally free from personal interest, however, as this article will show; yet his opinions are one of the most penetrating critiques of the rise of mass tourism and the negative effects of whale watching at Hermanus. They cannot help but lead us to the attempts and the challenges of whale conservationism both at personal and transnational levels. These will be discussed in the next section.

3. Saving the Whale? Wildlife Protection at Personal and Transnational Levels

In this novel, whales do not only feature as a backdrop or as a commodified good for tourists, one whale in particular is characterized as a major character and thus merits scrutiny. To make an ecocentric judgment of this work, I would like to start by evaluating this fictional whale not as a symbol but as a real, living animal, and by regarding Sharisha's suffering as a reflection of the real injuries done to the mammal in the wild. First of all, studies show that the Whale Caller's worry about Sharisha getting entangled and killed in nets is not ungrounded. "Reported deaths from entanglement amount to about 1.5 whales per year, and entanglement is so common that some 75 percent of living whales bear scars" ("Threats to Right Whales")[4]. In *The Whale Caller*, Sharisha once suffers from a "gaping wound… caused by a ship's propeller on her way to the southern seas" (p. 129). Such direct injury often occurs in reality, apart from other kinds of disturbance in whale's feeding and socializing grounds done by the noise of the ships' engines, which reduce the ability of whales to detect their prey, communicate, and navigate ("Be Whale Wise Guidelines"). In the novel, as Mda tries to juxtapose the two female characters, Saluni and Sharisha suffer a similar injury at the same time. Finding her man caring so much about the whale, Saluni furiously shows the Whale Caller a wound on her thigh. She is similarly bleeding and asking for the same attention and sympathy; yet one cannot help finding her cry for attention uncalled for. After all, she inflicts that wound on herself and later she even tries to stop it from healing only to spite the Whale Caller. Readers cannot help feeling that the bleeding wound of Sharisha, which is done unfairly against her and which none can heal, makes her worthier of sympathy. The same goes with the ending of the novel in which Sharisha is relieved from stranding by the most brutal means—explosion by dynamite. Even though it is parallel to Saluni's ironic execution by the Bored Twins, the prolonged suffering of the whale, the stupid jests exchanged among the politicians and the media, and the description of the onlookers who "cheer and applaud like the carnival crowd" at the explosion (p. 224) makes Sharisha's death all the more distressing. In the past, such an event of a stranded whale would be an opportunity to perform a ritual, "the Khoikhoi of old [would dance] around… [giving] their thanks to Tsiqua, He Who Tells His Stories in Heaven, for the bountiful food" (p. 4). On the contrary, Sharisha's final moment is celebrated as a spectacle for tourists and a chance to gain media attention for local authorities. Her shredded carcass is showered on the Whale Caller, making Saluni throw up, and is finally devoured by seagulls that "scavenge on the tiny pieces strewn on the sand" (p. 224). In her violent ending, Sharisha exemplifies a mute victim of human cruelty--the protected animal that cannot be saved. Previously she was hurt in the wild from the boatman's ignorance or

carelessness; finally she is killed in the name of mercy and is exploited even in her death.

On a personal level, in opposition to all kinds of environmentally harmful activities, the Whale Caller stands for a person who genuinely cares about whales and nature. He resists commodification of the nonhumans in every form, and resents even the fact that Saluni tries to rent out the giant fish that he caught to tourists to photograph instead of selling its meat as usual. Unlike the official whale crier, the Whale Caller "call whales to himself" (p. 14), not for tourists, possibly a nobler act that undermines objectification of whales. His exceptionally intimate relationship with Sharisha in particular is a striking model of how human beings and animals might communicate and interact in ways that are above the level of exploitation or hierarchical division. The problem with this line of argument, however, is the fact that even though the Whale Caller is free from anthropocentric motive, he is the most self-righteous and egocentric person. The novel is ridden with his whines and complaints, about Sharisha, Mr Yodd, and Saluni. His obsession with Sharisha makes him hysterical when a group of male whales are about to mate with her, so that he blows his horn hard to "save Sharisha from this rape" (p. 66). The interdependency between the Whale Caller and Sharisha reaches an unhealthy level when it results in a drastic change in her migratory pattern and consequently leads to her tragic end. The Whale Caller's attachment to Sharisha, therefore, is yet dubious in the eye of ecocritics since it borders on domestication of the wild animal and betrays the implicit urge to master nature. Mda seems to be aware of this dangerous interspecies relationship as the Whale Caller finally develops a different attitude toward Sharisha's calf in the end: "He stopped playing [his song]. He must not enslave the young one with his kelp horn. Softly he said, 'Go, little one. You do not want to know me'" (p. 229). The Whale Caller renounces his previous claim to friendship or masterhood over this gigantic mammal, as he is made to realize that destruction of a fellow animal can come from hatred and ignorance as much as from this kind of personal attachment and egotistic manifestation of love and good-will. Ultimately, by denouncing commodification of whales and idolization of them at the same time, the novel points out that the most favorable relationship to forge with the nonhumans on a personal level is perhaps to maintain only distant compassion for them—in other words, to leave them alone.

The problem of over-interdependence between individual human and nonhuman leads us to the larger challenge regarding the implementation of wildlife protection, which is closely related to the previous topic of tourism and commodification of whales. In the middle of the story, the Whale Caller's anxiety intensifies when he hears that there is "a mission of tourists in a boat sailing towards a whale," some even come back boasting "how they actually touched a whale when it came alongside a boat" (p. 131). It is not that they do not know the regulations of the boat-based whale watching—the boat is not

allowed to follow a whale at a speed of more than three and a half kilometres per hour; it must not get closer than fifty metres to a whale; and touching whales was strictly prohibited. However, in practice the boat-based whale watching is abused since "no one will be out there at sea to enforce the regulations" (pp. 131-2). As one can easily imagine, there is a problem of law enforcement when it comes to these marine mammals because the law can hardly be strictly enforced over such an enormous body of the ocean; and those directly affected—i.e. injured whales—are in no position to seek legal protection or compensation. Tourists and operators also seem to care very little about the whale's safety. Even though they are aware of the rules against touching whales, for example, it is much more exciting and fun to be able to pet them in the wild, since the focus of such boat trip is usually a great encounter or sensation rather than education or preservation. This corresponds to what Paul H. Forestell says, "while the general trait has been to an increasing effort to protect and conserve, the motivational basis for the change remains highly anthropocentric" (as cited in Roman, 2006, p. 172). These circumstances make the Whale Caller draw a parallel between whale watching at present and whaling in the past—"As far as he is concerned these boat-based whale watchers are no different from the whalers of old. They might as well carry harpoons and trypots in those boats" (p. 132). Here one might be amazed by the protagonist's undue worry about the animal, but studies show that bad whale watching practices could literally harm the whale. According to the National Marine Fishery Service's report, most right whale deaths are caused by human activities. Records of deaths from 1970 to 1999 indicate that ship strikes are responsible for over one-third of all confirmed Northern right whale mortalities ("Final Environmental Impact Statement," 2008, p. 4). Simply because modern-day tourists do not harpoon or butcher any whale does not mean that the whale is safe. In fact, this activity might be even more damaging because while whale advocates can protest against whaling, they might not imagine that whale watching could be equally harmful to the animal.

So far a few critics have tried to assign meanings to Sharisha and point out that the mammal is relevant to postcolonial studies. In terms of whale's classification, Jonathan Steinwand observes that cetaceans are very similar to us, but at the same time they are "uncannily others" (2011, p. 182). Citing Bryld and Lykke, he adds that "dolphins and whales are compelling figures because of their liminality and ambiguity: as mammals they are most closely related to land dwellers and yet they swim in the sea among other animal kingdoms. Marginalized and indigenous peoples are also liminal figures negotiating the boundaries of the dominant 'civilization' and wild nature, of traditional premodern and postmodern late capitalist lifestyles" (p. 184). In my opinion, the whale is also an apt agent to introduce the problems of global animal conservation. While land animals are largely non-migratory or are at least continent-bound, whales that constantly migrate somehow serve to underline the

difficulty, if not the impossibility, of drawing national boundary or identity. In the increasingly speedy global communication and travel, not only capital, tourists, and cheap labor flow in and out of Hermanus, but also whales. Therefore, they brilliantly serve as a metaphor of mobile and liminal beings unrestricted by national, cultural, or political territories. Figuratively speaking, whales thus carry a lot of significant implications. Literally speaking, they are even more appropriate since the situation of whaling nowadays is extremely complicated and exemplifies animal conservationist attempts hampered by the lack of consensus beyond the national scope.

Although the Whale Caller admits that his concern over "the Japanese eating Sharisha" is "hysteria" (p. 15), in reality whales are still hunted by Japan, Norway and Iceland under the guise of scientific research against the original IWC by-laws (Roman, 2006, p. 170). It would seem inconsistent on my part if I raise concern over whale-watching enterprise causing certain indirect risks to whales without tackling this debate of present-day whaling. However, while it certainly is against environmentalist mindset that whales are still hunted commercially, there are many other details to consider in contemporary whaling, such as the fact that whaling has been an important tradition of Japan for much longer than the European massive whaling, the height of which in the 17thand 18thcenturies had driven several whale species to near extinction. As Roman carefully describes—"Japanese whaling dates back at least 1,000 years" and it did not have the waste associated with the American and European hunt: meat, oil, bones, baleen, penis, entrails, and even the membrane of the heart were put into use. There are festivals and performances related with the success of the hunt, and Japan is also the only industrial whaling nation to hold memorial services for whales killed in the hunt (2006, pp. 183, 186-191). More importantly, this controversial issue is related to the West's attempt to dominate the rest of the world with its hegemonic ideology of conservation. In 2014 *Reuters* published an article entitled "Opposition to Japan's whaling program is a kind of 'eco-imperialism.'" In this report, Joji Morishita, Japan's commissioner to the IWC, claims that to oppose Japan's whaling is to impose one value system on another; and that "Tokyo still plans to resume whale hunting in the Southern Ocean in 2015 despite an international court ruling that previous hunts were illegal, although it also slashed the quota for the so-called scientific whaling program... Japan has long maintained that most whale species are not endangered and that eating whale is a cherished part of its food culture" ("Opposing Japan's Whaling"). However, according to an article in *The Guardian* later in the same year, it turns out that a radical environmentalist group called the Sea Shepherd openly acted in opposition to the enterprise by throwing acid and smoke bombs at Japanese whalers in the annual whale hunt off the waters of Antarctica ("Judge Rules," 2014). These facts and arguments are cited at length despite having little to do with *The Whale Caller* because they

show how the issue of saving the whale has been greatly problematized by both impractical legal enforcement and by cultural differences and postcolonial situations. Whaling-related disputes, therefore, are not only often articulated in relation to the colonial discourse but can also escalate to more serious international conflicts.

4. Global Conservationism and Environmental Justice

In the previous part, I have discussed difficulties in the international protection of the charismatic megafauna, owing to disagreement on terms of wildlife protection at a transnational level. Next, the problem of global conservationism—the irreconcilable interests between the First World biologists and Third World economy—is also much relevant to postcolonial environmental conflict. Basically speaking, this problem derives from the start of wild animal conservation dominated by Western ecologists, whose interests come into conflict with laypeople in developing countries. For example, Beinart and Hughes discuss a complication resulted from the establishment of International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) in 1948. This organization has played a role in setting up lists of status of plants and animal species threatened with extinction and has influenced the drafting of international nature conservation conventions. The problem is the union relied so heavily on ecologists, "some of whom were prone to be dismissive of human needs and to value most highly those ecosystems that were not disturbed by people. Again there were continuities with the colonial past and a tendency to impose conservation models on developing countries" (2007, p. 294). While Japan's claims over the right to continue whaling have been voiced and echoed by international media, people in poorer countries are suffering from wildlife conservation regulations in silence. One representative of them is the abalone poacher in *The Whale Caller*. This issue has been overlooked by other scholars—but to me it is extremely important as a clear case of multi-layered conflicts of environmental ethics and environmental justice[5]. Toward the end of the story, the Whale Caller finds a sack full of abalones and Saluni urges him to hand it back to the puny poacher. The Whale Caller is upset, saying "But this is wrong. It is all wrong. Do you know how long it takes for those perlemoens to mature? Eight years. Eight years. I tell you." Promptly the puny man argues, "We have got to eat, sir… We have got to feed our children. Big companies are making money out of these perlemoens. The government gives them quotas. What about us, sir? Do you think if I apply for quotas I will get them? How are we expected to survive?" (p. 191). The dialogue compels environmentalists to rethink about environmental ethics and about their self-appointed role as the guardian of the natural world at large. It is a commonly accepted fact that certain species should be protected legally in order to ensure their survival; but in practice these regulations often mean the reduced quality of life or even a threat

to the livelihood of marginalized people in developing countries[6]. One might argue that this abalone case should be solved *within* the scope of South Africa or other nations where these endangered species are native because it is not exactly relevant to the global communities. Mda, however, refutes such simplified solution by letting the poacher talk about the motive behind his hunt and the destinations of these exotic aphrodisiacs.

> Well-known poachers have become rich, building double-storey houses in dusty township. Why must he be the only one who remains poor for the rest of his life?... The puny man still lives in a shack, but he hopes that one day he too will have a double-storey house. He tells them how he started harvesting the rocks on the kelp beds for the precious creatures. It was for the pot. But the temptation was too great. Soon he was harvesting to sell. Now his ambition is to have direct access to the white middlemen who in turn sell to the Chinese syndicate bosses. 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. (pp. 191-2)

It turns out that what drives the puny man and many others to this illegal trade is not just survival but a bigger house and wealth, temptation generated by global capitalism and materialistic values. The puny man's retort can be interpreted as a defiant gesture of the oppressed against the white colonialist-ecologist, if not a plea for a chance to survive and prosper. While the man's aspiration is by no means laudable, it is perfectly understandable that he does not want to remain poor while his neighbors can get rich by poaching. Selling abalone meat in South Africa is prohibited as the state tries to discourage poaching. So once these perlemoens are harvested, they are exported to cater for expensive restaurants—a ready market on the other side of the globe. In this process the racial hierarchy is maintained just like colonial enterprises in the past: several middlemen in this abalone syndicate are white, while the largest markets are powerful countries where this animal is considered a delicacy and could fetch extremely high prices. However, when there is a crackdown on poachers and traffickers, the poor black locals are naturally the first to be arrested and persecuted, while foreign consumers are deemed innocent and unaccountable. To further complicate the matter, the puny man adds that it is the money gained by this illegal activity that boosts the economy of the whole community of Gansbaai. Therefore "when the Scorpions [undercover cop] tighten the screws,… the whole village suffers. Business in pubs, furniture shops and even video shops falls to the extent that some have to close down only to reopen when poaching activity resumes with the departure of the police, who are obviously unable to tighten the screws indefinitely" (p. 192-3). This excerpt suggests the

complexity of the ecopolitical issue of abalone poaching in relation the local community, as well as the discrepancy between wild animal conservation in theory and the legal enforcement in practice. The illegal flow of income is entangled with the betterment of individuals, the communities, and the Third World nations' development and progress; while the transcontinental smuggling of wild animals implicates more parties to the crime. In the background are the mute mollusks striving against extinction, drowned in humans' economic strife and conflicts of interests. As readers will see, these various issues of environmentalism are inseparable and actually interconnected with transnational cooperation and politics. Finally, in the tragic ending of the novel, I think Mda succeeds in showing the gap between the First World environmentalism and Third World's struggle to survive in the two main characters, the Whale Caller and Saluni. The former is trying hard to protect the environment—he tries to conserve cetaceans and abalones, cultivate interspecies relationship, keep the beaches clean, and even say no to fur coat. From these actions and outlooks, his approach to nature seems to echo deep ecologists' ideology. Such an extreme, biocentric perspective is nevertheless impractical and inapplicable to the survival of average South Africans. The poorer people cannot afford to turn their backs to the yearly influx of tourists, although they know these tourists might disturb the animals and leave a heap of garbage behind in the town's dumping ground; nor can they stop poaching the high-priced perlemoens as long as there is a market for it. Through these dilemmas, Mda helps raise public awareness about several urgent ecological crises. It is true that he does not offer ready solutions to the challenge of mass tourism or abalone trafficking[7]; even so, his work does not only defend the animals' right but also the indigenous people's. Questions remain whether—and how—we should prioritize or compromise on these pressing issues. How do we serve the interests of all parties—affluent countries with advanced technology and resources to tackle environmental challenge, poorer countries usually depicted as environmentally insensitive or damaging, and the non-humans' chance to survive? How much responsibility foreign buyers and whale watchers should take as consumers of another country's natural resources? If we impose a law against whale or abalone consumption, would it be fair to those who have grown up by the seaside and have had the animals as their natural food for centuries? et cetera.

IV. Conclusion

One might observe that, in this research article, the novel has not been read in the vein of traditional literary criticism. This is as it should be, since the aim of this reading is not to shed light on the literary work as much as to engage with the ongoing conflicts that the story is predicated on in the first place. Indeed, postcolonial and environmental criticisms both call for a reconsideration of socio-historical frameworks as well as the factual dimensions in a fictional

work. Therefore, I have tried to draw out relations between ecological and imperialistic elements in *The Whale Caller* and reality as a way to oppose the traditional method of literary criticism, which is both Eurocentric and anthropocentric. These theoretical approaches may be applicable to any other literary works. Nevertheless, I believe that they are especially well suited to *The Whale Caller*, its greatest merit being that Mda successfully highlights the complexity of certain environmental dilemmas in connection to global economic and political challenges. His book also cultivates interspecies empathy and spurs advocacy of endangered animal at a transnational level without slighting the interest of human—especially the indigenous South Africans. This is a crucial point—because the task of saving the earth is not, and should never be, claimed by or entrusted to any single group of people or nations. Perhaps we need to find a new definition or variation of environmental awareness that works for people outside the Global North in order to bring about just and sustainable conservatism and development. While it is beyond the scope of this article to improve the situations, I hope it has shown how ecological concerns have come to intersect—if not clash—with issues in postcolonial criticism. I also hope that my arguments on colonial history and environmental causation, the new forms of imperialism hidden in mass tourism and animal conservation, and the challenge of wildlife protection on the planetary scale would urge readers to see *both* the correlation and dissonance between the two literary approaches. Apart from what Buell et al. suggest—that the two disciplines can work well together in issues of land rights, environmental degradation and pollution (2011, pp. 426-7)—this novel shows how the two approaches might still share a keen interest in the plight of the silent, marginalized beings, as well as the problems of inequality, exploitation and interconnectedness of multiple issues, despite the probably irreconcilable differences between essentially anthropocentric and ecocentric orientations. DeLoughrey and Handley note that "postcolonialism is already familiar with the challenge of articulating otherness without reinforcing the very binaries that undergird hegemony in the first place" (2011, p. 27), I would add that ecocritics have experienced exactly the same thing. Apart from that, critics from both fields also suffer the challenge of pinning down the single cause of the problems in history and of providing quick, easy solutions. As the novel has shown, a number of problems in two fields are interwoven to the extent that it is unimaginable to solve the problem of environmental degradation caused by the industries discussed without addressing the social and economic inequality between the rich and poor countries. Equally impossible it will be to promote wildlife conservation without considering the cultural, ethnical, and economic differences between the parties involved. Such an interdisciplinary reading is of course an arduous task. It takes into account not only the relationships between people of several ethnic groups, but also the relationships between human as a species and animals and even the earth—and each of these

factors is never static, but dynamic and constantly emerging. While the spatial scope is global, the temporal scope is still more ridiculously immense, ranging from the pre-colonial period to the most recent situations. Nevertheless, I would argue that this is not only a worthwhile but actually a necessary undertaking in the global literary studies and the current environmental crises. The time has come for postcolonial critics to look beyond the plight of marginalized people suffering from colonialism, because the environment and natural resources are often the means through which they have been exploited and environmental problems will directly affect or further displace this group of people before others. It is also important that environmentalists are cured from its excessive eco-centrism, because to value animals and plants over fellow human beings will only turn them into self-righteous eco-imperialists and such attempt will decrease any chance to enlist the public support, which is sorely needed in any environmentalist missions. Therefore, such an interdisciplinary collaboration between the two fields is necessary, not only because their concerns are inextricable, but also because this way of reading will hold us back from lapsing into our habit of narrow inclusiveness, compartmentalizing tendency and sentimentalism, which I think are still, sadly, the limitations of the two literary approaches.

Notes

1. That is, with the help of pathogens, most startlingly through the spread of smallpox epidemic in 1713.

2. I have yet to find evidence of tulip spreading over this colonized landscape, but such things have actually happened to other parts of the globe. One example is the spread of purslane, white clover, and thistle in Australia from Britain in 1788. The result is that "most of the weeds in southern third of Australia… are of European origin" (Crosby, 1986, pp. 162-4).

3. See the article called "Irregular Droughts Trigger Mass Flowering in Aseasonal Tropical Forests in Asia" (26 May 2006) from American Journal of Botany; or The Star's article called "Climate change is altering flowering patterns" (31 March 2014).

4. Most studies I found are done in the US and are more relevant to North Atlantic right whales than southern right whales, but it is highly probable that interruption caused by tourist ships to North Atlantic right whales would do the same to their southern relatives. An instance of direct intrusion of whale watching boat is recorded by Roman: "Sitting on a beach in Cape Cod, I've spent hours watching right whales engaged in courtship activity: females with their dark flippers in the air and males chugging in from all over the bay. The whales were restless, the air filled with gruff blows—until the whale-watching boats got too close. Then the sea went quiet and the pod submerged. Although the whales later regrouped, the disturbance was evident at each close approach. Without strict guidelines, we intrude on their habitat" (2007, p. 177).

5. In *Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, Timothy Clark cites Joni Adamson's definition of the term environment justice as "the right of all people to share equally in the benefits bestowed by a healthy environment" and says that "such things as locating a waste plant near people too poor to oppose" is a clear example of eco-injustice (2011, p. 88).

6. More examples of such cases often appear in the news. The first, addressed by Amitav Ghosh in The Hungry Tide, is the Bengal tiger in the Sundarbans wildlife sanctuary in India. Local people are risking their lives daily as these "royal occupants" habitually escaped from the reserve and killed people in the vicinity (Beinart and Hughes, 2007, pp. 306-9). Meanwhile, Thai authority executed poor, old couples for picking up mushrooms for food in the protected forest as elaborated in The Bangkok Post's article "Mushroom-picking couple released after 17 months in jail" (2005) and in Coconuts Bangkok's "Poor villagers 'targeted' by forestry laws" (2015).

7. The solution to abalone problem, I believe, might be sought in abalone farming and a better organized system that can ensure more equal distribution of benefit to the locals, dealers, and business owners; but it is difficult to say whether it will be too late. According to recent news in 2014,

abalone fishing right in South Africa will be extended only until July 2015 despite consideration of socio-economic factors and hardships experienced in coastal communities, since "the decline in numbers in the abalone fishery was worrying." ("South Africa: Abalone fishing rights exempted," 2014).

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