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TRANSITIONS OF MEANING: LIFE, DEATH, AND IDENTITY IN ZAKES MDA'S *WAYS OF DYING*

Abstract

The present work considers Mda's *Ways of Dying*(1995) as a piece of transitional literature set in South Africa in the early 1990s. Themes discussed include representation and meaning of life and death in the novel, the connections to carnivalesque performance and culture, the political context of the novel, and issues of identity performance in relation to race and ethnicity. The theoretical framework for this work is based on post-colonial theory, Boehmer's theory of terror, and the theories of Butler and others regarding the performativity of race, gender and other elements of identity.

Keywords: carnivalesque literature, gender, performance, racial identity, transitional literature.

Introduction

In the early 1990s, South Africa stood between the abolishment of apartheid and the establishment of democracy. The narrative in *Ways of Dying* takes place between Christmas and New Year, and is seen through the experiences and histories of two main protagonists – Toloki and Noria. Both characters had originated in a small unnamed village at some geographical distance from the large and violent – also unnamed – South African city in which they currently reside. Through the present-day actions and past-tense memories and flashbacks of these two characters, the novel's narrative unwinds in such a way that contemporary reality is distorted or suspended to some degree. Toloki had been a boerewors salesman; in the new informal and transitional economy of South Africa between 1990 and 1994 he has invented a new profession for himself. Toloki is a "professional mourner" as a way of making a living in a society in which violence and death are commonplace and there

are many funerals every day. In this professional context, Toloki attends funerals as an active mourner, receiving whatever compensation the family can afford for his services. Toloki compares his profession to those of doctor or lawyer (Mda 17). He additionally leads an intentionally austere, monk-like existence, subsisting on a diet of Swiss cake and green onions. There is therefore some spiritual or ascetic element to Toloki's existence, his memories and imagined future, and his professional activity as a mourner. Although not a directly religious figure, Toloki's presence at funerals as a paid mourner gives his character in some ways the behavioral appearance of a monk or other holy man. In the acting element of Toloki's activity as a professional mourner, there is also an element of carnival or carnivalesque performance, in which he provides a conduit and a representation of the group's emotions relating to the funeral and to mourning. In this aspect, it can also be seen that Toloki is performing a quasi-spiritual, cathartic or omnipotent representation of mourning, hopes and transition in relation to South African society as a whole at this time.

Noria and Toloki alike live in a precarious and violent world, shortly after the apartheid regime has been officially abolished, but before South Africa achieved democracy in 1994. In the townships and the city, constant violence and danger exists, and both characters live in a way that can be described as consciously close to violence and trauma. The apartheid regime has left a legacy of problems and divisions relating to perceived and practiced "ethnicity", poverty, segregation along racial lines, gender and political divisions. The term "ethnicity" is a fraught and loaded word not only through the narrative and context of *Ways of Dying*, but also in contemporary South Africa, as ethnicity cannot be strictly divided along binary lines as was attempted during the apartheid era. The ambiguity attached to the term "ethnicity" is connected throughout the novel to issues associated with not only racial performativity but also socio-cultural and gender issues. Apartheid was, of course, based on a binary division of "race"; the hierarchies associated with apartheid officially fell in the early 1990s, but various ethnic groups in South Africa since sought to reclaim historical borders to their specific homelands. According to Davison: "In post-apartheid South Africa this has changed [classification schemes and racial stereotypes] and cultural diversity has been embraced within the symbolic construct of nation building. In practice, however, accommodating ethnic difference without resorting to essentialist notions of race and culture remains a challenge" (151).

Theoretical Frameworks

The theories of Elleke Boehmer regarding post-colonial terror can be used as a lens through which to examine *Ways of Dying*. Boehmer follows Achille Mbembe in the definition

of terror: “Terror according to this logic can be defined in terms taken from Achille Mbembe’s exposition of the *necropolitical*, as a politics exercised through the imposition of death and near-death” (145). Following both Mbembe and Frantz Fanon, the necropolitical state can be understood as founded on colonial violence and a need for the state to keep citizens of the state reminded of the fear of death – they need to be kept essentially close to the concept and the awareness of death in order to be sufficiently and functionally terrorized by the necropolitical state. In *Ways of Dying*, it can clearly be seen that the oppressive state functions to keep citizens in a close relationship with death and violence; the state enacts terror in this way as a necropolitical actor. Mda states: “Power does corrupt in many instances and one can already see some of that arrogance that, yes, now we are in power now, you can go to hell. So it is very important that there should be writers like us, you see, who are always looking out for such traces of that arrogance and exposing it from time to time. That’s what I think memory does” (Kachuba). Through Boehmer’s definition and framework regarding terror, it can be understood that terror is inherently important in the novel, and in Mda’s depiction of transitional South Africa. Violence is used politically as a means of attaining and maintaining power in transitional or other times; Boehmer states that post colonialism itself “correlates with struggle, subversion, the nation, the region, resistance to the global status quo” (143). Terror, according to Boehmer’s theories, can be more closely related to the forces of post colonialism than those of globalization. Post-colonial theory can certainly be used to understand *Ways of Dying*, a South African-set novel written by an author of color. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin state: “Theories of style and genre, assumptions about the universal features of language, epistemologies and value systems are radically questioned by the practices of post-colonial writing” (p. 11). Therefore, the theoretical framework for this work will be based on post-colonial theory in addition to Boehmer’s theory of terror, in addition to the theories of Butler and others regarding the performativity of race, gender and other elements of identity.

Ways of Dying can read as a somewhat carnivalesque piece of literature employing magical realism. Bakhtin’s theory of Carnavalesque performance resonates with the characters and narrative of *Ways of Dying*, which portrays human cruelty and violence in detail and pervasively. However, as with Bakhtin’s carnival, subversive behavior allows a cathartic and empowering performance. Performance will be considered in terms of race and gender, following theories of Butler and others. Commonalities between Bakhtin’s Carnavalesque and magic realism will be considered. Magical realism will also be considered in the context of Carnavalesque in relation to Bakhtin’s medieval society; carnival

performance can then be considered in relation to performance issues in race and gender in South Africa and elsewhere.

Life and Death

Mda's novel can be understood as one that functions through an exploration of the transition from life to death, and the meaning of this transition. In Mda's works there is an ironic or humorous approach to the topic of death, which equates laughter as a sort of death and vice versa. The work *Ways of Dying* can in fact be read as a piece of transitional literature, in which the transition from life to death is considered in the context of South Africa's transition from apartheid-era to post-apartheid-era society and culture. *Ways of Dying* was published in 1995, and temporally is placed in the period 1990 through 1994. In South African history this was a transitional period from the end of apartheid to the beginning, in 1994, of the democratic state. This transitional period can be seen as one in which violence is ever-present and a constant background to the transition itself. The South African state, by 1990, had largely lost its legitimacy; however, there were several turbulent transitional years before democracy was enacted. The main character of *Ways of Dying*, Toloki, is a professional mourner, attending daily funerals as a way of comforting grieving families who have lost loved ones to violence rooted in racial hatred, crime or poverty. The divisive and violent nature of such a transitional time is evident in the text, and the idea of senseless violence depicts a kind of group mentality or psychology that quite commonly emerges in transitional times. The culture of transitional periods can be seen to commonly include mass protests or demonstrations, street culture in which groups express ideas and identities, and a tribalism around race and ethnicity. Clearly, in the context of South Africa, such group mentality and psychology had been embedded in the apartheid structure and the ways in which South Africans lived segregated from one another in economic hierarchy. As noted by Samin, "the ambivalence which the reversal of focus between the political and the ordinary and the contradictions the main characters generate is reinforced by the theme of death" (193). Magical realism allows the novel's characters to express themselves and their fantasy lives in relation to both their history and their future. Magical realism itself can be seen as strongly associated with life rather than with death in *Ways of Dying*; although death is such a constant presence as almost to constitute a character in and of itself, the elements of magical realism bring the focus back to life and to living, as evidenced by the human characters in the novel. Mda's own words, in an interview with Kachuba, define his take on magic and magical realism: "I draw from the same sources as the creators of magical realism

hence the ‘magic.’ I say ‘magic’ in quotes, you see, because the world from which my fiction draws hasn’t got that line of demarcation between the supernatural on one hand and what you would call objective reality on the other hand. The two merge and live side by side. Those who live in that world can’t separate the two. In fact, that’s how they live their lives. What in the Western world you consider as magic is part of their day-to-day lives, you see, and it is part of their real world. It is part of their realism” (Kachuba).

Ways of Dying also uses magical realism and the literary employment of dream devices throughout the work. These surrealist elements can be seen as a common trait in transitional literature, and also appropriate to the novel’s consideration of the transition from life to death – a human process that involves dream-like alterations in reality and the perception of reality. Furthermore, a funeral context such as that inhabited professionally by Toloki can be understood to have dream-like elements – mourners remember and commemorate the deceased person as if they were still living, in some ways. Furthermore, the memory of a deceased person can be understood as something of a dream state, in which time warps the reality of that person’s lived history. A sense of suspended or altered reality pervades *Ways of Dying*, and this is linked both to its magical realism and also its focus on the transition between life and death, and the ways in which collective or group memory affect present-time reality for the individual, the group and – by extension – the nation of South Africa in a global context. In interview with Kachuba, Mda states:

I can only explain this question of memory. You see, since 1995, when apartheid was abolished in South Africa, there has been a very big reluctance among South Africans, especially white South Africans, to talk about the past. You find that every time there is mention of the apartheid past. There will be a lot of noise from all over-radio talk shows, call-in programs, and so on, you know, people complaining-about this talk of this past. “You said that you are forgiving of this past, so why do you keep on mentioning it, going back to it again and again?” people will say. I’ve even heard critics complain that South African writers are obsessed with the past because a lot of the work that comes from South Africa addresses the past. (Kachuba)

In transitional times, reality can become altered and intertwined with elements of fantasy, as individuals and groups remember their own specific experiences of history while dreaming of a different future in the same geographical location. The dream-like elements of the narrative include the use of flashback as a key plot device – through the primary characters of Toloki and Noria, flashbacks present memories of the decades prior to the South African transition. Therefore, the few days’ worth of plot narrative framed in the novel are the metaphorical tip

of the iceberg – historical memories run deep and are used to inform the “present-day” narrative as presented in the novel.

Mda’s novel can be seen as apocalyptic in its treatment of the transitional period and process; the violence is catastrophic on individual and collective levels, but there is a sense of rebirth with the transition towards democracy. For example, Toloki states: “there are funerals everyday, because if the bereaved were to wait until the weekend to bury their dead, then mortuaries would overflow” (Mda 136). However, death itself can be seen as a form of rebirth in *Ways of Dying*, and through elements of magical realism and transitional writing it can be seen that the relationship between life and death is not simply a one-way journey, but rather a cycle and an intersectional component of South Africa’s transitional period. Trauma of all kinds can be understood as destructive and hurtful on the individual level, certainly; yet, in a transitional period there can be productive or even perhaps creative elements to social and cultural trauma as it can be seen as a form of “growing pain” towards a new democratic structure and a new form of South African society.

The abnormality of violent death in the natural order of things is inverted in *Ways of Dying*, in that most of the funerals attended professional by Toloki are those of individuals who have died of violence rather than of natural causes. In this violent and transitional context, a natural death – of old age, or of illness – is seen as somehow abnormal or unexpected. A nurse in *Ways of Dying* indicates this: “The son had died a normal death. Perhaps I should say an abnormal death, because he died peacefully of natural illness in his sleep. Normal deaths are those deaths that we have become accustomed to, deaths that happen every day. They are deaths of the gun, and the knife, and torture and gore. We don’t normally see people who die of illness or of old age” (Mda 157). In this context, there is a sense that for a life or an existence to be interrupted by an untimely death is more normal than a peaceful, natural death. Violence and loss become normalized in a transitional society such as South Africa in the early 1990s. The opinions and frames of both Toloki and Noria are inherently affected and informed by the death-ridden society in which they exist; were death and violence not a constant background to the novel, their experiences and opinions – and in Toloki’s case, profession – would likely be very different.

Considering life and death, it can be seen overall that *Ways of Dying* depicts primarily death and violence, yet is actually concerned with the concept of life, of rebirth and of progress into the future rather than a focus upon the past. Life and death are therefore a structural binary that underpins the novel, while being connected with the transitional era in South African history and – by extension – global humanity seeking to reconcile the past and

the future, the oppressive state and the popular mass movement.

Carnival

Carnavalesque is a theory developed by Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin. His *Rabelais and His World* draws together concepts relating to carnival itself, and to the forms and process of dialogue. Bakhtin frames his work in terms of the social institution of *carnival*, together with the grotesque and elements of magical realism. The connections, tensions and relationships between carnival, reality and magical performance form the core of Bakhtin's work. According to Bakhtin, there is inherent meaning in the relationship between the person who is speaking and the one who is listening; this can be related to the function of narrative and story-telling in *Ways of Dying* and its violent, transitional context. Bakhtin describes an ambivalent kind of carnival, simultaneously grotesque and subversive, in a medieval historical context. When the state oppressively, the language and practice of carnival can be used cathartically, as can be seen in the public demonstrations and protests in *Ways of Dying*. Bakhtin stated that "carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions" (Bakhtin 10).

The State itself plays a powerful yet inhuman character in *Ways of Dying*. Protests and actions against the state are often met with crushing violence, fatalities, persecution and repression on a grand scale. There is a transition, overall, from huge and oppressive power of the State to a reclaiming of that power and function by people as they become increasingly visible through mass actions such as protests. As the old power structures are undermined, the death of the old order itself is accompanied by carnivalesque imagery that includes death alongside birth, the connecting element of sexuality and the related performance of physical violence. Carnavalesque performance and activity can be seen as closely connected to concerns surrounding life, death, freedom of expression and the suspension of reality and rules. The mysticism, magical realism and dream devices of *Ways of Dying* can be seen as related closely to the centuries-old tradition of carnivalesque performance, transition, celebration and culture.

Ways of Dying is concerned with a specific period of time between Christmas and New Year during the 1990-1994 period. This short temporal focus of the novel allows it to be seen as a snapshot of the transitional era that could have occurred anywhere between 1990 and 1994. However, the temporal device of framing the narrative of the novel between Christmas and New Year connects inherently to themes of life and death, birth and rebirth. The period between Christmas and the New Year represents the last days of the calendar year – the year

itself can therefore be seen to be “dying” in a direct parallel to the old South African apartheid regime that is about to be replaced by a democratic state. The last day of the year can be seen as the year’s death, but there is also the transition to the birth of the new year – in a parallel, the new era of democracy. The New Year itself is seen as a turning point towards liberation and a more free future: “Women are singing ... Their song is about the freedom that is surely coming tomorrow” (Mda 159); there is also reference to “the freedom that was surely coming soon” (Mda 172). Of course, this period is also framed by Christmas, a celebration of Jesus’ birth and the hope of new life generally. Carnavalesque traditions and celebrations surround the period which includes Christmas and New Year, together with feasting and festive behaviors. In the Christmas and New Year traditions can be seen the power of mass celebration, of the carnivalesque, and of collective cultural and social expression by groups of people. This is intimately connected to the mass protests depicted by Mda in *Ways of Dying* as the new order of democracy is embodied by groups of people, living and dead. Notably, also, the novel enters into an interrogation of the past and attempts to understand the processes of reconciliation, forgiveness and the future: Mda states,

I think all great literature, especially in recent years, is about the past. I do not see why South Africans should be afraid of the past. You see, for me to forget about the past it would mean I must erase my history. I have no history. I just emerged today. I don't have a father that died in the struggle, I must forget his existence. How can I do that? So I think that memory is very important. My compatriots, of course, look at memory as something that works against reconciliation. I am an advocate of reconciliation itself and have written extensively about reconciliation because I believe it is very important to forgive the past. (Kachuba)

The transitional period for South Africa as a whole is portrayed and symbolized in terms of a transitional economic structure – and lack of structure – in *Ways of Dying*. For example, Toloki is an early purchaser of a trolley to grill meat products and sell them on the street (Mda 113). This informal economy is mirrored in new, informal ways of living that reject the strict rules of the apartheid era. While formally segregation was still enforced, informal ways of integration occurred; for example, the character Nefolovhodwe “used a white man, whom he had employed as his marketing manager, to buy the house on his behalf” (Mda 116). For those of lesser means, squatter camps emerged as a new way of living – despite repeated destruction of such camps by the government, these resilient informal communities would rebuild overnight – this is a clear metaphor for rebirth following “death”: “Bulldozers would move in and flatten the shacks, and then triumphantly drive away. Residents would

immediately rebuild, and in no time the shanty town would hum with life again. Like worker bees, the dwellers would go about their business of living” (Mda 136). The concept of liberation as presented in *Ways of Dying* can itself be seen as a natural progression from the sacrificial violence of the era depicted. In this apocalyptic work, death itself can be seen as a harbinger of rebirth, and of the journey that is necessary to reach a new way of living. Death is collectivized in this novel, with the idea of freedom uniting the living and the dead, the present and the remembered. Funeral songs depicted in *Ways of Dying* function so that “the message of the songs is that the people shall be victorious in the end” (Mda 159). The future is imperfect, but it is crucially different to the past lived by Toloki and Noria, and depicted in their flashback narratives.

Group psychology and mass expression is a key device in the work’s presentation of a transitional period between an oppressive past and a hopeful future liberation. Freud talks of a group psychology in which the group develops a “sense of omnipotence” (104) which leads to a sense of hope for the future as “the notion of impossibility disappears for the individual in a group” (p. 104).

Nefolovhodwe is impelled by the ghost of Toloki’s dead father, Jwara, to bring sculpted figurines to Toloki: “he could not rest in peace in his grave, or join the world of the ancestors, unless the figurines were given to Toloki” (Mda 192). Therefore, it can be seen that the dead characters in the novel do not cease to fulfil narrative function; they interact with living characters through memory both individual and collective, and this memory leads to real-time actions and consciousness that affect the trajectory of the novel. This connects with the magical realism of the work, and the use of dream-like sequences and devices to move the narrative along while deepening the historical context of the plot.

Another metaphor that is used to connect the present and the past, the living and the dead, is that of archaeology: “Nefolovhodwe rounded up a few labourers, and proceeded to excavate the site of the workshop” (Mda 194). Obviously at the basic level, archaeology is an unearthing of the past, of history. As Mda’s flashback device allows Noria and Toloki to provide historical background to present-day narrative, archaeology informs the present by uncovering the relics of the past. In a violent context such as transition-era South Africa, archaeology also carries direct parallels to elements of life and death – archaeological finds are unearthed in a mirror process to that in which dead bodies are buried. The excavation or exhumation of historical items, through archaeology, can be seen as a parallel to excavating and knowing the past, on an individual and a group level. In *Ways of Dying*, it can be seen that history – like, to some degree, the post-transitional future – is repressed and hidden from

the individual. Archaeology provides a means of examining and interrogating the past that has been hidden from view. The novel itself can be seen as a way of examining the transitional past of modern-day democratic South Africa, a reminder of the human cost of the new nation. Archaeology also connects with the novel's understanding of tension between the rural past and the urban present to future. Toloki and Noria have moved from a nameless village to a nameless massive South African city; archaeology is carried out to unearth the rural past and its artifacts. The objects that are unearthed through archaeology can be seen as silent witnesses to the present, and these emblems of a repressed rural past in some way inform the urban present and the democratic future.

Racial Performativity

The two contrasting characters portrayed in *Ways of Dying* both endeavor to create self-identity through racial performance. To some degree, both are "playing a role"; there are contradictions and limitations inherent in such role-playing. In the South African context, Raditlhalo argues that the "segment of the nation that hankers after whiteness" (19) results from a system of liberation in post-apartheid South Africa which did not fully regard the importance of culture in the creation of self-identity. Raditlhalo sees evidence of ongoing identity crises which were rooted in the dismantling of apartheid. Naori and Toloki navigate such crises of identity while reconciling these crises through respective racial performances.

Butler's theories of performativity can be used to inform an analysis of the characters and narrative in *Ways of Dying*, in relation to life, death, violence and individual creation of distinct identities in post-apartheid South Africa. Butler sees gender as a rehearsed performance rather than defined by fixed biological categories (Butler); likewise, race can also be viewed as a performance rather than an inflexible category or division. Language and vocabulary function as indicators of cultural identity and struggles associated with identity formation and performance. In South Africa, language plays a key role in public discourse surrounding education, politics, race relations and national culture. Victor Webb states, in a post-colonial context:

firstly... the indigenous languages of the people of Africa have no role (or almost no role) in the official domains in their countries; secondly, that the official language of public communication in all these [African states] is a language originating from the colonial period (usually English, French, or Portuguese) and thirdly, that generally only about 30% of the citizens of these states "know" the official languages of their countries. (5-6)

In South Africa, a person's identification as a speaker of English, Afrikaans, or an indigenous African language is culturally and politically weighted. Notably, in *Ways of Dying* the focus is upon black South Africans rather than white colonial characters. English speaking is seen as a mark of privilege, but also potentially as an indicator of a "coconut" or "oreo" identity (Matlwa).

Conclusions

South Africa was undoubtedly a starkly divided country during the apartheid era and the transitional period that preceded democracy. Through *Ways of Living*, the individual experience is examined in the context of a mass populist movement towards a new form of democracy and governance. At the same time, the new society that is being formed at the time of the novel's action is inevitably affected by – and informed by – the nation's repressed and violent past. From a critical reading of *Ways of Dying*, it appears that the author posits a diversity of ways to live, just as there are many different ways to die in the violent context of transitional South Africa. The binary opposites of death and life are portrayed as interconnected and, in some ways, necessary components for change and transition – for rebirth – to occur.

Considering life and death as a structural thematic device in *Ways of Dying*, it can be seen that the funerals which Toloki attends as a professional mourner can be seen as a celebration of life rather than as specifically limited to a consideration of death. The violence portrayed in *Ways of Dying* can be seen as affecting the portrayal and understanding of the settlements themselves. Symbolically, the novel's use of magical realism and story-telling devices – including through dream devices – is connected with life just as the ubiquitous and traumatic violence is connected with death. The society surrounding Toloki and Noria is ridden with death and violence; however, this is used to contrast with the emphasis upon life, and upon the future, in the novel. Additionally, the nuances and tangled causation associated with what is termed "ethnic violence" is examined in the novel, pointing out the problems of this being depicted as based on strict ethnic or class-based lines. In the midst of all the violence and death depicted in *Ways of Dying*, it is shown that South Africans are able to – and impelled to – find ways of celebrating their own lives and heritage. The function that Toloki fulfils as a professional mourner is, in some way, associated with this celebration among the living in a context of constant death and violence.

Death in *Ways of Dying* simultaneously unites people in shared humanity and human experience, and it numbs them to the constant violence and loss in their transitional society.

Mda transcends a simple binary understanding of life and death and the dichotomy; the sense of death informing and affecting life permeates the novel, whether this is through Toloki making his living mourning death, or the way in which fear of death and loss informs and shapes the ways in which people live and celebrate their own existence. In Toloki's words: "Death lives with us everyday. Indeed our ways of dying are our ways of living. Or should I say our ways of living are our ways of dying?" (Mda 98).

In the context of this novel, life itself can be understood as that which thrives or develops despite the presence or inter-relationship of death. Fear of death can be seen as a factor that alters an individual's experience of life; in the context of an ultra-violent urban environment as envisaged in *Ways of Dying*, it is natural that citizens may be more than normally preoccupied with thoughts or fears in relation to death. However, it can be seen that characters in the novel do continue to thrive and flourish – for example, Noria prevails through the death of two children and the death of her mother; Noria manages nonetheless to live a relatively full life herself. In this context, death is understood not only as a physical phenomenon but also, potentially, the ability for a character to be emotionally or spiritually deadened by constantly dealing with trauma and violence with resulting numbness or fear responses.

Transition is a key structural component of *Ways of Dying*, and it is well documented that South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy was neither easy nor straightforward. Politicized violence wracked the country during this time; as outlined by Bouckaert:

the process of negotiations soon came to take second stage to the rising tide of violence,

as the rivalry between the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) erupted into an all-out war in Kwazulu Natal and the townships surrounding Johannesburg. The ANC accused the apartheid government of complicity in fomenting the violence from the very beginning, and history would later show that elements within the apartheid government had indeed played a central role in the spiral of violence by training Inkatha "hit-squads" and engaging in a dirty tricks campaign aimed at destabilizing and discrediting the ANC. (246)

South Africa is home to great diversity in terms of ethnic and racial identity; under apartheid there was a systemic classification protocol according to defined "ethnic" categories. In *Ways of Dying*, it is shown that such a system was an unwieldy and often problematic means of racial classification; ethnic violence as shown in the novel can better be understood perhaps as politicized violence. This is because much of the violence enacted by tribal or ethnic

leaders in the novel is done with the aim of gaining political power. For example, Buthelezi – a tribal chief – organized zulu “warriors” “into armies that harass innocent residents merely us[ing] ethnicity as an excuse for his own hunger for power” (Mda 55).

In the context of a violent and transitional society, life and death take on nuanced meanings for the novel’s protagonists. The proximity of death to individuals is contrasted – Noria loses her children and mother to violence, while Toloki is some degree removed from personal grief as his job is to attend the funerals of strangers. In this context, it makes sense that when Toloki hears of the death of his own father, he appears to be emotionally unaffected by this news (Mda 111). The contrast between Noria and Toloki in their attitudes and responses to death demonstrate the tension between violent and “natural” deaths, politicized and ethnic violence, and ways of living in comparison to multiple ways of dying.

Magical realism should be considered in relation to both violence and death, and politicized violence as outlined above. Carnavalesque performance and culture is intimately tied to the grotesque, and therefore is also connected to death and violence. The carnivalesque elements of *Ways of Dying* include grotesque depiction of violence, and the dark humor which permeates the work in a death-ridden society. This is contrasted with the artificial dissociation from the rural past by those who seek to hold themselves within a higher socio-economic class. Again, carnivalesque and grotesque realism can be considered as related to magical realism symbolically and in terms of performativity. Medieval society as considered by Bakhtin was hierarchically structured; this connects with the ethnic hierarchy established in apartheid-era of South Africa. Carnavalesque mockery and practice therefore can puncture or interrogate hierarchical power structures (Jung). Toloki’s professional mourning activities can be read as carnivalesque performance in this context.

The actions of the state in *Ways of Dying* can be seen as necropolitical according to the theories of Elleke Boehmer regarding post-colonial terror. Death and near-death are imposed upon the population by the state, and by individuals and groups seeking to achieve an increase in power. The *necropolitical* “politics exercised through the imposition of death and near-death” (Boehmer 145) are clearly evident on the part of the South African state in *Ways of Dying*. Following Boehmer, Mbembe and Fanon, the colonial and post-colonial violence of the apartheid era is evident in *Ways of Dying*; the state is a necropolitical actor needing to keep citizens of the state reminded of the fear of death. Death is everywhere in *Ways of Dying*, ironically providing Toloki a means of earning a living in a transitional and informal economy. Terror fulfils structural functions in the narrative of *Ways of Dying*, as violence is a means of attaining or increasing power by the state, individuals or groups. Post-colonial

theory along the lines of Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin can be used to further understand *Ways of Dying*; this novel and Mda's work in general add to the post-colonial diversity of practice that questions entrenched and hierarchical value systems such as those of the old South Africa. Further, it can be seen that – following Butler – performativity is a key component of *Ways of Dying*, affecting response to death or violence in the experience of an individual or a group. Furthermore, race and gender and ethnic identity are also all affected by performance issues according to Butler's theories. Performativity and performance further relates to carnivalesque elements, magical realism as a way to interrogate a violent lived reality, and also to Toloki's performances as a professional mourner at the funeral services of dead people he never knew personally. Interaction with the grotesque, violent and death-ridden connects with Bakhtin's theory of Carnivalesque performance, with subversive behavior allows a cathartic and empowering performance and identity in a context where the state or those with power are acting to repress others during a transitional time.

In conclusion, the function of life and death in *Ways of Dying* must be considered in historical and literary context, and considering the theoretical framework employed above. *Ways of Dying* functions through an exploration of the transition from life to death, and the meaning of this transition. Laughter is equated with death, and this is in line with the tradition of carnivalesque performance and cathartic "carnival laughter". In Mda's works laughter is a sort of death and vice versa. *Ways of Dying* represents the transition from life to death in the context of South Africa's transition from apartheid-era to the post-apartheid democracy. In this transitional period, violence is ever-present and a constant background factor that affects those living through the transition. The South African state, lacking legitimacy by 1990, acted in repressive and necropolitical ways in the years immediately before democracy was enacted. Group mentality or psychology is shown to emerge in such a transitional time, and this is linked to life and death in ethnic-political violence between self-identified groups and individuals. The culture of transitional periods includes mass protests or demonstrations, and in *Ways of Dying* street culture is used as a way to express ideas and identities. South Africa in the apartheid era reinforced group mentality and psychology, together with ethnic tribalism and a racial hierarchy in society. Magical realism as used by Mda allows the novel's characters to express themselves and their imagined future lives, or remembered historical pasts. Magical realism in this context can be associated with the grotesque death and violence of the carnival, or more optimistically with life continuing and flourishing despite a dark context. In *Ways of Dying* death is a constant presence; magical realism brings the focus back to life and to living. *Ways of Dying* also uses magical realism and the literary employment of

dream devices throughout the work. These surrealist elements relate to the transitional focus of the work and its setting. Memory, reality and history intertwine in magical realism, storytelling and the literal excavation of the past via archaeology. Flashback is used extensively as a literary and narrative device, underscoring the importance of history and heritage in a transitional period towards a new future.

Death must be considered in relation to the theoretical framework and in relation to *Ways of Dying* as a piece of transitional literature. Toloki's professional mourning activities at funerals form the key emblem of the novel; furthermore, he notes that funerals have a tendency to lead to more funerals as individual deaths are avenged or family members of the deceased also succumb to death. Additionally, the act of attending a funeral in a violent South African city is itself relatively dangerous; Toloki relates stories of funeral attendees being killed in car crashed on their way to or from a funeral, for example. However, in keeping with the transitional nature of the novel, it can be seen that the funerals, and the deaths, also produce or affirm life itself. Death as a background element in *Ways of Dying* becomes, at a very simple level, just a part of the every-day life of the characters. The funerals themselves therefore become intrinsically connected to life as well as to death, and as stated by Mda regarding his work generally the concept of death is connected to laughter and therefore to life and to hope. For example, raunchy jokes about the deceased are told at the funerals attended professionally by Toloki (Mda 163) and laughter is used – as in Bakhtin's carnival – as a means of collective catharsis and expression by a repressed group with a common identity and performance practice. Noria's friend is actually shown to die of laughter early in the novel's narrative. The connection between death and life is reflected and reinforced by the transitional elements of the novel's setting and narrative, for example by its setting between Christmas and New Year at the death of one year and the rebirth of a new one. This obviously parallels the (re)birth of a new South Africa in the post-apartheid era. The society depicted by Mda in *Ways of Dying* is death-ridden and yet emphasizes life, living and laughing. Violence is ever-present as a background to the narrative – at first look this appears to be “ethnic violence,” yet on closer inspection it appears to actually be based upon power struggles. Mostly committed by the Young Tigers, the tribal chief, hostel dwellers, migrant workers and Battalion 77, violence is cyclic and seemingly aimed towards one of these specific groups gaining greater power through the transitional period. The fight for freedom is tainted by individual and group yearning for a higher place in the power hierarchy of the new South Africa, and blood feuds and revenge killings become cyclic in addition to the background of pervasive and often senseless violence in the novel.

Toloki and Noria represent not only different attitudes to death, but also different political views in the context of South Africa's transition. Their attitudes towards death itself are in fact changed over the course of the novel's trajectory, and Noria becomes more outraged as she sees the effects of constant death on her community and surroundings. Toloki displays a more muted emotional response to death, including that of his own father, having perhaps become numbed to the violence and death associated with his daily work as a professional mourner. Noria's reactions remain stronger while Toloki's weaken; Toloki therefore becomes somewhat marginalized, an outsider in his society and culture. Politics are not directly related to violence and death in *Ways of Dying*; yet, there is no doubt that much of the violence and death has political relevance or resonance. The political leanings and opinions of the characters doubtless have a strong effect upon their approach to the relationship between life and death in their individual and cultural experiences. Toloki's relatively unemotional stance in relation to death is paralleled in his political marginalization. Magical realism fulfils a sort of fill-in function in this context, and it can be seen as Toloki's way of de-marginalizing himself in personal ways while politically and professionally marginalized. There is likewise a lack of political structure in transitional South Africa that reflects the need for magical realism to fill some kind of personal void. Politically, the transitional era seems to come between the death of apartheid and the birth of a truly democratic era. Thus it is seen that life and death are inextricably linked, and dependent upon one another. Yet there is no simple binary dichotomy, and magical realism fills the gaps between one era or existence and another. Mda's magical realism can be understood as a response to transitional terror, to a necropolitical state and to the numbness that results from a constant exposure to death and violence, and the fear of death and violence. Narrative and magical realism can be seen as an alternative response to terror; magical realism allows life to continue, with laughter, in the face of unending violence and the threat of death. Although contextualized and informed by death and violence, *Ways of Dying* is fundamentally about ways of living in negotiation with the transitional South African context.

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