

**MAGIC REALISM AND IMAGES OF THE
TRANSITION IN ZAKES MDA'S
WAYS OF DYING (1995)**

BY

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DECLARATION

This study represents original work done by the author and has not been submitted in any form to another university. Where use has been made of the work of others, this has been duly acknowledged in the text.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation I will explore Mda's use of Magic Realist devices in his novel, *Ways of Dying* (1995). I will focus on the political instability of the transition period as the dominant trope that informs this magic realist text.

I shall demonstrate that in the climate of unrestrained violence which was unleashed in the period between the Soweto uprising in June 1976 and the period before the first democratic elections, specifically between 1990 and 1994, the characters depicted were unable to distinguish between reality and fantasy. This feature, which focuses on the complex experiences of a confused society trying to come to terms with a new society, creates fertile ground for Magic Realism as a literary mode.

In terms of this transition, specific literary features are embraced. In *Ways of Dying* (1995) Mda describes the mass gatherings on the streets which evokes images of the carnival. The breakdown of the old order and its accompanying images of violent death and birth leads to the reality principle being eroded, producing dream-like images. This combination of death and rebirth, and the apocalyptic with the carnivalesque will also be explored as features of the transition in the novel.

I shall attempt in Chapter 2 to provide biographical details of Zakes Mda. In Chapter 3 a brief definition of Magic Realism as a literary mode will be presented. Mda's use of Magic Realist devices in *Ways of Dying* (1995) will also be explored in this Chapter. Chapter 4 will provide an analysis of the images of the transition which are evident in the novel.

Zakes Mda's novel, *Ways of Dying* (1995), is an example of Transitional Literature incorporating the device of Magic Realism as a literary mode. Set in the period

1990-1994 when negotiations for democracy began, the novel reflects many recognizable images of this turbulent transitional period or the “interregnum” (Gramsci 1985 :98). As indicated in the title, the author focuses on the many violent deaths that occurred in a society experiencing ideological, political, economical, social, cultural and institutional changes.

Ways of Dying (1995) deals with the issue of transition, urban violence and ultimately, reconciliation. The story is set in an informal settlement in an unnamed South African harbour city.

The novel describes events in the period between Christmas and New Year 1990 when political negotiations for change commenced, and 1994 when South Africa achieved democratic status. The repressive era which preceded the transition is also recorded in flashbacks.

The main character, Toloki, a self-styled professional mourner, dressed in a velvet cape and black top hat bought from a theatre shop, attends funerals in a township steeped in death, crime, violence and crippling poverty. Toloki perfects the art of exaggerated grieving.

At a Christmas day funeral for a young boy (Noria’s son) Vutha II, Toloki is reunited with Noria, his “home girl” – a woman from his rural village. Using different levels of flashbacks, Mda describes the village past, the urban township present and the interim. The novel’s communal narrating voice informs of Noria’s arrival in the urban landscape, the abuse she suffers at the hands of her husband and the violent death of her child. Toloki and Noria reunite and together they begin a healing process.

Mda explains that the deaths mentioned in the novel are based on newspaper reports of actual deaths that occurred as a result of township violence during this period :

Every one of those deaths happened, those were deaths reported in the newspapers. These were deaths that I had read about in *The Sunday Times*, and *City Press*. Those were the two newspapers which were the source of my information on the deaths ... The very first death mentioned in the novel, however, didn't come from a newspaper, but is actually based on fact. It happened to a cousin of mine, and I have reported it exactly as it happened. So, all those deaths actually happened, and all I did was to take these deaths and put them in an imaginary story with a professional mourner (Naidoo : 1997 : 253).

As a characteristic of the transitional period, the emergence of group psychology is evident and is vividly depicted in mass meetings, political speeches, street processions and vigilantism.

The novel maps the journey of Toloki and Noria who are caught in the turbulence of historical transition of transformation. Mda presents these characters as having magical abilities to survive in a hostile environment :

These protagonists are constructed as characters who are empowered through their association with the supernatural to decode the historical realities of their times (Naidoo : 1998 : 02).

Mda depicts many elements of Magic Realism as a literary mode in the novel. He also presents images of the carnivalesque and images of the apocalypse in *Ways of Dying* (1995). Dorothy Driver asserts :

Ways of Dying (1995) has been especially highly praised, displaying as its main character a self-styled professional mourner whose approach to the horrifying ways in which people die in South Africa produces a carnivalesque quality unusual in South African fiction, achieved here in part by Mda's masterly combination of realism and supernaturalism, in what some critics have called after the South American novels, Magic Realism (1996 : 123-124).

CHAPTER TWO

BIOGRAPHY

Zanemvula (Zakes) Kizito Gatyeni Mda was born on 6 October 1948 in Sterkspruit, Herschel District, an economically disadvantaged area in the Eastern Cape Province. The poverty that Mda observed there left an indelible impression on his mind. Zakes was the eldest child of Ashby Peter Solomzi and Rose Nompumelelo Mda. The Mda family relocated to Soweto soon after Zakes was born, but they continued to maintain links with the Herschel District where Zakes had received some of his early education (Naidoo : 1998 : 79).

In Soweto, the family initially settled in Orlando East, but later moved to Dobsonville. Ashby Peter Solomzi was a political activist, highly committed to creating a free and democratic South Africa. While living in Orlando East, Soweto, the family maintained close ties with other political activists like Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Robert Sobukwe and other prominent African National Congress (ANC) leaders. Young Mda was often harassed by the Security Police who demanded information about his father's political activities. Solomzi's desire for a more militant response to apartheid resulted in him resigning from the African National Congress (ANC) Youth League which he considered to be too conservative in its policies. As a radical militant, he felt more comfortable with the Pan African Congress (PAC) – a movement that was imbued with the spirit of Africanism which he also espoused.

Young Zakes became a victim of the corrupting influences of township life. In his early youth, he dabbled in petty crime. He also became a gang member who sold sweets and picked pockets on trains. He did not attend classes regularly at school, often opting to spend the school day loitering around shops. In an attempt to rehabilitate Zakes, he was sent back to the Herschel District where he lived with his grandmother and grandfather who was the chief of the village. At Herschel, he attended St. Teresa Mission High School.

In 1964, the family sought political exile in Lesotho as Zakes's father, who was a lawyer, had been arrested for his militant political activities. After securing bail, he received political asylum in Lesotho.

Zakes attended High School in Lesotho and it was here that he developed an enthusiasm to write. While in Lesotho, Zakes discovered literary legends like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. He was inspired and began writing plays in Junior High School, but his work did not receive professional production status until 1979. During this time he also painted pictures of Zulu warriors such as Phoshozwayo (Naidoo : 1998 : 79).

During his thirty year stay in Lesotho, Zakes became a member of Potlako Leballo's POQO (Xhosa for "for ourselves alone") – this was the military wing of the Pan African Congress (PAC) and the forerunner to the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA). However, when Mda was instructed by Leballo to kidnap white children who lived across the border in the then Orange Free State, he realized that he would be unable to respond to such militant orders. This was a turning point in his political life as he came to the conclusion that he did not want to be bound to any specific political doctrine or to any particular party.

After having matriculated, Zakes studied law for a while, but decided that he needed to change direction. While being employed as an English teacher in the Lesotho's Ministry of Education, Mda studied for a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree in Visual Arts and English Literature through the International Academy of Art and Letters in Switzerland (Chapman : 2003 : 500). Thereafter, he continued his studies at Ohio University in the United States of America where he was awarded a Masters Degree in Fine Arts (Theatre) and a Masters Degree in Telecommunications in 1984. He was awarded a PhD in 1990 by the University of Cape Town. For his PhD Thesis, he researched the utilization of theatre in development communication. After having written more than four hundred pages

for this Thesis, a process he described as “difficult and painful”, he realized that it would be possible for him to write sustained prose. This marked a period of transition as he became more confident about writing a novel. Prior to this, Mda considered himself a dialogue person who was more comfortable writing scripts for plays (Naidoo : 1997 : 254).

Mda taught at the National University in Lesotho until 1992 and was Director of the “Theatre for Development Project”. Hereafter, he served as a Fellow of the South African Research Programme at Yale University.

He was also a UNICEF Consultant on social mobilization from 1988. In South Africa, he was employed as a professor at Wits University and playwright in residence at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg. At present he works at the Ohio University in the United States of America where he lectures on Creative Writing. He spends several months in the United States of America and the remaining time in South Africa where he is involved in AIDS theatre and education.

Having come from a family of readers, Mda was, and still remains, an avid fan of comics and books (Naidoo 1997 : 247). His great love for reading was inspired by his father who was a teacher, and later, a lawyer. Having been fascinated by the stories that he read, Mda felt compelled to create his own stories. He did not start out as a writer, but as a painter – an art form that he still enjoys engaging in. While at school, Mda started writing poems and short stories in Xhosa. His earliest work written when he was 13 or 14 years old, was a Xhosa short story titled *Igqira lase Mvubase*.

After having watched Gibson Kente’s *Sikalo*, Mda was convinced that he could write a better play. While still a grade 8 pupil at Peka High School in Lesotho, he wrote a play called *Zhaigos*. The next play, *A Hectic Weekend* was influenced by Soyimica and other West African playwrights whose plays he was reading at the

time. Other literary influences included the prescribed set works he was studying at school.

Although Mda admits to creating a different style or type of theatre from that of Athol Fugard, he does concede that he owes a lot of the style that he uses to Fugard (Naidoo 1997 : 249).

Mda's first literary contributions were his plays like *Dead End* written in the sixties and *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland* written in 1973. Since then he has written many plays : -

- The Plays of Zakes Mda (1990)
- And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses? (1993)
- Four Plays (1996)
- Let Us Play (1998)
- Fools, Bells and the Habit of Eating : 3 Satires (2002)

In the last ten years Mda has also written many novels :-

- Melville 67 : A Novella for Youth (1998)
- She Plays with the Darkness (1995)
- Ways of Dying (1995)
- The Heart of Redness (2000, 2002 in U.S.)
- The Madonna of Excelsior (2002, March 2004 in U.S.)
- The Whale Caller (due for release December 2004)

He has also written an academic book entitled *When People Play People : Development Communication through Theatre* (1991)

Mda was also the recipient of many awards –

- **Winner of the MNET Book Prize for *Ways of Dying* (1995)**
- **Shortlisted for the CNA and Noma Awards for *Ways of Dying* (1995)**
- **Olive Schreiner Prize in 1995 for his play *The Nun's Romantic Story***
- **Amstel Playwright of the Year Award in 1978 for *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland* and in 1979 for *The Hill***
- **The Christina Crawford Award of American Theatre Association in 1984 for his play *The Road***

***Ways of Dying* (1995) was translated into seven European languages and his plays have been performed in the United States of America, Scotland, the then USSR as well as in various parts of southern Africa.**

Mda's plays and novels were written while he was away from South Africa. He believed that his distance from the subject helped him create better scripts and stories as he was forced to create situations by using his vivid imagination. He maintains that the playwrights and authors who created their stories from the actual experiences of Apartheid, often became mere reporters of a situation (Naidoo : 1997 : 251). As he had always drawn from his imagination, he can still create even though Apartheid no longer exists. Mda believes that the writer who depended on Apartheid to write his story will be in the doldrums, but the talented writer, with a creative imagination will continue to work.(Solberg : 1999:37)

Mda had taken three months to complete each of his novels. He started *Ways of Dying* (1995) on 25 December 1994 and on 01 April 1995 he wrote his last sentence. He attributes the short time frame to the fact that he enjoys writing novels and creating characters and that he uses a literary style that is very clear and precise, without unnecessary details or lengthy descriptions.

Mda writes in English and acknowledges the importance of English as a means of effective communication internationally. However, he does point out that African languages need to be used and promoted as they serve an important function. He maintains that literature should be created in African languages.

With Mda's novels :

one senses the emergence of literature that is truly South African in a sense, rather than one that is merely the product of a black or white writer (Naidoo : 1997 : 257)

Consequently, Mda's style of writing differs vastly from the protest poetry or literature that was influenced by the Black Consciousness Movement. Mda asserts that he finds African "Nationalism rather inhibiting and destructive" (Naidoo : 1997 : 258).

He embraces the idea of Pan-Africanism as a philosophy as it "acknowledges and celebrates the common history of the African people" (Naidoo : 1997 : 258). Mda is of the opinion that the common culture, traditions and interests of the African people must be acknowledged.

In *Ways of Dying* (1995) Mda uses the voice of the communal narrator – a product of African orature. There is also evidence of African Cosmology in the type of Magic Realism created in the novel. Mda claims that magic has always been a part of African culture, and when he was writing *Ways of Dying* (1995) he was aware that he was writing a magic realist novel. However, there are elements of Magic Realism in his earlier works when he was not aware of this literary movement, but incorporated aspects of belief systems and elements often referred to as superstitious by the Western world. Having read Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1978), and the works of other Latin American Magic Realism writers, Mda eagerly embraces this popular mode.

In *Ways of Dying*(1995) the magical or supernatural is not seen as problematic or disconcerting, it is accepted by the characters and settles snugly in the plot. Mda admits that he is comfortable writing in this mode. “I explore reality, you know – not in an objective manner, not as an objective reality, but reality governed by magic and the supernatural. The supernatural is taken for granted. In other words, my characters interact with the supernatural forces in their day-to-day living – it’s a natural thing to do. They don’t find the supernatural problematic.” (Solberg : 39)

Mda’s view is in harmony with that of Jean-Pierre Durix who claims that :

Rather than reject reality in favour of the powers of the imaginative, many post-colonial writers offer alternative interpretations of reality (1998 : 80).

Grant Farred asserts that in *Ways of Dying* (1995) Mda attempts :

to carve out a new space for black writers in post-apartheid South Africa, a mode liberated from the incessant political demands placed upon disenfranchised authors in the anti-apartheid struggle (2000 : 187).

Farred views this new role as problematic as he maintains that it is difficult for black literature to transform in the post-apartheid era as the black underclass has not achieved common equality and the living conditions continue to remain as in the apartheid era.

Mda points out that when writing non-academic books, he blots out his specialized training :

It actually caused my work to be stifled and contrived. I have had to recapture the innocence of writing (Sowetan:1997: 8-9).

He started writing novels after he stopped writing poetry because he considers himself to be a “lousy” poet. (Sowetan : 1997 : 9).

Art is art is art. I don't have a compartmentalised attitude to creativity. I create and use any form of expression (Sowetan : 1997 : 9).

Mda's works also indicate socio-political comment. He explains :

I am a social being and political animal. My characters are influenced by the prevailing political environment (Sowetan : 1997 : 9).

In the 1970's in South Africa, the literary mode embraced by many black writers was a direct response to the Black Consciousness Movement. This powerful movement, under the leadership of Steve Biko, called for a collective black identity “which emphasised group rather than individual freedom”, and in the 1970's in South Africa would see Black Consciousness as a powerful tool shaping the literary-political sensibilities of most local black writers (Naidoo 1997 : 3-4).

It was against this background that Mda emerged as a writer. He also embraced the Black Consciousness philosophy of using literature to foster black unity and introspection in response to apartheid. In the eighties, black writers turned their attention from overt protest to resistance literature as a new vehicle in the liberation struggle. Writers began to focus on issues such as class, gender, ethnicity and language (Naidoo 1998 : 93).

In an interview with Rebecca Weber, Mda recalls how *Ways of Dying* (1995) was created. On Christmas Day in 1992, while experimenting with his new computer, he just typed the line “There are many ways of dying”. The end of apartheid, Mda claimed, marked his transition from playwright to novelist (2004 : May 25).

During apartheid writers focused on plays and performance poetry which provided an immediate response as a weapon against apartheid. Mda explained :

Our poetry is performance poetry, it's not poetry that you write just to read. It is not art for its own sake. You write a play because there are issues that must be put on the table. Our work was highly political and it was used as a weapon against apartheid, as a weapon for destroying apartheid. So during this period of transition things were more relaxed. There were no longer any demands on us – demands that were imposed by ourselves, you know, as oppressed citizens of South Africa – there were no longer those demands that were imposed on ourselves for those immediate works. We could now sit back and write our novels. Today, for the first time in the history of literature in South Africa, you will find more novels than ever before. We've never had a period as we're having now (Weber : 2004 : May 25).

Having returned to South Africa after 32 years in exile, Mda was faced with :

new dilemmas and tensions – no longer black and white, so to speak, but more fluid and murky issues of identity and authenticity, progress and meaning (Tepper : 2002).

This long absence has enabled him to look at issues in the transitional phase in a refreshingly different way, incorporating the melancholic elements of social realism with magic realism in *Ways of Dying*.

The post-apartheid period provided fresh challenges for the South African writer for whom liberation was shadowed by the new, complex issues born in the

transition. The issue of focusing on human struggles that are common to all developing nations is often raised in transitional literature.

Mda has enjoyed considerable cultural acclaim, a feat only accomplished by a limited number of South African black writers. Novels written by black South African writers are not readily available as those writers prefer writing short stories, plays or poems – a mode that was used as an effective form of catharsis during apartheid.

As Mphahlele points out :

autobiography, the short story, the sketch, and verse, come more easily than the novel to the South African black writers. You can get quickly to the point, preserve your language for quick delivery of your anger. This is an aesthetic (1987 : 53).

Mda is also a talented artist whose paintings are exhibited in Stockholm, Bristol, England, Edmonton, Canada and Ohio, in the United States of America.

Mda is committed to social development programmes and is often consulted by local and international film producers who rely on his guidance, advice and expertise when they are working on documentaries.

Mda elaborates on his dual role as literary artist and social commentator :

...the role I hope to play as an artist, and the role I hope my work plays is that of social commentator and social commentary. I am against art for art's sake – in African aesthetics that is a strange concept. However, I do not want my work to act a social comment only... I want to rally people to action (Holloway 1988 : 83).

CHAPTER THREE

MAGIC REALISM IN *WAYS OF DYING* (1995)

In this chapter I will attempt a brief definition of the literary mode Magic Realism and I will explore Mda's use of Magic Realist devices in his first novel, *Ways of Dying* (1995).

The term *Magischer Realismus* or Magical Realism was first introduced by Franz Roh, a German art critic who viewed this mode as an art category. He used the term to characterize the return to realism of post-expressionism. Roh saw Magical Realism as a means to responding to reality and depicting pictorially the obscure or ambiguous aspects of reality (Naidoo : 1998 : 55).

As a literary mode, Magic Realism :

is an oxymoron that suggests the co-existence of two contradictory elements, the supernatural and realism in a text (Naidoo : 1998 : 01).

Latin American writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Carlos Fuentes, Isabel Allende and Aljeo Carpentier have incorporated Magic Realism in their literature. Contemporary post-colonial authors, writing in English, who have used this literary mode in their novels include Salman Rushdie, Ben Okri and Vikram Chandra.

According to Boehmer :

Drawing on the special effects of Magic Realism, post-colonial writers in English are able to express their view of a world fissured, distorted and made incredible by cultural displacements (1995 : 04).

Magic Realism, unlike pure fantasy, is set in a normal modern world where humans function authentically in their societies. Angel Flores describes Magic Realism as “an amalgamation of realism and fantasy” (Zamora : 1995 : 112).

Magic Realism conveys a world view that differs from what is deemed objective. Bruce Holland Rogers claims :

In these other realities time is not linear, causality is subjective and the magical and the ordinary are one and the same (in *Speculations* 2002).

Magic Realism as a literary mode reveals certain characteristics :-

Hybridity, a significant feature of post-colonial writing, is often used as a technique in Magic Realism. Authors present the urban and the rural or the western and indigenous as opposites. The plots may also include issues of borders or aspects of change :

Hybridity, the celebration of “mongrelism” as opposed to ethnic certainties has been shown to be a fundamental aspect of Magical Realist writing. A syncretism between paradoxical dimensions of life and death, historical reality and magic, science and religion characterizes the plots, themes and narrative structure of Magical Realist novels. In other words, urban and rural, western and indigenous, black, white and Mestizo – this cultural, economic and political cacophony is the amphitheatre in which Magical Realist fictions are performed. The plots of these fictions deal with issues of borders, change, mixing and syncretizing. And they do so, and this point is critical, in order to expose what they see as a

more deep a true reality than conventional realist techniques would bring to view (Cooper : 1998 : 32).

In order to preserve the deep, true reality of the plot, the writer must have ironic distance or else the magic may be seen as folklore or mere fantasy. The ironic distance of the author allows the magic to harmonise with the real as the author respects the magic. Brenda Cooper asserts :

If “hybrid” is the keyword for the Magical Realist plot, then “ironic”, is the key word for its author’s point of view ... The magic will only work if it is afforded dignity. This dignity can only evolve if there is a lack of patronization, which is itself dependent on genuine faith in, and respect for, the beliefs portrayed (1998 : 33).

The Magic Realist does not explain or account for the supernatural. This authorial reticence allows for the acceptance of the Magic Realism as valid :

Amaryll Beatrice Chanady states that although the world view presented by the Magical Realist differs radically from ours, it is to be accepted as equally valid. Chanady asserts that the Magical Realist should adopt “authorial reticence” as this “serves the purpose mainly of preventing the reader from questioning the narrated events, as no attention is drawn to the strangeness of the world view”. (Cooper : 1998 : 34).

This combination of authorial reticence with authorial irony is a defining characteristic of a Magical Realist text.

According to Bruce Holland Rogers, Magic Realism must be viewed as serious fiction as it engages the reader and conveys or explores the truth :

But Magical Realism is always serious, never escapist, because it is trying to convey the reality of one or several worldviews that actually exist, or have existed (in *Speculations* 2002).

Rogers makes a clear distinction between Magic Realism on one hand and science fiction and fantasy on the other. He claims that unlike science fiction and fantasy,

Magic Realism is not speculative and does not conduct through experiments. Instead, it tells its stories from the perspective of people who live in our world and experience a different reality from the one we call objective (in *Speculations* 2002).

Brenda Cooper is of the opinion that :

Magical Realism arises out of particular societies – post-colonial, unevenly developed places where old and new, modern and ancient, the scientific and the magical views of the world co-exist (1998 : 216).

Cooper further states that African writers reject the label of Magic Realism because it implies the slavish imitation of Latin America and gives the impression that Africa is unable to produce new intellectual or spiritual modes.

Magic Realist writers like Marquez and Rushdie were intensely influenced by the world views, histories, religions and cultures of the societies they wrote about. This suggests that the local context is considered significant in Magical Realist writings.

The plots of African Magical Realist novels are informed by the cultural and religious heritages of Africa. Jean-Pierre Durix asserts that :

Such novels evoke the process of liberation of oppressed communities. The scope of these books largely transcends the individual fate of a few characters in order to constitute an imaginary re-telling of a whole nation through several decades (1998 : 80).

Durix points out that the fantastic serves different purposes in European literature and post-colonial literature :

Where in European literature, the fantastic serves to protest against the tyranny of “fact”, in post-colonial literature it frequently serves to incorporate the old values and beliefs into the modern man’s perception. It has a social function, whereas in European literature, it more often expresses individualistic rebellion (1998 : 81).

Mda believes that the African people have always lived with magic. This is evident in African cosmology and the belief in the ancestral voices, witchdoctors, inyanga, myths and legends and the rich oral history which abounds with magic and the fantastic. Mda is emphatic that “voodoo” and magic had its roots in Africa. In *Ways of Dying* (1995) Mda draws on his personal knowledge of African folklore and myths. In an interview with Chris Barron of the *Sunday Times*, Mda claimed :

I’ve never referred to what I write as magical realism. I’m writing the kind of literature that draws from the African oral tradition – the stories that our grandmothers used to tell us, which are always magical, where realism and the supernatural co-exist in the same narrative. So it is a mode of writing I was

using long before I even heard of the existence of magical realism (13 October 2002).

Mda has admitted to having experimented with elements which characterised Magic Realism in his earlier works :

After I discovered Magic Realism as a literary mode I became quite fascinated by it. As I have said I have been writing in this mode without knowing that it existed as a literary movement, or how it actually worked. When I looked at other works and what other people were saying about it, I found that what they were saying was what I was doing as well ... Things that seem to contradict the laws of reason, happen in my novels, ... (Naidoo : 1977 : 256).

In *Ways of Dying* (1995), Mda incorporates the elements of Magic Realism, the carnivalesque, the apocalyptic and African folk culture. I will now focus on examples of these literary modes in *Ways of Dying* (1995).

Mda claims that he always begins a novel with a place in mind (Jacobs : 2003 : 172). In *Ways of Dying* (1995) the harbour city is not named. The informal settlement, which is located in an urban environment, does not have a clear status or identity. The city is presented as an ambiguous space – a world of poverty, death and violence. But, as Richard Samin states “It is also a world which wavers between slapstick comedy and tragedy, between legality and illegality” (2000 : 24).

The harbour city could refer to Durban or any Cape port. This absence of giving names seems to be an inversion of the colonialist agenda and the whole “realism” paradigm. The narrative is set in an uncertain set of zone of borders.

The story of Toloki, Noria and other fictional characters can thus be read allegorically as the life story of “Everyman” and “woman” in any black community in apartheid and transitional South Africa (Mervis : 1998 : 54).

The description of the rows of mini-bus taxis suggests that the urban setting of Mda’s novel is not a mappable South African city, but a fictionalised, “allegorical construction of any coastal apartheid city.” (van Wyk : 1997 : 84).

The narrative covers seven days, yet time seems to become fluid. People and events seem to be caught in a time warp where the narrative explores parallel universes of time and space, all running concurrently with the communal voice being the only static device used. The boundaries between time, history and space have all become blurred and the events could be applied to any space in the post-colonial context. Naidoo claims that :

the merging of time past with time present and the healing potential of time future make possible the dawn of a new era (1998 : 230).

Mda also incorporates the concept of the carnival in the novel. This concept celebrates the body, the senses and the relationships between humans. “Carnival” refers to cultural festivals that occur in different related forms in North and South America, Europe and the Caribbean. At these festivals there is often a prescribed dress code and a particular language. These cultural manifestations are often characterized by the presence of a madman, fool or clown. People organize and engage in specific forms of dance, music or theatre. Historically, the time of carnival was outside the official order, and implicitly challenged it through debunking satire. In Latin America, the Magic Realist writers explored the optimistic, life- affirming quality of the carnivalesque :

In attempting to find new ways of countering the oppression of the Social Realism imposed on the Russian people, Bakhtin turns to the carnival as a means of demonstrating the power of laughter. Bakhtin sees carnival as a powerful force in social transformation (Naidoo : 1998 : 68).

An example of the carnivalesque as a theme of Magic Realism can be seen in Toloki's persistence in acquiring a costume that will elevate his status as a professional mourner. A costume in a theatrical "for hire" store catches his attention and he engages in a pathetic display of longing – exaggerated salivating called "izinev, the gob of desire" (1995 : 22) :

Different types of costumes were displayed at the window, and he was struck by particularly beautiful outfit all in black comprising a tall shiny top hat, lustrous tight-fitting pants, almost like the tights that the young women wear today, and a knee-length velvety black cape buckled with a hand-sized gold-coloured brooch with tassels of yellow, red and green (1995 : 26).

He does not give up his quest, so the mall shop owners collect funds to purchase the costume for him in an attempt to get rid of him. This costume, which resembles those worn by magicians and the legendary vampire, Count Dracula, becomes the hallmark of his trade :

The fact that he has become some kind of a spectacle does not bother him. It is his venerable costume, he knows, and is rather proud. Dirty children follow him. They dance in their tattered clothes and spontaneously compose a song about him, which they sing with derisive gusto. Mangy mongrels follow him, run alongside, sniff at him and lead the way, while

barking all the time. He ignores them all, and walks through a quagmire of dirty water and human ordure that runs through the streets of this informal settlement, as the place is politely called, looking for Noria (1995 : 42).

Dressed in this costume which was once hired by Americans for a Halloween celebration, Toloki attends funeral after funeral, hoping to be given the job of professional mourner. He becomes the character who represents both death as well as the carnival as he preys on the dead, by creating laughter rather than fear in his "audience". Toloki is presented as a comic figure with an offensive body odour and eccentric appetite for swiss roll eaten with green onions.

Magic Realism as a literary mode can be clearly observed in Toloki's ability to convey an exaggerated, intensified grief. He becomes a talented actor, performing his grief hyperbolically, both vocally and with gestures of anguish and pain. Mda depicts the melodrama and hilarity within the context of the funeral ritual by describing Toloki's mourning as sounding like "a goat that is being slaughtered" (1995 : 144). Toloki states :

Death lives with us every day. Indeed our ways of dying are our ways of living. Or should I say our ways of living are our ways of dying? (1995 : 89).

The disintegration of the subtle dichotomy between both states of being highlights Mda's intent to attempt at a blurring of the conceptual boundaries between both states of being, while the tropes of the apocalyptic and the carnivalesque , similarly, waver ambivalently between each other within this society (van Wyk : 1997 : 80).

The oxymoron of laughter and sadness in Mda's presentation of the funeral ritual suggests a turbulent past and the possibility of a better future. Naidoo elaborates :

The carnivalesque images that constantly undercut the apocalyptic scenes in the text serve as indicators that death is a process that makes possible another life (1998 : 231-232).

On a political level the narrative records the transition from apartheid rule to the birth of a new democratic social order.

The funerals are presented as theatrically exaggerated rituals and the atmosphere of the carnivalesque is enhanced by the use of expressions such as "jam-packed" and "bursting at the seam" which describe the mass funerals born out of the violence of the transition.

Toloki states, "In death we laugh as well." (1995 : 152). This type of infectious laughter that echoes in a cemetery where four funerals are taking place at the same time informs the reader of Mda's deliberate attempt to contradict the sombre tone one usually associates with mass funerals. Toloki sums up this point succinctly :

In our language there is a proverb which says the greatest death is laughter (1995 : 153).

As a performer, Toloki has claimed his place in a new, hostile urban environment. He represents the collective grief of his community and he is able to use the oratory skills of the imbongi or praise singer in an attempt to retrieve emotional power and link the past to the present. He plays his role of performative agent with ease and declares, "Death becomes me, it is part of me." (1995 : 106).

In claiming his space as an ardent professional mourner, Toloki also creates a place for community memory to exist. His performance links their rural past with their urban present and creates a communal grief – to channel feelings of helplessness and frustration. In his carnivalesque costume, Toloki becomes a tangible representation of grief as he “sits on the mound and shares his sorrow with the world.” (1995 :17).

Toloki is joined by another performer – the nurse. The latter provides “a fountain of fascinating information about ways of dying” (1995 : 01). The professional mourner joins forces with the nurse to heighten the sense of grief and pathos. Together, they also serve as the spoken voice of the collective consciousness of the community.

Although Mda rejected the idea of a professional mourner as a ridiculous notion, he claims this concept as his own creation in *Ways of Dying* (1995). Only after having written the novel, he found out that professional mourners did exist in Europe during the time of the bubonic plague (Naidoo : 1997 : 253).

The role of the nurse, Mda explains, does exist among Basutho people. The nurse is a funeral orator who provides a historical narrative, reporting details of the death. The nurse combines his powerful oral delivery and tradition with a passionate performance as he works himself “almost into a dance-like frenzy that leaves the crowdpanting with excitement” (1995 : 144).

The nurse too becomes drawn into the carnivalesque when he confesses at a funeral :

...it was fortunate my brothers and sisters, that I had some money in my shoe where I hid it from my grandchildren. Oops, now they know where I hide my money. But don't worry I'll find another place (1995 :149).

In Magic Realism no attempt is made to explain irrational events. In *Ways of Dying* (1995) Noria gives birth twice to the same son, Vutha (meaning burning fire). In each case she was pregnant for fifteen months. The second child was conceived when strangers “visited her in her dreams” (1995 : 140).

Naidoo asserts that Noria appears to be “imbued with certain supernatural powers like the biblical Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus.”(1998 : 175). This image of Noria, the Madonna, is contrasted with that of Noria, the prostitute in the novel. This ambivalence of whore and Madonna is further explored in the violent death of Vutha, the second, which may point to the cruel death of Christ.

Noria regains her Madonna status at the end of the novel when she assists Madimbhaza to take care of the poverty-stricken, neglected children in the squatter settlement instead of accepting Shadrack’s offer of becoming his mistress in exchange for a life of luxury. The paradoxical portrayal of Noria as Madonna and whore is an example of Magic Realism in the text.

Noria is presented as having many mysterious powers. Her penetrating eyes enable her to read people’s minds. She was, after-all, the daughter of a medicine woman. Noria’s influence on Jwara, Toloki’s father, was significant. As a child, she sang so beautifully, that Jwara was so inspired by her voice that he was filled with a creative urge to carve strange figurines. He remains an impotent artist until his creativity is unleashed by Noria’s voice. When Noria left the village, Jwara lost the will to live. All creative urges deserted him and he eventually allowed himself to starve to death. Noria is described as a woman who “had the power to give or withhold pleasure.” (1995 : 65).

Jwara’s obsession could not be quenched, so he sunk deeper and deeper into depression. He could not create without Noria. Yet his dreams did not give him any respite. The strange creatures continued to visit him in his sleep, and to

demand that they be re-created the next day in the form of figurines (1995 : 101).

Most Magic Realist novels reveal a strong narrative drive which combines the elements of dreams with reality. There are many references to dreams in *Ways of Dying* (1995). Van Wyk postulates that many of the dreams in the novel may be examined on an oedipal level.

The oedipal of the dream is specifically African in the way it links the dream to the ancestors (1997 : 83).

Noria's singing inspired Jwara to communicate with people in his dreams so that he could carve their images in the figurines he created :

Sometimes new shapes would visit him in his dreams and he would want to create them the next day (1995 : 31).

It was because Jwara's dreams had been particularly crowded the previous night, and he was unable to stop until he had reproduced all the strange creatures with which he had interacted in his sleep (1995 : 31).

Toloki's dreams and nightmares may also be examined on an oedipal level. Toloki was intensely jealous of Noria's influence on his father :

How he hated that stuck-up bitch Noria! (1995 : 33).

Toloki did not enjoy a positive relationship with his father. Jwara, who was considered very handsome and creative, did not show any paternal love to Toloki, but drew inspiration from Noria. His constant rejection, "Get out of here, you stupid, ugly boy!" (1995 : 33) destroys Toloki's self esteem and he struggles in the

years ahead to find his niche in the transforming urban landscape. Toloki, in his youth, had ambivalent feelings for Noria. He enviously acknowledged her ability to inspire his father :

If Jwara ruled his household with a rod of iron, he was like clay in the hands of Noria (1995 : 33).

In the urban landscape, Toloki desperately wants the approval of the woman who was the source of his father's creativity. Noria, the muse, becomes the object of his oedipal and sexual desires. She features in many of his "wet dreams". These dreams obstruct the vision of a pure, spiritual professional mourner that Toloki wishes to accomplish "To mourn for the dead became a spiritual vocation" (1995 : 134).

In an attempt to nurture a sense of spiritual superiority, Toloki rejects any form of emotional or physical intimacy. He makes a concerted effort to deny the attraction he feels for Noria. He wanted to be like the monks from the Orient as he wished to bring a sense of purity to the funerals.

Later in the novel, Toloki starts drawing again to entertain the children and Noria, but soon he too, like his father, becomes enchanted by her beautiful voice and is inspired to draw human figures. In the following extract the sexual connotation of Noria's song points to the death of an old order and the possibility of creativity in the new order :

The drawing becomes frenzied, as Noria's voice rises. Passers-by stop to watch and are overcome by warm feelings. It is as though Toloki is possessed by this new ability to create human figures. He breathes heavily with excitement and his palms are clammy. His whole body tingles, as he furiously gives shape to the lines on the paper. His breathing

reaches a crescendo that is broken by an orgasmic scream. This leaves him utterly exhausted. At the same moment, Noria's song stops. The spell breaks, and passers-by go their way (1995 : 187).

In the above extract Toloki's repressed sexual fantasies resurface. This, according to Naidoo, "is a common trope in Magic Realist texts." (1998 : 219). Irene Visser further explains Toloki's new-found creativity :

This new mode of expression symbolizes his returning interest in human companionship – which is a return to life (2002 : 43).

Toloki's attempt to create beauty in a hostile urban environment is evident when he filches roses from the city gardens to give to Noria. Side-walk gardens where roses grew in abundance did not exist in South African cities.

He walks towards the taxi rank and furtively picks some of the flowers that grow along the sidewalks ... He is very pleased that he was able to get roses this time. Their scent fills the whole taxi. Noria will love these. Indeed flowers become her (1995 : 100-101).

The above extract presents yet another characteristic of Magic Realism where elements of reality exist in harmony with elements of non-reality.

Toloki and Noria transform their shack by plastering pictures from the *House and Garden* magazines on the walls. These pictures present an opportunity for escapism and a temporary, imaginary journey into a world of glamour and beauty. Here the element of Magic Realism is evident in the celebration of personal creativity and the unproblematic fusion of fantasy and reality.

The theme of the carnivalesque is presented in the character of Nefolovhodwe who is described as “a man of immense physical girth” (1995 :125). He displays a ridiculous passion for fleas. He even believed that his fleas would one day engage in competitions internationally. Nefolovhodwe’s physique and his obsession with fleas recalls Bakhtin’s notion of grotesque realism (Naidoo : 1998 : 188). According to Bakhtin, laughter is evoked by focusing on the grotesque images of the body (1984 : 21).

On another level, Nefolovhodwe is presented as a symbol of the black petit bourgeois who, as a successful coffin builder, becomes obsessed with material wealth and ultimately alienates himself from his people.

The inter-play between the rural, the urban and the subsequent transgression of boundaries as explored in Magic Realism becomes evident when Nefolovhodwe’s redemption is prompted by his conscience at the prodding of Jwara’s spirit :

he could not rest in peace in his grave, or join the world of the ancestors, unless the figurines were given to Toloki (1995 : 192).

Nefolovhodwe’s experience reveals :

The capacity of the spiritual wealth of the rural past to transfigure the urban environment (van Wyk : 1997 : 83).

Jwara’s spirit continues to haunt Nefolovhodwe, until his fleas mysteriously begin to die :

Then his fleas began to die. In his nightly visits, Jwara laughed and danced, and warned that more fleas would die if

Nefolovhodwe did not do what he, Jwara was ordering him to do (1995 : 2066).

Further evidence of Magic Realism is evident when Nefolovhodwe goes to collect Jwara's figurines and is surprised that there are so many :

...did they perhaps multiply on their own, giving birth to more metal monsters? (1995 : 195).

A significant theme of Magic Realism is the overwhelming idea of terror which reaches apocalyptic proportions. Even the prominent authoritarian figures such as the police have the power to torture and kill. This theme is evident in the vile, perverse treatment meted out to Shadrack by the white security police in the novel :

The men told him that they were going to kill him, and started assaulting him again. He stumbled over the corpses, and fell among them. When he tried to rise, the corpse of an old man was thrown onto his chest. He fell down again. One of the men grabbed him by the shoulders and ordered him to make love to a corpse of a young woman (1995 : 142).

The hostility of the urban environment is clearly evident in this incident as the white policemen show no respect for the dead and the living. Another example of extreme cruelty is evident when Noria's husband, Napu, employs his small son as a beggar, denies him food and chains him to a post. As a result of his regular drinking bouts, he forgets about the little boy who is savagely devoured by dogs. The grief-stricken Napu dies by drowning in a sewerage storage dam.

During the "interregnum" years, between 1976 and 1994, there were more killings recorded than ever before in the history of South Africa. Mda presents these

killings not in traditional apocalyptic patterns; rather death is seen in the novel as a “process that is an intrinsic aspect of laughter and living, and re-birth” (Naidoo : 1998 : 190).

Vutha’s second death is by “necklacing”, having a tyre placed around him and being set alight. He is killed by the Young Tigers, the youth wing of a political party in the squatter settlement. The cathartic aspect of these deaths are revealed when Noria is able, after a period, to talk about the deaths and thereby begin a sense of renewal and re-birth. She is able to bond with Toloki physically, after seventeen years of celibacy. There is reference in the novel to violent killings where the perpetrators hack and mutilate bodies or set their victims alight. The playing of games to assert power is evident in the incident where Toloki’s friend is killed by a white colleague who is burnt to death in a game because “the big white baas ... likes to play with black labourers” (1995 : 57). Shadrack’s son, who is picked up at random and taken to a hostel, is set free but shot at as he running away because the perpetrators wanted to “test their guns” (1995 : 47).

In the many political funerals described, the carnivalesque is evident in the to-ing and chanting :

It is like those political funerals where the Young Tigers dance to a call-and-response chant. Someone who does not understand the meaning in these chants might be amazed or even shocked at how these youths can be so happy at a funeral (1995 : 159).

Van Wyk comments further on the violent deaths described in the novel :

many deaths in the text, point to the fact that in this historical nightmare, dying is a way of life. It points to a society that has regressed ; a society in which the institutionalised law is

illegitimate or completely absent. The perpetrators of the crimes in this lawless society were not allowed to grow up, and this is evident in the fact that they cannot distinguish between their fantasies (ideologies) and reality. The reality principle is absent. Senseless violence permeates everything and everybody ... (1997 : 18).

In his description of the senseless killings in the novel, Mda has presented :

...paradoxical inclusion of such paradoxical opposites as fear and laughter, aggression and playfulness, and the merging of fantastical/macabre carnival atmosphere with rational and logical reality (Meyer : 1995 : 1).

Mda admits to being quite fascinated by Magic Realism as a literary mode :

I write about the supernatural, but I don't present it as being problematic, in other words my characters take it for granted (Naidoo : 1997 : 256).

In addition to the traditional beliefs in the spirits of ancestors, Mda also focuses on religious rituals and evil spells which link the rural past of the characters to their urban present. The mention of muti killings draws attention to the element of witchcraft in the novel. Napu's grandmother also seems to be embroiled in the practice of witchcraft when she attempts to induce labour in Noria :

When they thought she was fast asleep, the grandmother stripped naked, and danced over her, chanting some strange language (1995 : 77).

In the thirteenth month of her pregnancy, Noria and her husband Napu “consult diviners and herbalists of all types” (1995 : 78). They perform certain rituals, herbs are mixed and animals are slaughtered in an attempt to induce labour. Noria’s mother, That Mountain Woman, is associated with creating traditional remedies as well as putting curses on enemies, despite declaring “I am not a witch. I am a doctor” (1995 : 79).

The carnivalesque is also evident in the pregnancy of Noria’s mother who in her eighth month of pregnancy engages in a sexual encounter with a health assistant who calls himself a doctor. This so-called “doctor” is caught and beaten up by the village folk and the policemen. The incident provokes much laughter :

We told the story over and over again, we laughed and we said, “That Mountain Woman has no shame” (1995 : 34).

Although That Mountain Woman was eight months pregnant with Noria when she engaged in the sexual act with the “doctor”, many villagers believed that Noria’s facial features closely resembled that of the “doctor”.

Richard Samin postulates :

The Magic Realism of the novel lies in the unquestioned endorsement of the extraordinary and, more generally, in the deliberate contiguity of two African literary traditions, the urban tradition of critical realism and naturalism of the 1950’s and 60’s and the rural tradition of legends, tales and myths, or, in other words, of the written and oral traditions (2000 : 25).

In *Ways of Dying* (1995) the oral tradition is reclaimed. The omniscient narrator, in communal voice, relates the experiences of Toloki and Noria, spanning a thirty year period. Through the categories of oral discourse, he narrates their

adventures to his imagined audience, but adopts an external point of view. In this way, the instrument of Magic Realism is used to present the communal voice as a re-definition of rural culture within urban modernity :

There is an all-wise and all-knowing “we” that comments on events, both political and personal (Cooper : 1998 : 229).

The omniscient narrator also participates in the narrative, following the characters and sharing in their experiences. A sense of communal ownership of the narrative is suggested in the narrative voice in the following extract :

It is not different, really here in the city. Just like back in the village, we live our lives together as one. We know everything about everyone. We even know things that happen when we are not there ; things that happen behind people’s closed doors deep in the middle of the night. We are the all-seeing eye of the village gossip. When in our orature the storyteller begins the story, “They say it once happened...”, we are the “they”. No individual owns any story. The community is the owner of the story, and it can tell it the way it deems it fit. We would not be needing to justify the communal voice that tells this story if you had not wondered how we became so omniscient in the affairs of Toloki and Noria (1995 : 8).

The communal voice functions as a chorus narrating the story which represents both life and death and the rural past and the urban present. This voice is sometimes insensitive. This is reflected in its negative description of Toloki “We always remarked, sometimes in his presence, that he was an ugly child” (1995 : 26).

Christopher Warnes asserts that “the narrator in the Magical Realist text plays a central role in integrating and legitimating the natural and the supernatural on the level of the fiction. “ (2001 : 249). According to Warnes, Mda has attempted :

to contextualise Toloki’s and Noria’s stories within a collective, folkloric dimension that nevertheless does not take itself altogether seriously (2001 : 249).

In an interview, Mda explains his unconscious encounter with Magic Realism :

I am writing in the mode of Magic Realism, which is a mode that I have always used from the time I began to write, even in my plays, without knowing that there was something called Magic Realism ; it was just that I felt like writing that way (Solberg : 1999 : 39).

In *Ways of Dying* (1995), the new year presents new opportunities for optimism. This is reflected in the magical glow of Jwara’s figurines which have been relocated from the rural village to the urban squatter settlement so as to claim its place in history. The potential for healing is evident in his merging of the past with the present to make it possible for the dawn of a new era.

It is appropriate to conclude this chapter with Mda’s intention to continue embracing Magic Realism as a literary mode :

I will continue to use Magic Realism and I will continue to be as innovative as I have always tried to be. I will attempt to bring other elements of Magic Realism into my novel as I think of them (Naidoo : 1997 : 257).

CHAPTER FOUR

IMAGES OF THE TRANSITION IN *WAYS OF DYING* (1995)

In this chapter I shall focus on how historicity has informed Mda's oeuvre in the novel. The history-making exigencies of a society in turmoil will be examined.

In 1989, South African writer Albie Sachs, speaking at an African National Congress (ANC) seminar in Lesotho, suggested that ANC members be banned from saying that culture is a weapon of the struggle. He was calling for a new discourse of liberation. In the same year, Jane Watts addressed readers and critics and called for the acknowledgement of the African writer's rejection of Western literary traditions (Visser : 2002 : 39). In the early eighties, Njabulo S. Ndebele called for a literature that would free the social imagination in South Africa from the laws of perception of Apartheid society. He stated :

There must be a change of discourse, from the rhetoric of oppression to that of process and exploration (1994 : 73).

In *Ways of Dying* (1995), the protagonists' process of exploration are dramatised – answering the call by Ndebele. The historical period in the novel is undoubtedly the early post-apartheid era, but the setting is deliberately vague. Visser points out :

...the place is an unspecified metropolis; and even names of famous leaders (such as Nelson Mandela) are left unspecified. This deliberate withholding of specific historic details, no longer necessitated by state censorship, may be interpreted as a new emphasis on the autonomy of art. For not only does the novel's focus on the experiential and the personal constitute a release from the former political demands of resistance literature, but in its eventual orientation towards

the future of post-apartheid South Africa, it also invites an engagement with wider issues than the historical, local or personal (2002 : 40)

The narrative records the crucial moments in South Africa's history, the period between 1990 and 1994 which was, according to Attwell, characterised by :

unbanning of exiled organizations, the release of many political prisoners and tentative negotiations towards a transition to democracy (1993 : 124).

By 1991, negotiations had not reached the desired levels and the country was ravaged by violence. This horrific violence is described by Mandela in his Autobiography, *Long Walk To Freedom* :

...Natal became a killing-ground. Heavily armed Inkatha supporters had in effect declared war on ANC strongholds across the Natal Midlands region and around Pietermaritzburg. Entire villages were set alight, dozens of people were killed, hundreds were wounded and thousands became refugees. In March 1990, 230 people lost their lives in this internecine violence. In Natal, Zulu was murdering Zulu, for Inkatha members and ANC partisans are Zulus (1994 : 566).

At one point in 1989, the black-on-black violence was claiming 1500 lives a month. The Nationalist Party had been claiming that this violence was as a result of ethnic differences, but after Mandela's release, it was clear that the battle lines were drawn along political lines, between members of the Inkatha Freedom Party and ANC members.

Mda claims that it was easier to write during apartheid; the transition introduced new literary challenges :

It was easier to write about the past ...because the past created ready-made stories. There was a very clear line of demarcation between good and evil, you see? Black was good; white was bad. Your conflict was there. There were no gray area ... We no longer have that. In this new situation, black is not necessarily good. There are many black culprits; there are many good white people. We have become normal. It's very painful to become normal. (Swarns : April 1999)

In *Ways of Dying* (1995), Mda does not romanticize village life. The urban environment of his adulthood is presented as violent, but he does not take sides. He describes the atrocities perpetrated by blacks and whites and suggests that there are elements of the elitist and corrupt in the new leadership. Both the migrants from the hostel and the Young Tigers of the movement are presented as power-hungry and brutally violent. Mda also laments the inclusion of innocent children in the civil war which preceded the first democratic elections.

The violence involving children is evident when Vutha, the second, who is five years old, is described as a “veteran” (1995 : 167) in the struggle. He declares : “But mama, I am a cadre. I am a freedom fighter” (1995 : 181). He is described as :

an expert at dancing the freedom dance, and at chanting the names of the leaders who must be revered, and of the sell-outs who must be destroyed. He could recite the Liberation Code and the Declaration of the People's Rights (1995 : 167).

As children, they did not know the difference between right and wrong; they did not understand the implications of betrayal. When Vutha communicates

information to hostel dwellers about a planned attack against them, Danisa, his four year old friend, becomes his executioner. He is callously “necklaced”.

There are also references to state-sponsored violence which fuels the tension among hostel dwellers, squatters and vigilantes :

Sometimes the police and security forces assist them in their raids of death and destruction, because this helps to divide the people so that they remain weak and ineffective when they fight for their freedom. (1995 : 48)

Unlike Mda, Narismulu ignores the violence motivated by Africans :

... the state came increasingly to rely on the terror created by the vigilantes to destabilise resisting communities. To obscure the connection between the vigilantes and itself the state perpetuated the old racial stereo-type of internecine battles among blacks, which gave it an excuse to move in (under the guise of restoring order) and deal with the squatters (1998 : 37).

Although the urban black underclass in the novel sees itself as post-tribal and post-ethnic, Shadrack describes how the tribal chief uses ethnicity to fuel black-on black violence in his selfish quest to maintain power :

And you know, what is worse is that I am of the same ethnic group as those hostel dwellers. The tribal chief who has formed them into armies that harass innocent residents merely uses ethnicity as an excuse for his own hunger for power. I am from the same clan as this blood-soaked tribal chief (1995 : 55).

Ultimately, both the tribal chief and the Young Tigers are equally guilty of spilling the blood of their people :

You see, they say they are fighting for freedom, yet they are no different from the tribal chief and his followers. They commit atrocities as well (1995 : 167).

A gloomy view of the future is presented in new divisions, betrayals, disillusionment and repression. Mda reveals the affluence of the leaders of the political movement who arrive at the poverty-stricken squatter-settlement in an entourage of flashy vehicles. The wife of the political leader is described as “bejewelled” (1995:174) and the women of the settlement are reproved for serving the leaders a humble meal of “bread and cabbage” (1995 : 174).

Noria is promised a public apology for the murder of her son by the comrades, but instead of the anticipated apology, she is asked by the leaders to remain silent about the murder.

According to Freud :

A group is impulsive, changeable and irritable. It is led almost exclusively by the unconscious. The impulses which a group obeys may according to circumstances be generous or cruel, heroic or cowardly, but they are always so imperious that no personal interest, not even that of self-preservation, can make itself felt (1985 : 104)

This group psychology is evident in the senseless brutality committed by the mob :

... we go for what we call a joll. All it means is that we engage in an orgy of drinking, raping, and stabbing one another with knives and shooting one another with guns (1995 : 25).

The above extract demonstrates that during the transition, the traditional values and belief systems of the African people were being eroded. Naidoo points out :

The unity of black people, and the collective communal self, which was the founding principle of Black Consciousness, face threats of erosion and disintegration. Ethnic divisions are encouraged to muster political support. Similarly, the tenets of Black Consciousness which sought Ideological solidarity among black people on the basis of skin colour, are effaced in favour of individual aspiration and demands. The shock of such disintegration takes its toll on the individual and the community (1998 : 197).

In the absence of Ubuntu, spiralling violence reaches catastrophic proportions:

Each day, each weekend, the newspapers were filled with fresh reports of new and bloody violence in our communities and townships. It was clear that violence was the number one issue in the country. In many communities in Natal and on the Reef around Johannesburg, a poisonous mixture of crime, political rivalries, police brutality and shadowy death squads made life brutish and untenable. As long as the violence was not dealt with, the progress to a new dispensation would remain uneven and uncertain (Mandela : 1994 : 582).

Against this background of trauma, confusion and extensive bloodshed, Ndebele called for the new post-apartheid literature to explore how and why people survive in extreme conditions and to understand their mechanisms of survival and resistance (Visser : 2002 : 40).

In Mda's novel of the transition, he suggests that a reconciliation between the old and the new will provide an answer to the question of "how to live". But Mda rejects the myth of political utopia as evident in the Marxist-socialist ideologies of the resistance movement. While Farred asserts "In this novel the anticipation of the democratic future co-exists awkwardly with the memories of past injustice" (2000 : 184), Mervis maintains "This is a time when people are especially given to re-evaluate and re-define themselves, their concepts and ideals" (1998 : 44).

The "twinning protagonists" (Jacobs: 2004) Noria and Toloki have to search for new means of survival in a drastically new urban landscape and hostile socio-political conditions. Toloki wanders through the urban landscape, struggling to define himself in relation to his new environment. He acquires a costume and claims a personal space, his "headquarters" – "quayside shelter and waiting-room where he spends his nights" (1995 : 10). He further adopts an acquisitive stance in the interest of his own survival. He acquires a blanket and a shopping trolley. These are acts of territorialisation in an atmosphere of uncertainty characterised by the transition. Toloki's growing familiarity with the urban context enables him to use a politically correct reference, "informal settlement", instead of "squatter settlement".

The selfishly individualising space of the urban environment contributes to the destruction of traditional value systems and family structures. This is evident in Noria's life of prostitution in her determination to survive, to find ways of living. The novel vividly portrays the hardships of existence in the transitional period :

Toloki and Noria, the book's protagonists, are familiar with loss, death and destitution. At the start of the narrative, their lives are stagnant; frozen in time, unconnected to a future and cut off from the past. This transition period is, for them, a time of mourning and abstinence (Visser : 2002 : 40)

Both are celibate and live a precarious existence – Noria in a shack which could be bulldozed or burnt down at any moment and Toloki in a public waiting room. The waiting room presents a significant metaphor for the manner in which the narrative describes the people waiting for change, for new opportunities, for hope.

There are many examples in the text of the images of social changes which occurred during the transition. References to “these days”, “those days”, “people of his colour” suggest a sense of alienation experienced by the black people during the apartheid period.

People of his complexion were not allowed to buy houses in the suburbs in those days (1995 :116).

Funerals were held only on Saturday and Sunday morning those days, because death was not as prevalent then as it is at present (1995 : 145).

Some people took advantage of opportunities for economic empowerment and achieved wealth and status. Nefolovhodwe's wealth as a successful coffin builder allows him to move into a “white” area. He beats the constraints of the Group Area's Act by engaging a white man to buy the house for him.

The establishment of sprawling squatter settlements altered the urban landscape and revealed that the black majority were claiming their land.

According to Naidoo :

The “squatter settlements” became a monument to the total defiance of influx control laws and the carrying of the hated “Dompas” which restricted movement of black people to the urban areas. The repeated attempts of the government to destroy the informal settlements proved to be futile (1998 : 203).

The resilience of the settlement dwellers is evident in the following extract :

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 (1995 : 145-146).

The emergence of the informal sector of the economy in the urban context is evident in the commercialization of death. Initially Toloki decided to “profit from death like his homeboy Nefolovhodwe”, but he soon embraces his profession as a “spiritual” vocation. In contrast, Nefolovhodwe seizes the opportunity to amass wealth by building coffins in a city where people “die like flies” (1995 : 116). The perversity of the situation is evident in his creation of a “De Luxe Special” coffin for the wealthy. Toloki uses his physical appearance to profit from death :

Your face is a constant reminder that we are all going to die one day. He was going to make his face pay. After all, it was the only gift that God had given him. He was going to profit from the perpetual sadness that inhabited his eyes. The concept of a Professional Mourner was born (1995 : 133).

New opportunities for black economic empowerment in the informal sector is evident in the relaxation of laws governing trade. Toloki had initially established a thriving business as a vendor, selling grilled meat and bread rolls, but his trolley was confiscated by the City Council.

The transition did produce an emerging feminism which challenged patriarchal notions. Mervis asserts, "Just as Noria has evolved into a proud individual who values her independence, life is changing for all the women in the transitional period in South Africa as they move from the old deference towards a new authority" (1998 : 54).

Toloki keenly observes and acknowledges the significant role played by the women of the informal settlement:

You know what I think, Noria? From what I have seen today, I believe the salvation of the settlement lies in the hands of women (1995 : 176)

In contrast to Mervis' claim that the transition provided opportunities for women to expand their political horizons, Farred points out :

Much like in the anti-apartheid struggle, the patriarchal system ghettoizes women's ambitions by restricting their influence to those arenas – the settlements, euphemistically referred to here as "grassroots communities" – where the most labour is required and the least reward is offered (2000 :198).

Women were not allowed to advance beyond the tin roof of the shack :

... All over the country, in what the politicians call grassroot communities, women take the lead. But very few women ever reach the executive level. Or even the regional or branch committee levels. I don't know why it is like this, Toloki (1995 : 176).

***Ways of Dying* (1995) shows just how resilient patriarchal authority is.**

Mda has deliberately not focussed on the usual White versus Black confrontation. This relative omission of the white protagonist allows for focus on the African community itself so that the issue of reconciliation can be explored. Samin postulates:

By so obviously leaving aside the white Other, Mda's novel seems to intimate that the question of reconciliation between victims and perpetrators is not the only major issue. By focussing on the Black community it points to the priorities for the future such as fostering social solidarity and attending urgently to the needs of those most severely hit by apartheid (2000 : 25).

Mda focuses on the political and criminal violence, greed and corruption among Africans themselves in order to expose these elements as the negative forces which threaten the democratic processes as the country prepares for liberation. The abrasiveness is intended to create moral awareness. The moral awareness is signified by images of rebirth in the narrative. The New Year celebration at the end of the text signals the birth of a new order. "The people are beginning the new year with a strong statement to the government that it is high time that they took the negotiations for freedom seriously" (1995 : 172-173).

In its final pages, the novel points towards a hopeful future, with the children of the settlement fully present amidst the New Year celebrations, learning new beliefs to supplant the extremism of their political education; a commitment not to “Fight until the end” but to live, to work together, and to achieve pleasure (Visser : 2002 : 43).

Images of the rebirth are also present in the efforts of Madimbhaza who feeds and clothes the abandoned children in the informal settlement. These children are the orphans of political violence. The spirit of Ubuntu shines through Madimbhaza’s actions and represents optimism for black solidarity for future generations. Hope is also suggested in the fact that despite the magical glow emitted from Jwara’s figurines :

Not even the most habitual thieves among us lift a finger towards the boxes (1995 : 199).

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Mda has claimed that he is “the god of his creations” (Naidoo : 1998 : 302). In *Ways of Dying* (1995), he has used Magic Realism in a unique manner, relating it to the African situation. In the novel the elements of Magic Realism as a western literary mode is fused with elements of traditional African folk-culture and mythology. This innovative use of Magic Realism has enabled Mda to play god in his literary contributions. As Brenda Cooper asserts :

Magical Realist writers have an urge to demonstrate, capture and celebrate ways of being and of seeing that are uncontaminated by European domination. But at the same time, such authors are inevitably a hybrid mixture of which European culture is a fundamental part (1998 : 17).

Mda presents this hybridised form of Magic Realism in the mirror-images of the carnivalesque and the apocalyptic in the historical nightmare of the transition in *Ways of Dying* (1995).

Van Wyk points out :

The transition is a period of extensive bloodshed and killing. It evokes images of both the apocalypse (“there are funerals every day, because if the bereaved were to wait until the weekend to bury their dead, then mortuaries would overflow” 1995:136) and carnival (the serious funeral situation becoming comical in the overcrowded cemetery as “hymns flow into one

another in unplanned but pleasant segues” (1995:136)
(1997 : 81).

The breakdown of the old order and birth of a new democratic order results in the loss of the reality principle and the emergence of a dream-like quality in the text. In portraying images of the transition as a historical nightmare, Mda presents a society that has regressed, a lawless society that “cannot distinguish between their fantasies (ideologies) and reality (van Wyk : 1997 : 88-89).

The human struggles described in the text are common to many developing nations. Mda focuses on these struggles by using the tropes associated with Magic Realism. He uses language to reclaim the self from the colonial past, to recover from the trauma of Apartheid. Naidoo suggests :

Mda’s project as a novelist evidently involves the equivocation of the intricate juxtaposition of life and death, and in reflecting tensions between the carnivalesque and apocalyptic, in ways that are almost self-parodying. The novels frame a “world” recovery from the self-negating effects of Apartheid, by a process of resurgence and assertion of individual and collective energies. Negritude and Black Consciousness which advocated a solely collective black self, based on communal needs, are replaced by the reality of individual demands which in turn combine to facilitate group identity and group consciousness (1998 : 94).

As an emerging social commentator, Mda does not see the end of Apartheid as the end of the people’s struggles. The choice of Magic Realism as a literary mode suggests Mda’s desire to use the novel as a tool for political change. As he himself has stated in Daymond *et al* :

...the characters and situations that I depict in my drama continue to be motivated by social, political, economic and historical factors in South Africa. I have dismally failed to respond to the strange aesthetic concepts so cherished in the western world that profess that artistic creation is an end in itself, independent of politics and social requirements. I draw from the traditional African aesthetics where art could not be separated from life. In our various African societies the artist was a social commentator (Naidoo : 1998 : 108-109).

The reference to “traditional African aesthetics” suggests the strong influence of the African notions of magic in Mda’s novels and plays. In *Ways of Dying* (1995) he effectively uses language to portray the tensions of the transition which he presents in images of the carnivalesque and the apocalyptic with healthy doses of African folk-culture. Mda’s use of Magic Realism has allowed him to effectively engage in reconstructing the black self during the hostile socio-political transition and transformation in South Africa.

In harmony with characters in magic realist texts who find refuge in their own worlds, Mda’s protagonists in *Ways of Dying* (1995) struggle against the erosion of their humanity and escape to imaginary worlds to seek solace, to claim individual power and control and ultimately, to find new ways of living. Samin points out :

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was a unique way of ritualising the passage between Apartheid South Africa and the New South Africa; post-apartheid fiction has correlatively sought the proper language to encode the hopes, contradictions and ambiguities of the period. Like its institutional counterpart, the discourse of reconciliation in fiction has acknowledged the necessity of delving into the

past and laying bare its most unpalatable secrets. It was deemed essential to redefine human relationships on ethical grounds and thus resuscitate forgotten or betrayed principles of behaviour (2000 : 26).

Ndebele is of the view that South African fiction is most politically powerful when it explores in the ordinary lives of people new possibilities of understanding and new responses to the struggles they face (Visser : 2002 : 40). This challenge is answered in *Ways of Dying* (1995) as the protagonists embark on a quest for wisdom as they search in their insecure worlds for answers to the central question of “how to live”. Mda’s protagonists suggest by their actions that it is only by reconciling the old with the new that they will be able to find new ways of living. This process is explained in the ancient teaching of the Chinese *Book of Changes* :

No matter how painful, we must prepare to move forward into the new time, together with old remnants that tradition has given us. Once this decision is reached, then the new time will take shape. New times must remain in contact with old times. Humanity must not experience a break. Otherwise history would be meaningless (Visser : 2002 : 42).

CHAPTER SIX

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