

# Chanting the Song of Sorrow: Threnody in Homer and Zakes Mda

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## Abstract

This article examines the role of threnody in ancient Greece and contemporary South Africa. The main focus is on its representation in literature, in this case a passage from Homer's *Iliad* and the novel *Ways of Dying* (1995) by Zakes Mda, which are read in their respective historical contexts. The aim is to compare the different functions which threnody fulfills in different societies in different times with special emphasis on societies in crisis and transition.

A comparative study between the ancient Greek poet Homer and the contemporary South African writer Zakes Mda might seem at first sight quite an exotic idea. A closer look, however, reveals several striking similarities that invite one to read Mda not only in his South African context, but also in relation to an ancient classical tradition. In Homer's epic *The Iliad* mourning and funeral scenes play an important role in the narrative, providing insights into historical and social conditions in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. Homer stands in the long tradition of oral poetry and is – to our knowledge – the first Western author who applies the medium of writing to oral poems. Zakes Mda similarly draws on a South African oral tradition for his fictional narrative dealing with a period of historical change and conflict. The protagonist in his novel *Ways of Dying* (1995), Toloki, uses traditional oral performance techniques which he adapts to the needs of the new society that is emerging in South Africa in the early 90s. This essay will explore how both authors employ the motif of threnody and mourning rites in order to shed light on the historical role of men and women within their respective societies and the changes these societies undergo.

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At the end of book 24, the last book of the *Iliad* (line 697ff.), Homer describes Priam's return from the Greek army camp with the corpse of his son Hector. The moment they arrive at the gate the inhabitants of Troy, headed by Hector's wife Andromache and Hector's mother Hecabe, surround them with laments. Priam insists on taking Hector's body home first, where the following scene takes place:

And when they had brought him inside the renowned house, they laid him  
then on a carved bed, and seated beside him the singers  
who were to lead the melody in the dirge, and the singers  
chanted the song of sorrow, and the women were mourning beside them.  
(lines 719-722; Lattimore 1962)

This ritual lament is followed by the personal laments of the three women who were the closest to Hector. Andromache as the chief mourner (see Alexiou 1974:6; Kurtz and Boardman 1971:59) stands in the traditional place at the head of the corpse, holding it in her arms, and bewails the premature death of her husband, the impending fall of Troy, and her own and their son's destinies (lines 723-746). Hecabe expresses her grief over the fact that the last one of her sons has now also been taken away by Achilles, although she is glad to see that Hector's body, which was dragged by Achilles around Patroclus' grave, is still preserved unmutated (lines 747-760). And finally, also Hector's sister-in-law, Helen, laments the death of her only friend (except for Priam) among the Trojans: Hector who had defended her against the reproaches and accusations of other family members, and now leaves her unprotected (lines 761-776).

The scene, the book and the whole epic are rounded off by Priam's instruction to collect wood and to burn Hector's body on the eleventh day after ten days of mourning. Afterwards Hector's bones are collected in an urn, which they cover and bury. They erect a grave mound and conclude the ceremony with a "glorious feast" (lines 802-3) in honour of the deceased.

In the above scene, the so-called *prothesis*, "the formal lying-in-state of the dead" (Kurtz and Boardman 1971:58), the ritual of lament is performed by three different groups of people in three different ways: first the singers, who are leading the dirge; second the women, who accompany them by wailing; and third the family members, with their personal laments. Reiner (1938) makes a careful distinction here between the different technical terms Homer uses for the various types of lament and their different implications. He refers to the personal laments of the three women, Andromache, Hecabe and Helen, with the Greek word *goos*, which must be

clearly distinguished from the *threnos* of the singers (Reiner 1938:9; see also Alexiou 1974:12). A *goos* is a personal talk with the deceased, who is addressed directly without an excessive display of emotion (Reiner 1938:12-13). Another difference between *goos* and *threnos* consists in the fact that the *goos* was not sung but spoken in a special solemn, almost magical way (30). This is confirmed by the commentary of Ameis-Hentze (1896:145): there is no evidence that these personal laments were sung as well; it seems more likely that they were spoken in the described way. Alexiou (1974:133) analyses the structure of each of these *gooi* as follows and considers it as a traditional form of lament:

The mourner begins with a preliminary address to the dead, then remembers the past or imagines the future in a predominantly narrative section, and finally renews her opening address and lament. This is ternary form, *ABA*, in which the opening section, an address or appeal, is reinforced and modified by the intervening narrative of the second section.

Homer describes the first group of mourners in the above passage with the following Greek words: *aidous threnon exarchous* (line 721), all terms that occur only here in the *Iliad*, and literally translated mean “bards starting off the dirges”. In this context, one should recall the difference between the Greek words *aidos* and *rhapsodos*: *aidos* is a bard who sings his own poems, creates and composes them, drawing on a pool of oral poetry, and accompanies himself with a lyre or a kithara; *rhapsodos* means somebody who simply recites already existing poems without a musical instrument and tries to perform them to perfection in a histrionic manner. (The two most important ancient sources for this distinction are (i) a scene in Homer’s *Odyssey* (book 8, lines 250-545), where the bard Demodocos performs at the court of the Phaiacians, and (ii) Plato’s dialogue *Ion*, where Socrates engages in a conversation with the title figure, who is the most famous rhapsode of his time). Homer does not yet use the technical term *threnodos*, “singer of dirges”; this occurs only later in Greek literature, for the first time in Alciphron 1, 36, and according to the Greek dictionary Liddell & Scott only four times in total. Another term of the same word-family, *threnodia* (“threnody”), is used even more seldom and Liddell & Scott indicate only two passages in the whole Greek literature. Dirges developed into their own literary genre only from the 6th century BC onwards with the poems of Simonides and Pindar; in the early stage as in the Homeric epics they must still be considered as a form of oral poetry (Steven Feld quoted by Holst-Wahrhaft 1995:19-20). The commentaries of Ameis-Hentze (1896:145)

and Richardson (1993:351-352) describe the Homeric *aidous threnon* as professional singers, who perform traditional chants of grief of a more general content (*threnoi*) in contrast to the more personal laments (*gooi*) of the individual family members. We can assume that in the Archaic period, the setting of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, royal courts had their personal bard(s), but over the centuries it seems that it became more and more fashionable to hire foreign specialists for this job (Reiner 1938:66; Alexiou 1974:10). Plato in his *Laws* (book 7, 800 D/E) provides some very interesting information in this regard: "For if it is ever really necessary that the citizens should listen to such doleful strains, it should be more fitting that the choirs that attend should be hired from abroad [...] just as a corpse is escorted with Carian music by hired mourners" (Bury 1961:45). Reiner (1938:66) quotes the ancient scholion to this passage as well (in my own translation): "With Carian music; with threnody; for the Carians seem to be a sort of singers of dirges and to lament about foreign corpses for money".

The difference between the Homeric scene and the Platonic text lies in the fact that the Carian singers performed their songs of lament not during the *prothesis* as in the case of Hector, but during the *ekphora*, "the carrying out of the body to the grave" (Kurtz and Boardman 1971:58). Since Plato considers music "as an ennobling educational instrument, promoting self-control, not as a means of exciting vulgar sentiment and passion" (Bury 1961:45 note 1), he naturally opposes an open display of unbridled emotions by the citizens of his ideal state. Another passage critical of threnody can be found in Plato's *Republic* (book 3, 398D-E), where Socrates states that there is no need for dirges and lamentations in words and makes his dialogue partner enumerate the musical modes (*harmoniai*) with a dirge-like character: the mixed Lydian and the tense or high Lydian modes and some other similar ones, which he considers as unfitting for the warriors in his state model.

There is no evidence that the Homeric singers of dirges used musical instruments as the normal bards did. Homer does not mention any musical instrument in Hector's *prothesis* scene, but we know from several vase paintings that *threnoi* were often accompanied by the *aulos*, the double-pipe (Reiner 1938:67ff.), which produced a sharp, almost shrieking sound and which was an instrument "associated with the elegy and the expression of grief" (Holst-Warhaft 1995:70). Whether Homer simply omitted this detail or whether the use of the *aulos* during the lament was a later addition, must remain an open question.

This brings us to the third group of mourners, “the women, [who] were mourning beside them”, which means that they were moaning (*stenachonto*) in response to the *threnos* of the professional singers. They also moan in response to Andromache’s *goos*, and the whole people, *demos*, in response to the last *goos*, Helen’s. Reiner (1938:57, 62 note 1) thinks that these women were members of the royal court, either family members and/or slaves. His hypothesis can be supported by several similar mourning scenes in Homer’s epics (Patroclus’ funeral in the *Iliad*, book 17) or in Greek tragedy (the chorus in Aeschylus’ *Choephoroi*). Later, however, it became a custom to hire professional female mourners, in order to perform the typical gestures of female lament, as we find them also on numerous vase paintings (Kurtz and Boardman 1971:112): tearing their hair, beating their breasts and heads, scratching their cheeks until bleeding (see also Kurtz and Boardman: 78, 104), which Reiner interprets as the trace of an old bloody ritual sacrifice to appease the soul of the dead (1938:45). Rohde also states that it was believed that the soul of the dead was present at the funeral and enjoyed the most violent expressions of grief (1898:222-223).

As we can see from the above scene from the *Iliad*, men and women are equally involved in the process of mourning. The Homeric heroes have no problem in showing their grief in an uninhibited manner (the best example of this might be Achilles’ grief for Patroclus at the beginning of book 18 in the *Iliad*). But, as Holst-Warhaft in her book *Dangerous Voices: Women’s Laments and Greek Literature* points out, lament is traditionally the domain of women in most societies; women’s laments are considered to be more emotional and more irrational and therefore to equip women with a special power over the dead, which makes them dangerous and needing to be controlled. This might have been one of the reasons for the restrictions Solon imposed in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC on the participation of women in funerals (see also Rohde:221-223). As we can read in Plutarch’s *Vita Solonis*: “Laceration of the flesh by mourners, and the use of set lamentations, and the bewailing of any one at the funeral ceremonies of another, he forbade” (Ch. 21, 4; Perrin 1967:463). And another source, Demosthenes, quotes from another law of Solon in his speech *Against Maceratus*: “And no woman less than sixty years of age shall be permitted to enter the chamber of the deceased, or to follow the deceased when he is carried to the tomb, except those who are within the degree of children of cousins [...]” (43, 62; Murray 1964:103).

Scholars have speculated about the motives for Solon's restrictions on the role of women at funerals. Rohde gives a religious-superstitious reason (1898:223): a too emotional lament disturbs the peace of the dead person, so that he returns to the upper world. Alexiou (1974) suggests some further plausible explanations: (i) that it was an attempt to curb the holding of aristocratic clan cults in favor of the rising democracy in Athens and the introduction of "the hero of the state cult" (18-19); (ii) that it was a means to consolidate the property of the *oikos* (family) against the demands of the *genos* (clan) (20); (iii) that it was a sign of the diminishing importance of women from the archaic to the classical period (21), and (iv) that it was in order to prevent feelings of blood feuds and revenge arising between hostile families (21-22). However, we cannot be sure whether these restrictions were implemented in reality as strictly as they were imposed by the law.

From scenes in vase paintings and a much later text, Lucian's *De Luctu*, we rather get the opposite impression. In this diatribe Lucian mocks the funeral practices of his time. He describes the different funeral rites in a satirical way, and says about the behavior of the women: "Next come cries of distress, wailing of women, tears on all sides, beaten breasts, torn hair, and bloody cheeks" (chapter 12; Harmon 1961:119). In other words, we find here again the same gestures we encountered in the Homeric epics and archaic vase paintings. Lucian goes on to mock the *goos*, the personal lament of the father over his dead son, and imagines a nasty reply by the dead son: "(...) but what good do you think I get from your wailing, and this beating of breasts to the music of the flute, and the extravagant conduct of the women in lamenting? (chapter 19; Harmon: 125) And Lucian provides us with a last interesting detail, to which I will come back later:

Nevertheless, the dolts not only shriek and scream, but they send for a sort of professor of threnodies (*tina threnon sophisten*), who has gathered a repertory of ancient bereavements, and they use him as a fellow actor and prompter in their silly performance, coming in with their groans at the close of each strain that he strikes up! (chapter 20; Harmon:127)

Lucian satirically introduces the figure of the "professor of threnodies" to bring an irreverent perspective to bear on the funeral practices at the time. But despite its irony, Lucian's text serves also as proof of the fact which Alexiou (1974:22) has observed, namely that over the centuries "it is possible to detect a change in emphasis from the public lamentation at the grander ceremonies of *prothesis* and *ekphora* to a more personal kind of

lamentation at the tomb". This factor will also become important later for a reading of Zakes Mda's interpretation of threnody.

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Lamentation and burial are linked inseparably (Alexiou 1974:4). They are part of a complex system of rites performed for the dead. Ritual lament plays an essential, but not exclusive role. If we compare the burial rites of the ancient Greek and traditional Zulu cultures, for example, we can identify some interesting similarities between them, although they do not necessarily occur in the same sequence.

In the Greek tradition the burial rite comprises: 1) the closing of eyes and mouth of the dead, if possible by a family member; 2) the washing and anointing of the body; 3) the body is wrapped in clean linen; 4) the body is laid out on a bed (*prothesis*); 5) the lament starts; 6) the carrying out of the body (*ekphora*); 7) the burning of the body; 8) the collection of the remains in an urn; 9) the burying of the urn in a grave mound; 10) the funeral feast; 11) the funeral games (see Rohde 1898: 23-25; 218-228).

In the Zulu tradition, the rite takes the following form: 1) the corpse is washed and shaved; 2) the corpse is dressed; 3) the eyes and mouth are closed (there is an additional cleansing element for somebody who died a violent death (13)); 4) the body is laid out straight inside the hut; 5) vigil during the night before the funeral by family members and friends with continuous chanting; 6) the digging of the grave on the funeral day; 7) preparation of the communal meal by slaughtering an animal; 8) the corpse is taken out of the hut with the feet outwards to the cemetery; 9) testimony by family and friends; mourning; singing or playing music; sermon; walking around the coffin with candles or flowers; 10) praying and throwing soil into the grave; 11) return home; cleansing of the hands with specially prepared water (see Nyawose 2000:12; 16-8; 25-9; 31).

This is not a complete list; in both cultures, there are more elements and variations, which are not included here. Andronikos presents a detailed discussion of all the different stages mentioned in the Homeric epics (1968: W1-W37). An ancient Greek burial ceremony could also include, for example, the evocation of the spirit of the dead person, or the shaving of the head or cutting off a lock of the mourners. In most of the literary descriptions not all stages are necessarily included in the narrative (Edwards 1986:84). In the case of Hector here, there are no funeral games as for the funeral of Patroclus in book 23 of the *Iliad* and the scene starts only with the fourth stage, the *prothesis*. There is a very good depiction of the early stages of the

ceremony with the preparation of Patroclus' body (*Iliad*, book 18, lines 343-355). It seems that there was a standard repertoire of elements which form part of a funeral, but not all of them were necessarily considered as appropriate for each occasion.

It is interesting to observe that both the ancient Greek and traditional Zulu cultures share certain beliefs and rites concerning the dead. Both feel that death is a pollution and needs specific cleansing rites (Kurtz and Boardman 1971:149-150 and Nyawose 2000:9): the house of the dead needs to be purified (Alexiou 1974:16 and Nyawose 2000:11-2) and the hands of the mourners must be washed with special water after contact with the corpse (Rohde 1898:219 and Nyawose 2000:18). Both also fear that the dead person might come back and therefore the corpse is laid out and carried out of the house with the feet facing outwards, i.e. turned towards the door, so that the deceased might not come back as a haunting ghost (Rohde 1898:23 note 2 and Nyawose 2000:10, 17). In both cultures mourners also shave their heads or cut their hair as a sign of grief (Rohde 1898:17 and Nyawose 2000:38) – another detail, to which we will come back later.

As mentioned before, funeral scenes were a favorite topic in all periods of Greek art and especially in vase painting. The vases provide further evidence in support of the information we gain from literary sources. I quote from Kurtz and Boardman (1971:59; see also 27, 133):

There are two basic types of mourning figures: those who raise both hands to the head and those who raise only one. The former is the traditional female gesture of lament which is found in the art of the Late Bronze Age in Greece and continues virtually unchanged into Hellenistic art. The latter gesture is the male expression of grief and figures who mourn in this way are further distinguished as men by their weapons. Men stand to mourn; women stand, kneel, or sit on small stools. Geometric vase paintings and later representational and literary evidence agree in giving women the major role in the preparation of the corpse for burial, in attendance at the *prothesis*, and in the performance of the lament.

In this context, I would like to point out a vase attributed to the Sappho painter, dated 525-475 BC, which represents, according to the description in the Beazley Archive Pottery Database, “an old man seated on block mourning” (Database Record Number: 361401; see also Kurtz and Boardman 1971:149). His back and head are bent forward, he raises his right arm and



hand above his head as a typical gesture of male mourning. The untypical fact of his sitting on the grave mound might be attributed to his old age.

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Ca. 2700 years later we can find an almost identical description of a mourning scene in a text written in a completely different context:

But in any case, he sits on the mound and shares his sorrow with the world. (Mda 1995:17)

“He” is Toloki, a professional mourner, and the protagonist in Zakes Mda’s first novel *Ways of Dying* (1995). The novel covers the transitional period between 1990–1994, when a new democratic order was being forged in South Africa against a background of conflict between rival groups, and it can therefore be considered as an example of transitional literature. According to van Wyk, the term transitional literature can be used to characterise literature written “when societies in South Africa experience extensive ideological, political, economical and institutional changes” (Van Wyk 1997:79-80).

These changes are manifested in various ways in Zakes Mda’s novel, which van Wyk elaborates in detail in his article “Catastrophe and Beauty: *Ways of Dying*, Zakes Mda’s Novel of Transition”. They include violence and death, re-birth of the repressed past, the use of dreams and narrative condensation, images of the apocalypse and of carnival, the loss of reality leading to a sort of “magic realism”, a term borrowed from Latin-American literature, especially the works of Gabriel García Márquez and Frida Kahlo with which Zakes Mda’s style of writing has often been labeled, although Mda strictly denies any influence from it (see Jacobs 2003:191 and Mervis 1998:51-2). The novel represents also a transition in Mda’s own creativity: in his earlier works, his theatre plays, he “regards theatre as the most effective art form for development communication” (Mervis 1998:39); now “he has extended his theatrical blueprint for social change, described in *When People Play People* (1993), to his first fictional narrative of transition, *Ways of Dying* (1995)”. In *Ways of Dying* Mda transposes to a fictional narrative the performance mode of his earlier work.

The action takes place in an anonymous “harbour city”, which is an amalgamation of several South African cities: “The train violence and attacks by migrants on nearby settlements are associated with the Vaal Triangle (Gauteng), the carnival with Cape Town, the tribal chief and his followers with Durban. The harbour city therefore becomes an allegorical image of all South African cities in the late apartheid era” (van Wyk

1997:84). Mda, who proclaims that “he always begins with the place, never with the story” (Jacobs 2003:192) employs here the kind of narrative condensation mentioned earlier in the same way as the names he gives to his characters derive from various South African languages, “making it a Pan African village” (van Wyk 1997:84).

The past is evoked by constant flashbacks to the rural area where the protagonists Toloki and Noria come from. They meet at the beginning of the novel at the funeral of Noria’s second son, each having left home many years before and having made their way via an individual odyssey to the big city. As homeboy and homegirl, they slowly discover their affection for each other despite their visual mismatch; they form a “Beauty and the Beast” couple with Toloki having been described since his childhood even by his own father as an “ugly boy” and Noria, “the stuck-up bitch”, having always been an extraordinary beauty with an enchanting laugh. This affection is based to a large extent on the fact that they are able to complement each other’s needs, like Ying and Yang, as Noria says: “We must be together because we can teach each other how to live. I like you because you know how to live. I can teach you other ways of living” (Mda 1995:115).

Jacobs has pointed out that the device of twinning and doubling “his main characters as part of a larger narrative and discursive design” of hybridisation (2003:194) plays a major role in Mda’s novels. It reflects also Mda’s own position as writer; he sees himself at the same time as “historian and storyteller” (192), drawing equally on “written and oral storytelling in the novel”. For Mda, the two sides of his creative process dovetail into a single novelistic discourse where fictional and realistic elements mingle. The same applies to the main characters of the novel: Noria acts with her singing as a muse for Toloki’s and his father Jwara’s artistic talent, and they need her to channel their fantasies into productive creativity. Toloki through his spiritual vocation to mourn for the dead (Mda 1995:134) complements Noria’s dedication to saving life (Samin 2000a:193) by supporting a woman who runs an informal orphanage, “a dumping ground” in the informal settlement for unwanted children or innocent victims whose parents have been killed (Mervis 1998:47-48). The link between Noria’s and Toloki’s ways of living is that they both serve the community and that their occupation is linked to death; as Toloki says: “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 1995:89) The difference is that Toloki has accepted the demands and rules of urban life, while Noria has

turned her back on the temptations of the city and has re-embraced the values of a rural lifestyle, a pattern, which Mda will use again for the protagonists in his second novel *She Plays with the Darkness* (Jacobs 2003:198-205).

But also in his capacity as professional mourner, Toloki fulfils his twin role, when he complements by his wailing and moaning the task of the so-called Nurse at the funeral (Mda 1995:7, 18). The Nurse is normally the person, man or woman, who last saw the dead person and tells the community how he or she met their death and reports their last words. Since the speech is addressed to the community, it cannot exactly be compared to the ancient Greek *goos*, the lament addressed to the deceased. Rather, Toloki's threnody expresses the imaginative response to death, while the speech of the Nurse contains a historical narrative recording the events of death. Jacobs (2003:196) comments on the interplay between Toloki and the Nurse: "This vocal ensemble of Professional Mourner and Nurse may be seen to represent the first stage in the discursive blending that is a feature of Mda's fiction and that increases in complexity in the later novels".

The many different ways of dying that Mda describes in his novel create a climate of death: death by disease (Noria's mother That Mountain Woman dies of cancer), by negligence (Noria's first son Vutha starves to death), by accident (the shooting of Noria's classmate), and by murder (the "necklacing" of Noria's second son Vutha; the old man who performs the haircuts of the family members in honor of his dead son is stabbed to death by his other sons because he disregarded the correct order; Toloki's first colleague and friend in the city is burnt to death in a grotesque "joke" by a white colleague); the surrealistic death of Toloki's father, Jwara (mummification through meditation), and many more. Horribly enough, the violent deaths are considered as 'normal', while the deaths caused naturally are considered to be the exception. It is within this context of death having become part of daily life that Toloki decides (after several unsuccessful attempts to establish a business) to make death also part of his life and to earn his living from the deaths of other people. He develops the idea to establish himself as a professional mourner in the black society:

But he [Toloki] had the saddest eyes that we have ever seen. His sad eyes were quite famous, even back in the village. We used to sing about Toloki's sorrowful eyes. Slowly he reached the decision that he was going to mourn and that people would pay him for this service. Even the fat Nefolovhodwe had told him, '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. (Mda 1995:133)

Toloki is intrigued by the idea of founding a new profession. He would like to train more people to become professional mourners as well. And he would like to introduce fixed rates for different levels of mourning in the same way as doctors or lawyers charge different fees according “to the gravity of the case” (17). But for the moment, being still a beginner, he is happy to accept the amount of money that the family of the deceased can afford. He identifies himself with his new profession to such an extent that he makes mourning an indispensable part of his life. He feels addicted to mourning and is unable to live his life without it. He puts himself in the same category as a Tibetan monk, who follows a spiritual vocation, so that death has become part of him. He wishes to give himself a special aura; he has invented a special diet of Swiss roll and green onions, and he wears a special costume which he sprinkles generously with cheap perfume in order to cover his body smell. Before Toloki got this costume – “a particularly beautiful outfit all in black comprising a tall shiny top hat, lustrous tight-fitting pants, almost like the tights that 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” (26) – it used to be rented out for Halloween, which gives his appearance a slightly carnivalesque aspect (van Wyk 1997:88; see also Samin 2000a:192).

According to Samin (2000b:23) the carnivalesque “shape[s] the perception of the uncertainties of the transitional period”. Michail Bakhtin emphasised that the carnival symbolises an important moment of transition for people. During the period of carnival existing rules and hierarchies are invalidated for a certain period of time. It is a time of “*mesalliances*”: contradictions mix in an unusual way; the parody / destruction / death of the existing contains also an element of renovation, palingenesis / birth of something new (Schmitz 2002:83-89). The connection between laughter and death can be found also in Mda’s text, in the conversations between Toloki and Noria:

Toloki: [...] In death we laugh as well. Don’t you remember that when you were a little girl, your own friend died laughing?

Noria: You are such a wise man, Toloki.

[....]

Toloki: In our language, there is a proverb which says the greatest death is laughter.

Noria: You see! I was right, Toloki, when I said that you know how to live. (163-4)

But one can find even more elements of Bakhtin's philosophy. The quest for the truth and the fundamental questions of human life (how to live and how to die in the here and now) are the central concerns of the novel. In the different stages in Toloki's and Noria's respective odysseys can be seen symbolic "philosophical voyage through the whole world" or better "to wondrous world of freedom and riches" (Mda 1995:59). Toloki describes "his way to the city to search for love and fortune" (60) as a noble quest, but "provokes the laughter of those who cannot understand the dreamer in their midst" (Mervis 1998:42). His quest is somehow comparable to those in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince* and François Rabelais' depiction of the adventures of the giant Pantagruel and his father Gargantua – the latter being in fact the work on which Bakhtin based his theory of the carnival – which can be read both on the level of simple fictional entertainment and also on a more profoundly philosophical level. And most importantly, coming back to Jacobs's point about hybridisation, the interplay between Toloki and Noria illustrates Bakhtin's theory that the human being can recognise itself completely only in dialogue with another human being (Schmitz 2002:83-9).

Mda refers in his funeral scenes to several rituals which I have enumerated earlier in connection with Zulu funerals: he speaks about the washing of the hands after returning from the funeral (1995: 10, 160), the cutting of the hair of the family members of the deceased in a specific order of hierarchy and seniority (157-160), and the communal feast (10, 160-162). Also the role of the Nurse can be compared to a certain extent to the testimonies of family members and friends.

How should one imagine Toloki's function at these funerals? He goes through different stages of developing his mourning technique, as may be seen from the following quotations, which I have arranged in chronological order:

(i) He had not yet sharpened his mourning skills at that early stage. He just stood there and looked sad. It was only later that he developed certain sounds that he deemed harrowing enough to enhance the sadness and the pain of the occasion. (Mda 1995:26)

(ii) At the cemetery Toloki sits on one of the five mounds, and groans, and wails, and produces other new sounds that he has recently invented especially for mass funerals with political overtones. These sounds are loosely based on chants that youths utter during political rallies. But Toloki has modified them, and added to them whines and moans that are meant to invoke sorrow and pain. He sways from side to side, particularly when the Nurse tells us the story of the deaths of these our brothers and sisters. (108)

(iii) Throughout the funeral, orator after orator, he sat on the mound and made moaning sounds of agony that were so harrowing that they affected all those who were within earshot, filling their eyes with tears. When the Nurse spoke, he excelled himself by punctuating each painful segment of her speech with an excruciating groan that sent the relatives into a frenzy of wailing. (17)

(iv) Toloki sits on the mound. Today he floors us with a modern mourning sound that he has recently developed. He sounds like a goat that is being slaughtered. (154)

If we compare the above scenes with the description of Hector's funeral in the *Iliad*, it seems that the figure of Toloki combines the tasks of the ancient male "singers of dirges" (especially when he produces sounds similar to political songs) and of the women who accompany them by wailing (when he emphasises the grief in the speech of the Nurse by groaning and whining). One might regard him as an African version of the "professor of threnodies" described by Lucian. He is a carnivalesque figure with his costume, a sort of jester, who at the same time speaks the truth, but also makes himself a fool for others.

What is the function of Toloki and his mourning in Zakes Mda's novel? In accordance with his theory of Theatre for Development, Mda gives Toloki the role of a facilitator or catalyst for his community, who can help to change this community. As I have mentioned before, Mda considers theatre as the most effective way to create a critical awareness among the disadvantaged, because "theatre enables them to help themselves by employing their traditional performance modes, and to participate in the creation of their own narratives" (Mervis 1998:40). Just as people can identify themselves with theatrical performances, so the other mourners can also identify themselves with Toloki's performances at the funerals, and Mda's readers can also through the figure of Toloki imaginatively enter the historical events of Mda's narrative. But it is also with his other creative talents – by decorating the interior of Noria's new shack with pictures from

decor and gardening magazines and catalogues and by painting fantasy figures in unusual colours – that Toloki gives his surroundings an additional aesthetic dimension, since, as Mda says, “art [...] can be used [...] within the community to empower and liberate” (Mervis 1998:40). Therefore Toloki facilitates the transition the society he lives in undergoes; as an outsider he shows his fellow countrymen how they might live.

As a side remark, I might mention that the concept of professional or official mourners exists also in other African countries, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo. In 2002, the *Mail & Guardian* depicted a photograph of official, probably female, mourners with painted faces dancing in the city of Lubumbashi in the province of Katanga, mourning “the spirit of Lumumba” (Matshikiza 2002:11) – a similar phenomenon in another society in crisis and transition.

A period of transition is a time when people re-evaluate and re-define themselves, their concepts, their ideals (Mervis 1998:44). This period of transition applies to the protagonist Toloki as well as to his creator Zakes Mda. They both try to establish for themselves a new position in a new society under new rules. Toloki succeeds in finding a niche for himself in the black community via his newly invented profession and with the help of his homegirl Noria (Mervis 1998:40). His struggle stands for that of many black people in South Africa today who similarly have to re-invent themselves by reconciling their ancient traditions with the demands of the (post)modern world they live in. As Mervis puts it: “The story of Toloki, Noria and other fictitious characters can thus be read allegorically as the life story of ‘Everyman’ and ‘-woman’ in any black community in apartheid and transitional South Africa” (50).

Mda himself “employs a genre new to him [...] to explore new ideas and an alternative ideology through which he can envisage a place for himself and his art in the future” (42) which Mervis calls Fiction for Development. Like his protagonist, Mda has struggled and succeeded to re-define himself as an artist in the new South Africa, and with his professional mourner Toloki, he has managed to find his individual niche in contemporary South African fiction.

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