Catastrophe and beauty: Ways of Dying, Zakes Mda's novel of the transition

Maybe all the catastrophes that have happened in her life have affected her eyes, so that she is able to see beauty where there is none (Mda, 1990:142).

In our language there is a proverb which says the greatest death is laughter (Mda, 1990:153).

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Abstract

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This article explores Zakes Mda's novel, Ways of Dying (1995), as an example of transitional literature. Ways of Dying (1995) deals with the period between 1990, when negotiations for change in South Africa started, and 1994, when South Africa became a democratic country. The text portrays many recognisable aspects of life in this transitional period, but the focus is mainly on the multiple occurrences of violent death in a society where the State has lost control and legitimacy. The main character, Toloki, a professional mourner, lives through these apocalyptic times. He is, further, seeking an answer to the question of how it happened that the child of his homegirl, Noria, died at the hands of comrades. The text deals imaginatively with aspects such as the resurgence of group psychology that is a common characteristic of transitional periods with its resistance culture of mass meetings, oratory by political leaders and street pro-These are also elements of the carnivalesque. One of the interesting features of the text is its many references to dreams and its use of dream devices in its form. This article will argue that this is an integral part of a literature of a transitional period. Such a period implies the erosion of the reality principle. Reality itself in such a period takes on the features of fantasy; beauty combines with catastrophe and the apocalypse with rebirth.

1. Ways of Dying as novel of the transition

Transitional literature refers to literature produced in or about periods when societies experience extensive ideological, political, economical and institutional

changes. The transition is in many ways traumatic and productive. In literature it can lead to specific literary features. Such periods produce a literature of mass meetings and processions: a literature depicting a group psychology and a mass omnipotence which asserts itself against the State that has lost legitimacy. The confrontation between the masses and the State often leads to violence, death, arbitrary repression and persecution. The inversion that takes place when the people take control of the State's functions, and the visibility of the people in mass gatherings on the street, evoke images of carnival. A resurgence of repressed instincts embodied in images of violent death, birth and sexuality, accompanies the breakdown of the old order. This resurgence of the repressed in turn implies regression: a loss to some extent of the reality principle (so that the form of this literature evokes the dream and mysticism). Death combines with rebirth, and the apocalyptic with the carnivalesque. This article explores these features of the transition in Zakes Mda's novel Ways of Dying (1995).

Ways of Dying (1995) describes the period between a Christmas and a New Year sometime between 1990, when negotiations for change in South Africa started, and 1994, when South Africa became, through elections, a democratic country. It therefore deals with the period of transition in South Africa. The transition itself is a product of the repressive decades, which preceded it. The text recollects these decades through continuous flashbacks. It describes the transition and the past as experienced by the two main characters, Toloki and Noria. Both of them came, although at different times, from the same unnamed rural village to an unnamed South African city. Years later they meet, coincidentally, at the funeral of Noria's second child. After this they re-establish friendship. The text starts with the funeral of Noria's child. It then develops around the question of how it came that Noria's five-year old child died at the hands of comrades.

2. Images of the transition in the text

The text evokes many images of transition through references to "those days" in contrast to "these days" or "today". Phrases such as "people of his colour" or "people of his complexion" often qualify sentences referring to "those days". These phrases evoke the typical exclusions experienced by Africans during the apartheid period: "In those days, they did not allow people of his colour onto any of the beaches of the city, so he could not carry out his ablutions there, as he does today" (p. 112)1. "People of his complexion were not allowed to buy houses in the suburbs in those days" (p. 116). "Funerals were held only on Saturday and

Page numbers without an indication of the source refer to Mda, Z. 1995. Ways of Dying. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sunday mornings those days, because death was not as prevalent then as it is at present" (p. 136).

From the rigid apartheid of "those days" the text narrates the small changes that occur as the resistance to apartheid intensifies, as petty apartheid laws disappear, and as people find new ways of survival. This culminates in the period of transition when the dismantling of apartheid is negotiated, and a new, democratic future becomes imminent. Typical images of these social changes in the text are:

- The emergence of the informal sector of the economy. The text describes the main character, Toloki, as one of the first to buy a trolley for grilling meat and boerewors. He makes his living selling his products on the sidewalks in the city (p. 113).
- The movement of Africans into "white" areas through new strategies. The rich Nefolovhodwe "used a white man, whom he had employed as his marketing manager, to buy the house on his behalf '(p. 116).
- The appearance of informal settlements, "squatter camps", and the repeated attempts by the government to destroy these, only to find that they are rebuilt overnight again: "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" (p. 136).
- The emergence of vigilante groups and street committees.

Stagnation, intensified repression and resistance further mark the period of transition. In the "eighteen years" that have passed since Toloki lived in his first shack very little has changed: "It is strange how things don't change in these shanty towns or squatter camps or informal settlements or whatever you choose to call them" (p. 138).

Instead of change for the better, things become more violent and complicated: "The situation is even more complicated these days, what with the tribal chief wreaking havoc with his hostel-dwelling migrants" (p. 138).

The transition is a period of extensive bloodshed and killing. It evokes images of both the apocalypse ("there are funerals everyday, because if the bereaved were to wait until the weekend to bury their dead, then mortuaries would overflow" – p. 136), and carnival (the serious funeral situation becoming comical in the overcrowded cemetery as "hymns flow into one another in unplanned but pleasant segues" – p. 136).

The transition, though, does not only mean death, but also rebirth. This rebirth is only implied in the strategic ending of the text with the arrival of a new year: a new year with a stay-away on its immediate agenda, as the people want to make "a strong statement to the government that it is high time that they took the negotiations for freedom seriously" (p. 161).

Their song is about the freedom that is surely coming tomorrow" (p. 159) and "the freedom that was surely coming soon" (p. 172). This future liberation is a product of death and sacrifice. Death becomes an assertion of imminent victory, an instrument of re-birth. It becomes a sign of collective power with the individual fading into the omnipotent² idea of freedom. The text explains this with reference to the jubilation of the Young Tigers at the political funerals which "is due to the fact that part of the message of the songs is that the people shall be victorious in the end" (p. 159).

The future, though, is pregnant with new divisions, betrayals, disillusionment and repression. Mda uses the portrayal of a meeting in order to represent the new order. The meeting assumes the form of a ritual repression of the real. He foregrounds the difference between the ideal and the real by depicting the affluence of the leaders of the political movement as against the poverty of the inhabitants of the informal settlement. The leaders arrive in a "Mercedes Benz" and an entourage of other cars at the meeting. The meeting ends in a disillusionment for the character, Noria, when a promised public apology by the comrades for the necklacing of her son is not forthcoming. They warn her not to speak to anyone about it, while the "bejewelled" wife of the leader smiles "benevolently" at Noria. After the meeting the women of the settlement are reproved for serving the leaders "bread and cabbage" (p. 163).

The political group demands silence, repression, complete unity. In this way the future contains in itself the past. Noria must remain silent so that no one will point fingers and say "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" (p. 167).

A repressed past, though, also returns in a more positive way with a return to creativity: a creativity rooted in a traditional and rural life. A certain normality

Freud in his essay on "Group Psychology" (1985) refers to the "sense of omnipotence" of the group; the sense in which "the notion of impossibility disappears for the individual in a group" (1985:104) as well as the infantile nature of the group "its similarity with the mental life ... of children" (1985:104).

reasserts itself when the business man, Nefolovhodwe, arrives at the informal settlement with the figurines sculpted by Toloki's dead father, Jwara. It is Jwara's ghost who forces Nefolovhodwe to take the figurines to Toloki, because "he could not rest in peace in his grave, or join the world of the ancestors, unless the figurines were given to Toloki" (p. 192). This is the beginning of an archaeological process ("Nefolovhodwe rounded up a few labourers, and proceeded to excavate the site of the workshop" – p. 194); it is a physical recovery of what is repressed, and in terms of the ideology of the text this signifies the capacity of the spiritual wealth of the rural past to transfigure the urban environment.

The figurines which are returned to Toloki are seemingly "useless" (p. 195). They represent the material manifestation of the past speaking silently as objects to the present. The meaning of what they say, though, is unclear. They have no apparent value to the people in the present, except as an image of the past, as commodity for white art dealers or in producing laughter among the children of the informal settlement. Is it possible that implied in this episode there is an allegorical reference to the post-apartheid future? Does the text imply that the repressed artefacts of the past (the art and literature looked down upon for being tribal) will become visible again? "They decide that they will keep one of the figurines in their shack, next to Toloki's roses, to remind themselves where they came from" (p. 198). These figurines are returned to Toloki at a time when Toloki himself starts drawing while Noria is singing to him, repeating the ritual of Noria singing to his father in the past. This repetition of the past introduces the oedipal themes of the novel that will be dealt with more extensively in the next section

3. The text as dream

There are many references to dreams in the text. The text itself can be interpreted in terms of the typical form and content of the dream: formally using the dream device of condensation and, on content level, it is oedipal. The oedipal of the dream is specifically *African* in the way it links the dream to the ancestors. The text sees the dream as communication from the world beyond and as a source of art and literature. The father, Jwara, for instance used Noria's singing to communicate with the beings of his dreams and to create their images in the form of figurines. While Noria sang "he shaped the red-hot iron and brass into images of strange people and animals that he had seen in his dreams" (p. 23).

On a formal level the novel uses the dream device of condensation, the device in which "a sole idea represents several associative chains at whose point of intersection it is located" (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1985:82). It is a device that combines various images into one image.

The harbour city in this text, for instance, combines various incidents reminiscent of the recent history of different South African cities into one city: 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. The names of the people from Toloki's home village are derived from various language groups: Xhosa, Sotho and Venda, making it a Pan Africanist village. The narrator is also an instance of condensation. The narrator is the collective alter-ego of Toloki, but also the voice of the group³. In its omniscience it embodies the omnipotence of the group. It focuses on Toloki in the village as well as the city. The text itself states:

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 everybody. 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 (p. 8).

The collective narrator, though, is not an innocent one. Like the group this collective narrator is not inhibited in terms of mindless primal drives. Freud (1985:104) writes:

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.

When Toloki opens his eyes on Boxing Day the following thoughts traverse the narrating text (they are both those of the communal narrator and of Toloki): "... 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" (p. 20).

³ See Mda's (1990) article "Marotholi Travelling Theatre: Towards an Alternative Perspective of Development" where, in another way, he theorises the community as a source of stories.

The group voice is cruel: it persecutes what it conceives as different from itself "we always remarked, sometimes in his presence, that he was an ugly child" (p. 26).

As an "all-seeing eye of the village gossip" the narrator is also an eye present in Toloki's dreams: "Toloki has nightmares that night. He is visited by strange creatures that look very much like the figurines that his father used to create" (p. 108).

There are many oedipal undertones to this dream. The "crystal clear and sparkling glass" (p. 108) figures point to purity and signifies Toloki's wish ("looking longingly at the scene" – p. 108) to be part of the realm of the holy⁴, to be part of the creative interaction between his sculpting father and the singing Noria. This oedipal aspect is present in his shame at desiring the woman who was his father's link with the creatures of the dream. He "sees himself, made embarrassingly of flesh and blood" (p. 108). His father, described as "a towering handsome giant in gumboots" (p. 23), is both an ideal and his opposite.

The fact that his father stifled his creativity, and never gave him any recognition for his achievements in art, intensify his oedipal identification with the father. The father is the source of his negative self-image. Noria, called a "stuck-up bitch" by his mother, and by himself ("one thing that Toloki used to be jealous about even as a small boy, was that we all loved the stuck-up bitch, for she had such beautiful laughter" – p. 26), becomes a transposed mother of his oedipal and sexual desires. The drunk perceiving Toloki dreaming asks: "Who is she, ou Toppie, the woman you have wet dreams about?" The wet dream becomes a recurrent motif, contradicting Toloki's own vision of himself as a holy man, even intervening with his daily activities:

The dream haunts Toloki ... It makes something rise in the region of his groin. It is violently kicking inside his pants. Toloki bends forward as if responding to the rhythms of oration and mourning. But what he is really doing is hiding his shame. People must not see that he has disgraced his asceticism by having dirty thoughts running through his mind, and playing havoc with his venerable body (p. 146).

The Holy is a recurrent motif with reference to Toloki who has a "singularly searching fascination" (p. 10) with the aghori sahdu monks from the Orient:

He sees himself in the dazzling light of the aghori sahdu, held in the same awesome veneration that the devout Hindus show the votaries. He spends his sparse existence on the cremation ground, cooks his food on the fires of a funeral pyre, and feeds on human waste and human corpses. He drinks his own urine to quench his thirst (p. 10).

The text at other places calls Noria "this powerful woman who killed his father" (p. 101). She thus embodies his own oedipal wish for the death of the father. The hold that Noria, as a little girl, had over his father enhances her image in his mind, makes her a "goddess". His desire for the woman who had this power over his father points to the unconscious oedipal ambivalence. On the one hand he identifies with the father, but on the other hand feels "deep bitterness" (p. 95) against him. The "hatred" (p. 95) he felt towards Noria is transformed into desire and elective love (amour fou⁵) at the end of the plot.

The love between Toloki and Noria in which the plot resolves itself is also associated with a "dream-like state". It is through the mysticism of love that they transcend their historical predicament:

They dazedly rub each other's backs, and slowly move down to other parts of their bodies. It is as though they are responding to rhythms that are silent for the rest of the world, and can only be heard or felt by them. They take turns to stand in the basin, and splash water on each other's bodies. All this they do in absolute silence, and their movements are slow and deliberate. They are in a dream-like state, their thoughts concentrated only on what they are doing to each other. Nothing else matters. Nothing else exists (p. 180).

Time in the text also belongs to the realm of the dream: Noria's two pregnancies last 15 months each. It is not a mortal man who conceives the second child, but "strangers that visited her in her dreams" (p. 140). Another dreamlike occurrence is when Toloki's apparently illiterate father leaves a hand-written testament at his death (p. 102). The death of the father itself evokes dream images: after years in a trance in his workshop his body is found:

And there was Jwara, sitting as they remembered him, but with his biltong-like flesh stuck to his bones. His bulging eyes were staring at the figurines as before. Glimmering gossamer was spun all around him, connecting his gaunt body with the walls and the roof (p. 102).

A paradox between text time and story time, adding to the dream-like nature of the text, occurs when "Toloki remembers how his father died" (p. 101). This happens at a point in the story when he has not as yet been informed about his father's death.

The themes of the dream and the oedipal link with the theme of beauty in the text: beauty is the product of the dream in the midst of catastrophe. The dream has at

^{5 &}quot;... love in the form of an exclusive passion" (Nadeau, 1978:24).

its basis the oedipal. Toloki identifies with his father, but is rejected. The father says: "So, now you think you are better? You think you are a great creator like me?" (p. 61).

To which Toloki answers: "I want to be like you, father. I want to create from dreams like you" (p. 61).

To which the father replies: "Don't you see, you poor boy, that you are too ugly for that? How can beautiful things come from you?" (p. 61).

4. Beauty

Beauty in the text is often placed in squalor: "There she is, Noria, in a rubble of charred household effects next to her burnt down shack. A lonely figure. Tall and graceful. Sharp features. Smooth, pitch-black complexion – what in the village we called poppy-seed beauty" (p. 43) and "She looks beautiful, this Noria, standing surrounded by debris, holding flowers of different colours" (p. 44). In contrast to Noria, Toloki's father always refers to him as stupid and ugly. When Toloki and Noria walked to the school as children, strangers would stop them and say: "What a beautiful little girl" (p. 64). About him, they comment: "He looks like something that has come to fetch us to the next world" (p. 64). After winning a prize in a national art competition sponsored by a milling company, Toloki for the first time in his life "felt more important than everyone else" (p. 27). His father, though, rejects him with the words: "Get out here, you stupid ugly boy!" (p. 28). Toloki then walks out "with tears streaming down his cheeks" (p. 28).

Noria calls Toloki "a beautiful person" (p. 142) and the narrator then shifts the focus to Toloki's thoughts and remarks: "he has been called ugly and foolish all his life, to the extent that he has become used to these labels. But he has never been called beautiful before" (p. 142). Because the text is focalised through Toloki's eyes, the reader never experiences his "ugliness". The text rather produces an empathy towards his loneliness and imaginings. The text continues: "maybe all the catastrophes that have happened in her life have affected her eyes, so that she is able to see beauty where there is none" (p. 142). When Toloki calls his father's figurines "ugly" (p. 196), Noria rebukes him: "Toloki, the figures are not ugly. Remember that my spirit is in them too. And we must never use that painful word – ugly" (p. 196).

The period of apartheid has been dominated by the internalisation of the negative. It was also, though, a period productive of beauty in that it produced, ironically, the beautiful poverty of Toloki and Noria: "They make a strikingly lovely picture against the sunset" (p. 165). This kitsch image is part of an inversion process: a writing back to white culture. The art dealer, in reference to the figurines of Toloki's father, said that they looked "quite kitschy" (p. 196). The ultimate

inversion, though, is the wishful imaginings of Toloki and Noria around the *Garden and Home* wallpaper to her shack. The inversion becomes literal in the journal title. Through these imaginings they parody kitsch white lives:

They walk out of their Mediterranean-style mansion through an arbour that is painted crisp white. This is the lovely entrance that graces their private garden. Four tall pillars hoist an overhead trellis laced with Belle of Portugal roses. A bed of delphiniums, snapdragons, cosmos, and hollyhocks rolls to the foot of the arbour. Noria and Toloki take a brief rest in the wooded gazebo, blanketed by foliage and featuring a swing (p. 104).

5. The transition as Halloween

The main character, Toloki (Xhosa derivation from the Afrikaans "tolk" meaning interpreter), evokes the image of an unreal being living during the transition as an unreal historical time. He wears a black costume and top hat, hallmark of his profession as Professional Mourner. He got it from a shop renting out "period" costumes to the theatre world. The text defines these period costumes as costumes used in plays "that were about worlds that did not exist anymore" (p. 21). Or they belong not "to any world that ever existed" (p. 21) thus emphasising the unreality of this historical period. The costumes are further evocative of "New Year carnivals" (p. 21). This is an indirect reference to the nature of the book itself. The carnival, though, that it evokes, is reminiscent of the terror of Halloween. The text makes this link explicit when it states that the costume has once before been used by Americans for a Halloween party (p. 21). Many macabre images of arbitrary and senseless killing, as well as of laughter, further develop this textual linking of the transition with Halloween. The text often describes the deaths of people in terms of games and fun. A white man burning a worker, laughs. A black "crony" of the white man explains "that the white colleague was merely laughing because it was a game" (p. 57) and the text states "To him the flames were a joke. When the man screamed and ran around in pain, he thought he was dancing" (p. 57). The community "danced around the burning shack, singing and chanting" (p. 58) when they revenged themselves on thugs who had been terrorising them for a long time. Their realisation that they had become "prosecutors, judges and executors" (p. 58) left them with a "numbed" (p. 58) feeling. Shadrack's "hell-ride" to the mortuary, where right-wingers force him to have sex with the corpse of a young woman, was done "because it was a fun thing to do" (p. 133). When the right-wingers dropped him at his taxi again they thanked "him profusely for the good time he had given them" (p. 133).

The many deaths of 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 institutional law is illegitimate or completely absent. The perpetrators of the crimes in this lawless society were allowed not 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. The political reality itself has taken on the form of a nightmare. Senseless violence permeates everything and everybody, also children, and as in the Halloween festivals, the children become the instruments of the dead. This raises the question of the innocence of children.

6. The innocence of children

The text questions the innocence of children. It makes it clear that their innocence lies not in the fact that they are incapable of being most violent tools in the hands of faceless historical forces. It lies rather in the fact that they do not know what these acts mean and signify. The episode depicting the death of Noria's child, Vutha the Second, at the age of five, interestingly explores the theme of the innocence of children.

At the age of five Vutha is already a "veteran" (p. 167) in the struggle. The text describes him 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" (p. 167). His feelings of infantile omnipotence is encouraged by the "Young Tigers" who "always praised Vutha for the strength of his throw. They said that if a stone from his hand hit a policeman, or a soldier, or a hostel vigilante on the head, he would surely fall down. Vutha was proud of this praise that came from older and battle-scarred cadres" (p. 169). His feeling of omnipotence is further strenghtened by his ability to manipulate his mother: "It established him as a hero among his peers. Sometimes it went to his head, hence his practising his stonethrowing skills at Noria's shack whenever she punished him for being a bad boy" (p. 169).

This infant, unable to know his own limitations, is further given "political education" (p. 169) about the "nature of oppression" (p. 169). The text states that "Much of this information floated above the heads of the children" (p. 169). Because they do not know the difference between good and evil, and they are capable of both, they are innocent. As they cannot understand the content of their political education, they are also not able to understand the implications of their betrayal. They betray the comrades when they communicate information to the hostel dwellers about a planned attack. When discovered by the Young Tigers, the comrades transform them into examples: they become signs to the community. The form of disciplining is necklacing: "They called all the children to come and see what happened to sell-outs" (p. 177). The act of disciplining consists in producing terror; necklacing is itself an infantile form of execution – pointing to the fact that the mind of a crowd is no different from the mind of a child. The text highlights this aspect when it is the four-year old Danisa who

innocently, under the orders of the Young Tigers, becomes the executioner of her friend Vutha: "Danisa and the child who had been given the honour of carrying out the execution struck their matches, and threw them at the tyres. Danisa's match fell into Vutha's tyre" (p. 177).

Conclusion

With *The Ways of Dying* (1995) Zakes Mda produced an intricate analysis of the historical nightmare of the "death producing" (Peterson in Mda, 1993) transition and its predecessor – apartheid. Mda is different from the black writers of the seventies and eighties in that he roots his plots not only in the "streets, schools, prisons, rallies and other public places" (Peterson in Mda, 1993). His text also explores the oedipal dynamics of the family and the broader society. In this, his works have the ability not only to deconstruct the past. It also deconstructs the future. The future carries with it the small details of the personal and oedipal narratives of the past. These past narratives contain determining signs that go beyond apartheid and which are shared by all humanity.

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