

Living Memory:

Building Communities and a Life-In-Common in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*

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Abstract

In Zakes Mda's novel *Ways of Dying* a recurring mantra is found between the two characters Toloki and Noria. They tell each other they both know ways of how to live, an important factor in the violent South Africa at the time of the ending Apartheid era. Through ideas on what a community is, what it depends on, and how it is strengthened I will explore how this becomes successful ways of living. With ideas from history, philosophy, feminism and post-colonialism this magical story of Toloki and Noria, their lives in the village and the unnamed city in South Africa becomes an explorative endeavor of what it means for a community-identity and a shared life-in-common to exist in a time where such a significant change is about to come.

Keywords: *Ways of Dying*, memory, mourning, community, feminism, post-colonialism, South Africa.

Introduction

The title of South African author Zakes Mda's first novel, *Ways of Dying*, might seem like a work focused on endings and the many varieties in which they come. However, set in a country renewing itself, *Ways of Dying* is rather a celebration of beginnings. The Apartheid era will soon see its end but the broken politics, the racial hatred and injustice lingers in the margins of the novel. Through the magic realism portraying the love story of Toloki and Noria, Mda displays an area for growth and continuance within a group of the poorest people in South Africa.

The settlements in which the story is set show a vibrant community struggling for survival. My claim is that means of strengthening the community is the key element for a successful future to come. Funerals and the rituals that come with dying are a way to form a communal memory, creating coherence within the group. Together with the work the women do in the settlements Toloki and Noria are important to the ways of strengthening the community. Through the struggle facing the characters of the novel the many ways to strengthen a community and shaping its identity can be seen.

In *Communities of Memory* W. James Booth debates what a community is and importance to a shared life-in-common. Memory and the things we do in order to remember are an important factors to Booth's discussion and I will apply his thinking to Mda's novel. Particular to the community seen in *Ways of Dying* are the trope of the funerals and Toloki's vocation as a Professional Mourner, Noria and her position of representing women, and the socio-political environment which marks this urban South African community away from many others. The absurd and the carnivalesque, where nonsense, chaos and humor blend together, are features in the novel that signify a reconciliation between the opposites where a fixed centre is never clearly established. The magic realism incorporates the carnivalesque with the rediscovery of traditional elements to African history and literature, elements that I will use to show the importance of a shared history for the identity of a community, and in relation to this, a shared historical narrative voice.

This essay will examine the ways in which a strengthened sense of community is formed and why this is the key to success. With starting point in a reconciliation between opposites, this will show how malleable boundaries and opinions become the first step towards progress. While my first chapter concerns the funerals, the second regards the women with added support of African feminist writers, and the third situates the ideas on community in the novel in the particular situation South Africa was at the end of the Apartheid era with support from post-colonial theory. As the essay progresses I will expand the idea of what a community is, incorporating traditions, feminism, oral storytelling, memory and justice.

All together, Zakes Mda has written a story of South African life, with traditional elements woven together into an urban setting. *Ways of Dying* is magical, cruel and funny story showing the struggle for a better community in a country seeking renewal.

Chapter One: Funerals and Community

This chapter will firstly look at the way *Ways of Dying* establishes the breakdown of binary oppositions in a rather absurd and carnivalesque manner. This will show the start to progress and coherence for the community being the result of this reconciliation between the opposites. It will also explain why funeral rites and community memory is important to the coherence of the group and the settlements. The traditional elements of South African history incorporated in Toloki as a character will be explored as well.

Right from the start Mda displays a scene of opposition. The funeral progression coming back from the ceremonies held for Noria's son enters a stalemate with a wedding party going the opposite direction. The joyous wedding party is made up of fancy cars “decorated with colourful ribbons and balloons” and, faced with the poor funeral progression they “will not give way” (Mda 10). The opposites of wedding and funeral, white and black, rich and poor are apparent. However, despite the deadlock, Toloki manages to resolve the situation. As “Toloki walks to the convertible [...] he greets the bridal couple, and is about to give them a stern lecture on funeral etiquette when the ill-humoured driver of the convertible suddenly decides that he will give way after all” (11). In an almost absurd way the oppositional forces have faded. Toloki wonders if the reason is “his fragrance”, oblivious to how some would rather call it a malodour, because it cannot be that the driver “was intimidated by his size”(11). Regardless of the reason “he smiles. He has this affect on people sometimes” (11). Without Toloki's help neither side would have been able to move on with their respective progressions, now two groups of people can gather and mourn or celebrate together. The resolution to an opposition is that instead of the stubbornness and shouting these two rituals, which bring people together, can continue.

The importance of bringing people together in the sense of the funeral rituals related to memory is something that Roiger Couaru and Sally-Ann Murray discuss in their essay “Of Funeral Rites And Memory: Ways of Living in *Ways of Dying*”. They suggest that in “Mda's narrative community and

history are expressed and entrenched through the performance of the funeral rite” (Courau and Murray 92). Furthermore, Courau and Murray discuss Toloki's role and how “the occasion of the funeral become ritual enactments of the memory and loss of relatives, a source of continuity and a form of relation for the larger black urban community” (91). The funerals in *Ways of Dying* work as rituals to sustain a shared memory of the person who passed on and this is beneficial for the community as a whole. When living in a time where “there are funerals everyday”, and even funerals “taking place at the same time, and hymns flow into one another” (Mda 145) it seems as if the funerals become almost the one event the community continues to share. As Courau and Murray state “[t]he rituals of death provide the source of cultural continuity and connection that is needed if memory and history are to survive” (101). In addition to this statement, the importance of history and memory in a community is something W. James Booth further develops the many aspects of in his book *Communities of Memory: on Witness, Identity and Justice*.

From the very basics of personal identity to the larger sense of a communal identity, memory is one thing that Booth bases his discussions on. In order to explain why “memory is essential to the coherence and enduringness of the community (or person)” (Booth xiii) he proposes the following claim, that “assertions of identity normally seek to do (at least) three related things: to draw a boundary between group members and others; to provide a basis for collective action; and to call attention to a life-in-common, a shared history and future” (3). As of now, I want to further develop the third statement while the other two will be discussed more in detail in chapter two. A shared history and future in relation to the identity of a group can be further explored by using the many funerals in *Ways of Dying*. Despite Booth not discussing *Ways of Dying* in particular, the novel presents many examples applicable to Booth's theories. What Booth, in addition, says about the identity of a community is that “a life-in-common that mark us apart from other groups or individuals all require a certain kind of persistence across time” (4). The temporal elements in Booth's statements is something that is present in the funeral rites from the way Mda draws upon traditional customs of South African tribes.

However, it is more than just the smaller group of attendants of the funeral that become aware of their life-in-common. The larger community will share a history of their variety of traditions, something that Courau and Murray call attention to through exploring how “Mda reworks some of the traditional roles associated with funeral rites” and more specifically “indigenous forms of performed memory” (Courau and Murray 101). As part of Toloki's profession as a mourner he “groans and wails” and his “moans [...] are meant to invoke sorrow and pain” as he “sways from side to side, particularly when the Nurse tells [...] the story of the death of [the deceased] (Mda 108). At one of the funerals Toloki attends an old woman, who is one of the relatives of the deceased, tells him that “[he] added an aura of sorrow and dignity that [they] last saw in the olden days when people knew how to mourn their dead”(109). Toloki's performance and the old lady's memory of how funerals were in the old days both allude to what Courau and Murray call an “agent for what many black people have lost: the emotional power associated with oral rhetorical skills, that in the case of the *imbongi* or praise singer, for example, work to situate a person in a network of past and present relationships” (103). In concurrence with W. James Booth's arguments, the community identity is shaped through the past and present relationships that are the focus of the funerals. Moreover, the traditional elements raised by Mda and compared by Courau and Murray to the *imbongi*, which is explained in more detail below, adds a history of relationships spanning over many generations. However, while they present the comparison, Courau and Murray's essay does not develop the idea much further. There is an interesting link between Toloki as the Professional Mourner, which to some extent also include the Nurse at the funerals, and the *imbongi* tradition.

Firstly, as Opland and McAllister explain in their essay “The Xhosa Imbongi as Trickster”, the *imbongi* is a praise poet, whose poetic songs, *izibongo*, found in Xhosa traditions, held many important roles in the community. They, for example, “inspired strong emotions, recorded clan and family relationships, alluded to historical events and commented on current affairs” (Opland and McAllister 159). Furthermore, they “confirmed a sense of identity in his audience as members of a chiefdom or

nation” as well as being purveyors of history “by invoking the names of departed ancestors he conjured their presence and facilitated communication between the living and the dead” through the magical power he was supposed to have (159). While a belief in magic like that is not present in *Ways of Dying*, Toloki knows of almost every one who has died in the settlements and their life's history shared by the Nurse, creating a burgeoning knowledge of the past and present network of relationships in the settlements. Secondly, if the Nurse tells the story of how the brother or sister of the community lost their life, while Toloki wails and groans rhythmically, their respective performances come together to form something song-like, almost like a praise song. With the lyrics provided by the Nurse, the sounds by Toloki compliments the speech and at one funeral “[w]hen the Nurse spoke, he excelled himself by punctuating each painful segment of her speech with an excruciating groan that sent the relatives in to a frenzy of wailing” (Mda 17).

Finally, then, in Oplan and McAllister's essay they argue for the *imbongi* as a trickster figure, and in doing so highlights the “status as liminal figure” (159) and “the liminal nature of praise poetry itself as part of a cultural performance” (157). The liminal position of the *imbongi* can be argued as being one held by Toloki as well. He inhabits the marginal spaces in the city, he does not live in the settlements and he does not have a regular job. Rather, he sleeps at “his headquarters” (16), by his trolley, or in waiting rooms and his made up profession “is a rather new concept and he is still the only practitioner” (17). Moreover, Toloki is quite naïve, at the incident with the stalemate between the wedding and the funeral progression, he wonders if it was resolved because of his fragrance, his perfume, oblivious to how later someone comments of him that he “smells like death” (57) and that he, in fact, absolutely stinks. Moreover, Toloki's naïve qualities can sometimes place him too far away from current affairs; the politics of the time is something he is unaware of. All he knows is that “there is war in the land, and he has mourned at many a funeral of war casualties” (56). However, while this places him further in the margins of the community, it is not without its benefits. Toloki uses this position of being an outsider once he is introduced by Noria to the life led by the people in the

settlements, and makes a very poignant commentary. While he “attributes his keen sense of observation to the fact that he has not lived with other human beings for many years” he says that “[f]rom what I have seen today, I believe that the salvation of the settlement lies in the hands of women” (176). This is something only said by Toloki because of his liminal position, however why this is so and more about the impact and importance of the women in the community is what the upcoming chapter will discuss. As of now, with the established comparison between Toloki and the traditional *imbongi* components, I want to return to the elements of a shared history being a factor for the identity of the community.

Communal memory takes many forms in a society; museums, archives and statues are all symbolic of a shared history and a current life-in-common. In the settlement camps where Toloki live there are no statues or museums, what exists are traditions of oral history, storytelling, and the rituals of the funeral. W. James Booth writes on memory and absence, and says of the death of a person that “[w]hat is lost in these deaths, then, is not (only) something private, the property so to speak of one person, but a part of the common stock of a community, a family, a culture, a society” (Booth 32). The inescapable death of every being will thus spawn a reaction to preserve what might be lost with the older generations. Together, we take “efforts to gather and store the remembrances of people” (32).

The allusions to a partially lost tradition, the *imbongi* praise singer that Mda incorporates to his novel, then becomes a very important factor in a society where oral storytelling is most common and only kept alive through the memory of the people. Furthermore, life in the settlements and the city is a melange of people from different tribes and villages, there are migrant workers and city natives, and with that, many different traditions. However, as Toloki is “still the only practitioner” of this “noble profession” (Mda 17) he creates a new tradition within this community. When new arrivals to the townships and settlement camps first come into contact with Toloki they “[think] that perhaps they had missed something they ought to have been doing”, that it perhaps is “one of the modern practices of the city to have a Professional Mourner” (134). This creates the basis for a new version of a tradition, reminiscent of old ones, that unify the new life-in-common that specifically the people of the

settlements and townships share, because as Toloki realised, it is “only at poor people's funerals he [is] welcome” (137).

The new life in the city in particular receives a strengthened coherence and identity through funeral rites. As I mentioned before, Toloki manages to reconcile an opposition in a quite absurd manner at the beginning of the novel; by smelling bad. This absurdity used by Mda to create an almost carnivalesque relation to death can be seen elsewhere in the novel. Courau and Murray discuss the “atmosphere of the carnivalesque” (Courau and Murray 102) through the following citation regarding how funerals are not only held at weekends anymore but rather “[a]s a matter of fact, even with funerals taking place daily, the mortuaries are bursting at the seams, and the cemeteries are jam-packed” (Mda 145). To imagine a mortuary “bursting at its seams” (145) is a ridiculous image in a very bleak setting. However, through this comes a “progression towards conviviality and irony [that] is a mark of the attempt to find ways of living in the desolate climate of ways of dying” (Courau and Murray 102). Therefore, because of the reconciliation between opposites, funerals and mourning mark a continuation into happiness and celebration.

Even in the sense of new traditions formed to create unity within the group does the carnivalesque play a role. Because of the many funerals taking place daily there is sometimes “up to ten funeral services taking place at the same time, and hymns flow into one another in unplanned but pleasant segues” (Mda 145). What Mda does is to let something very sad, such as ten funerals, become something pleasant through the hymns and the performance of the funeral. A performance, that in this case, overlooks the divisions between the different groups of bereaved and lets the universal aspect of mourning the dead shine through. It shows how the absurd and the carnivalesque work to show malleable boundaries, that includes rather than stay rigid and exclude. It unites all those who lost a loved one, and in the violent climate where people are “stabbing one another with knives and shooting one another with guns” (Mda 25), death is one thing that everyone encounters. Because of this, funerals have a strong relation to the coherence of the community and Toloki plays an important role whose

liminal position offers insight. As one of those insightful comments concerns the women in the community, the next chapter will introduce the connections between community identity and the work of the women in *Ways of Dying*.

Chapter Two: Women and Community

One thing that is known in today's academia is the presence of multiple feminisms, and the difficulty to in reality represent any large group of women. As Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi writes in "Gender, Feminist Theory and Post-Colonial (Women's) Writing" she states that "there can be no one, 'unified' post-colonial literature or theory, just as there is no one, 'unified' feminist theory" (262). In the same vein as feminism, post-colonialism developed and both share roots in deconstruction along with the desire to expose a discursive fixed centre. Whether it is the male or the European at the centre, what deviates is seen as The Other: something or someone inhabiting a marginal position. The African woman living in Apartheid South Africa would then be seen as first not-European, then not-white, and additionally, also not-male. Because of this, a feminist discourse that is relevant to South Africa may be difficult to define. The debate of racism in combination with sexism is one that has been raised before. In the introduction to *South African Feminisms: Writing, theory and criticism 1990-1994* M.J Daymond says that "ownership of knowledge – in its several aspects of representation, interpretation, commentary and theory – is being contested in all branches of feminist activity" (M.J Daymond xxii). Therefore, when it comes to finding a feminist discourse relevant to South Africa the question will regard how we can represent, interpret and comment to gain knowledge, which in turn, also represents how I will use the word knowledge in this discussion. Daymond expands this by establishing that "no one, white or black, can afford to teach, criticize, or theorize social practice (or fictional writing) as though authority to give utterance comes only from direct experience" (xxii). However, even this is a difficult statement. In short, according to Daymond, the important part is for authors to "write *with* their informants and *for* other readers, making the vital transition from experience to knowledge" (xxiii). As Toloki points out that he believes the women is key to the salvation of the settlements, he does this not through experience of the life Noria leads, but as a stranger to the women's ways of living in the settlements.

However, a counterpoint to this, and a reaction to a perhaps unsuccessful “transition from experience to knowledge” (xxiii) is raised by Marina Lazreg in her essay “Decolonizing Feminism”. She quotes Michel Foucault's statement that “knowledge is not made for understanding, it is made for cutting” (qtd. In Lazreg 70) and with this she argues that “[k]nowledge as 'cutting' [...] pervades feminist scholarship” (70). This shows an aspect of how knowledge can come from an experience that is not one's own, but based on knowing what it is not. Her essay regards, in part, the expression of “women of colour” and that our understanding comes from the cutting away “women of colour” from the centralized “women without colour”, the western woman. This illuminates the issues which M.J Daymond discusses as well by stating that “[a]n understandable reaction to the silencing of black women has been to insist that they, and only they, can speak for black women” (Daymond xxii). While it is my standpoint that Toloki, partially and in his own way, can speak for the women in the settlements despite not being a woman the question of who can speak for whom is a difficult one. Part of Toloki's authority on this matter is justified through the conversation he has with Noria when he says this, speaking with her, rather than instead of her.

These questions arise for Jill Arnott in her essay “French Feminism in a South African Frame? Gayatri Spivak and the Problem of Representation in South African Feminism”. She exemplifies the two errors common in the debate of representation.

Spivak asserts that the problem can only be approached from a theoretical position that absolutely insists on the deconstruction of the concept of a self-knowing subject, a subject for whom 'being' and 'knowing' – experience and the understanding of that experience – are identical [...] failure to acknowledge the construction of subjectivity can lead to either of two apparently opposite, but in a sense identical, errors: the belief in a universal sisterhood of women [...] or the belief that while the elite woman cannot 'know' the subaltern, the latter can 'know' and speak for herself. (Arnott 82)

It is not without difficulty that knowledge and its relation to experience can be defined. Even to base a new discussion on older debates in academia, such as the situation in South Africa based on a feminism mostly developed in France will perhaps only expose differences rather than a basis for discussion. What Arnott suggests as a conclusion is that if ‘ ‘difference’ can also be used creatively, to power a genuinely dialectical interaction between two vigilantly foregrounded subject-positions’ then maybe it could also “[change] the situation of all South African women” (87).

When it comes to *Ways of Dying*, the issue of 'difference' is displayed as something that suggests to be following Arnott's hopeful conclusion. The boundaries seen in the novel that signal difference are affected by the reconciliation of the opposites that dissolve the tension between the different groups. Boundaries can be exclusive and inclusive at the same time, what is of importance is that the boundaries are not fixed or that they centre on something that becomes a norm. In *Ways of Dying* the centre is constantly set under duress because of the reconciliation between the opposites and because there never seems to be a centre people strive towards. For example, despite everyone being poor, no one strives towards becoming rich. Being rich is not better, something that Nefolovhodwe, the coffin maker proves by failing to impress Toloki with all his wealth. Instead he has forgotten that he and Toloki used to be homeboys, and Toloki could not have known “that homeboys who did well in the city developed amnesia” (Mda 133). Rather, what Nefolovhdowe's search for riches displays a loss of memory and subsequently a loss of community, this is his actual mistake in life.

Moreover, the absence of a fixed centre, or a norm, in *Ways of Dying* can be seen through the duality of Noria's character that displays many different experiences of a South African woman. In her essay “Love and Wayward Women in *Ways of Dying*” Nokuthula Mazibuko argues for women as the custodians of creativity and healing. She states that “Mda presents women as being at the centre of reshaping and rebuilding a post-colonial, post-apartheid South Africa (Mazibuko 116). She explores this claim by noting how the women in *Ways of Dying* “seem to revel in behaviour that contradicts and upsets notions of ideal womanhood” and they “are outspoken, boundary-pushing women” (118). For

example, as a young girl Noria was the muse for Jwara, Toloki's blacksmith father, and the magical figurines he made out of metal. She would sing to him and he would shape the creatures that he saw in his dreams. Noria “had all this power to change mediocre artists into artists of genius” (Mda 31). Furthermore, she is according to Mazibuko “portray[ed] [...] in an interesting and contradictory manner. Noria is a combination of the mother, virgin, prostitute, artist and activist” (122).

The young Noria learned quickly that by giving pleasure to others, she could receive things for her self. Starting from how the people of the village all “would crowd around her and listen to her laughter” (31) to how she in her teenage years “would ride around in these taxis, dispensing pleasure to the drivers, who would buy her gifts and flatter her” (73). Noria knew that “[s]he could give or withhold pleasure at will, and this made her very powerful” (72). Both Noria and her mother were powerful women back in the village. Coined by Toloki's mother, frustrated with how her husband spent his time with Noria creating figurines instead of earning money, “Noria was always referred to as a stuck-up bitch” and contradictory she “was proud of her title” (73). Noria's mother was known only as That Mountain Woman because she came from a remote village up in the mountains. She is, according to Mazibuko, “seen as 'other' by the villagers” but is also very vociferous, because “she will not be governed by an illegitimate system that discriminates against women and elevates men” (Mazibuko 119). That Mountain Woman has a voice and an importance in the village community. She is the doctor, known for her “potent medicines for all sorts of ailments” (Mda 34) and through this a representation by Mda of being the healer, she is according to Mazibuko, one of a “range of symbolic figures that circulate within societal constructions of womanhood, as well as within the African literature canon” (Mazibuko 120).

Much like her mother, Noria grows up to be a person with a voice, however, as the village setting has changed to the poor urban communities, so has the current issues at hand. While Toloki is mostly unaware of the details of the war raging in the country, Noria is knowledgeable about the political situation she is dealing with and “[s]he and her friend, 'Malehlohonolo, never [miss] a single

demonstration [...] For ['Malehlohonolo], the struggle came first” (Mda 179). It is this struggle that encompasses everyone's life in the settlements and the one that Noria is fighting alongside the other women. A pivotal element to succeeding in this struggle is the coherence and identity of the community, and it is because of the women's work for the community that women are essential to the struggle in order for a change to come. Noria's life show her as the artist, prostitute, activist, and furthermore, as the virgin and the mother at the same time. As they all show the multiplicity of her character, it is the last two, the virgin and the mother, through which Mda displays an important aspect to living a life-in-common: the need for justice, seen when Noria deals with the murder of her second child.

What started with a quite out of the ordinary pregnancy that lasted for fifteen months Noria gave birth to a boy named Vutha who tragically passed away under care of his father. As Noria “learnt of the death of her son [...] [t]he cruelty of the world killed not only her uplifting laughter, but all human desires of the flesh” (Mda 149). Therefore, when she found she was pregnant again “she did not know how it had happened, as she had eschewed all contact with men” (149). After another fifteen months of pregnancy she gave birth to a boy who looked just like Vutha, and who “even had the same birth marks” (150).

The death of Norias second child, or perhaps it was “Vutha's second death” all started “with the last massacre experienced by the residents of the settlements” (179). The many political rallies held by The Young Tigers: “the youth wing of the political movement” (181), involved the young children, such as Vutha. The children sang all the songs, but did not understand them. The Young Tigers “taught them of the nature of oppression, the history of the movement [...] and why the tribal chief was doing such dirty things to the people” (181). When the secret that Vutha and a friend of his had been talking with the enemy in exchange for food and sweets, the enraged Young Tigers called the Vutha and his friend sell-outs. To teach the other children a lesson about what happened to sell-outs they put gasoline filled tyres around the boys' necks and gave matches to the youngest children. Those “who had been

given the honour of carrying out the execution struck their matches, and threw them at the tyres” (189).

In addition to the horrendous way the two boys died, a problem arising here is who to blame. The children never understood what they were doing, and when asked what had happened “none of the children could say who was actually responsible for the atrocity. They just said it was The Young Tigers” (190).

Two major aspects of a community that W. James Booth discusses are bearing witness and doing justice. If a shared history is part of the identity of the group then the need for bearing witness with a close connection to a truthful account of events is something we need. Booth argues for the need inherent in everyone for this by using examples from people having experienced historical events such as Stalin's Russia and life in Auschwitz. Those who witness preserve the past and are “both the guardians of the past, educators of the collective memory of a community and sometimes pointers to its future” (Booth 92). Noria's search for who should be held responsible for her child's death is a personal quest as a bereaved and angry mother; however, since no person is identified as being responsible other issues arise. Noria was promised by the local street committee “that the leaders would publicly make a statement at the meeting, apologising for the death of her son, and reprimanding those who were responsible for it” (Mda 177-178). Without someone taking responsibility and the children witnessing the event unable to state who gave the instructions, the community as a whole becomes responsible. Noria is promised recognition of the crime that was her son's death by the public apology of the community leaders. This echoes Booth's assertion that “doing justice and bearing witness are at their heart an expression of our memory-laden moral relation to the past” (Booth 113). Moreover, at the centre of his argument lies the claim that

there is something intrinsic to doing justice, as a working on the past, that it is not adequately captured in the language of instrumentality and interest, a language that seems to overlook the past-tense dimensions of communities of obligation. (113)

Noria's desire for justice through the given apology and responsibility taken by the leaders of her

community is therefore an essential desire for the very existence of a community. Without this need to bear witness and seek justice within a historical narrative shared by the community, the community would not come to be. The shared history of a group is strongly related to the identity of it. Therefore, when the leaders of the street committee who promised her an apology did not do it publicly, but rather “they called her privately” and “[swept] it under the carpet” (Mda 178), justice has not been done and the death of Noria's son become excluded from the shared historical narrative. This prompts Toloki to say “[t]hey have treated you like this, yet you continue to work for them”, referring to Noria's work for the community who let her down, however, her answer is that “[she is] not working for them, but for [her] people” (178). Her people are not the leaders but all of the community in the settlements that all share a life-in-common. However, with this there is a distinction of genders, “all the national and regional leaders [...] were men” (176), and the leaders failed the community by not publicly bearing witness to the reason Noria lost Vutha. In this Mda shows how the leadership fails its own community, and that the key to success and survival does not lie in the hands of the leaders, but in the hands of the community.

Toloki's keen sense of observation from his vantage point of being new to the life in the settlements allows him to observe how the men “tend to cloud their heads with pettiness and vain pride. They sit still all day and dispense wide-ranging philosophies on how things should be” (175). The men do little work to strengthen the community from within, the way Noria does work for her people. Toloki manages to illuminate the hegemony that exists, and if not for his being an outsider, he too “would assume that it was normal for things to be like this, for surely this is how they were meant to be from day one of creation” (176).

The continuance of reconciliation between opposites in *Ways of Dying* opens up the counter-intuitive argument that Toloki observes the men to hold, that if things have been a certain way for a very long time, then surely that is the way things should be then. However, within the novel, the key to survival and progress lies in the strength of the community. Being willing to work for their people, the

way Noria does, is tremendously beneficial and anything that expands the group of people as well as the number of people willing to do work is an advantage. The group needs to have malleable boundaries, be able to grow larger and not resist adaptation because of a belief in keeping things as they have always been. These malleable boundaries are showed through the carnivalesque elements in the novel, just like the stalemate and the many funerals taking place all at the same time.

While the community as a unit failed it's people by not accepting the killing of Vutha and another young boy, they swept it under the rug in favour for a more pleasant historical narrative of the community, one where it's members did not kill other members. The power to deny the events public recognition, exhorted by the leaders, led them to edit the historical narrative as they saw fit. The work that the women do for the community is also left without recognition of those who think themselves the leaders in a community, the men. The acceptance of the hegemony that Toloki exemplifies above becomes the recognition of just one man that the real leadership roles are taken by the women. If more of the men would acknowledge the same, the voice of the women would be heard in political spheres, where the men are the leaders, and they would be incorporated within other narratives of the community. This is echoed in "Gender, Feminist Theory and Post-Colonial (Women's) Writing" where Markuchi Nfah-Abbenyi takes a stand based on Gayatri Spivak's term of the subaltern woman, but with her own addition. She makes a statement that "to borrow Spivak's words, as that of 'the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman' with a difference. If Spivak's subaltern woman is historically muted, I contend the reverse, which is that she has always spoken, she has spoken in alternative ways" (Nfah-Abbenyi 273). My addition to this would be that a way the women have spoken is through the creation and existence of communities. The life-in-common that has always included women, and the subsequent shared history, memory and narrative of it is where the voice of women is heard. The work that women do shapes the identity of the group in question and within that a voice can be heard. Noria and her friend Madimbhaza take care of orphaned children with disabilities, some of which "are on crutches, and some have their legs in callipers" (Mda 166). The old woman's home has become known

in the settlement as “the dumping ground’, since women who have unwanted babies dump them in front of her door at night” (166). Because of these two women, a group of children survive, go to school and becomes part of the community. Their work in the community shapes it, affects the larger identity, through the inclusion, survival and witness bore by the very children their work has helped survive.

This is how multiplicity in characteristics all common to canonical African literature displaying females have come together in Mda's representation of only a few women who symbolise the way to survival. The injustice that Noria faces ties together the issues and the way to successfully deal with them by focusing on the community they live in. The next chapter will continue to look through the lens of what a community is in order to find further examples of how *Ways of Dying* promotes the survival of a community by ways to strengthen it. This time I focus on a larger picture than the women, and consider all the South Africans in order to place Mda's novel in a context where its full importance can be seen.

Chapter 3: Country and Community

The micro cosmos that the life in the unnamed village and city in which *Ways of Dying* is set can be seen as a parallel to a life in South Africa at large. The presence of Apartheid in the novel is never overtly expressed despite being present throughout. Toloki's old headquarters by the beach, the costume shop from where he gets his mourning clothes and his memories of when he first came to the city all display scenes where people leading a very different life can be seen in the margins. The magical realism implored by Mda can be seen as a way to draw together certain elements and leave out others at the authors own will, not by the hands of Apartheid, but by own choice. Elements from the oral traditions from generations ago are adapted to a modern life. Ordinary objects take on magical properties, such as the pages of home and garden magazines on the walls of Noria's shack. Magic, fairy tales and oral literature are sources of reference in Emily R. Zinn's essay where she writes that “[i]n the context of a new South Africa, a discourse that, like the fairy tale, can upend ossified hierarchies and offer visions of transformation could be enormously valuable” (251). In *Ways of Dying* the reconciliation of the opposites and the way that Mda writes the very text through the upheaval of magic and reality, traditional elements and modern life show a similar valuable upending of hierarchies.

Moreover, this is a trope that is common to African literature. The oral traditions of storytelling that becomes interwoven with modern, written, literature is an element that is often explored. In *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character, and Continuity*, Isidore Okpewho provides a reasoning as to why this is and raises notions of cultural change over time:

African oral literature is studied side by side with modern African literature because many modern African writers consciously borrow techniques and ideas from their oral traditions in constructing works dealing essentially with modern life. These writers would like to feel that even though their societies have changed drastically from what they were several generations ago and even though they communicate with the world in

a language that is not their own, there must be certain fundamental elements in their oral traditions that they can bring into their portraits of contemporary life” (qtd in Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi 263)

The change of the society and the subsequent desire to go back to something and find an importance for it today is of importance. One reason, which I propose, is in the light of the Apartheid era and the desire to step away from this, into the new South Africa as Zinn proclaims, and this goes hand in hand with causing duress on fixed hierarchies. The bringing of oral traditions, styles of storytelling and characteristics known to be associated with South Africa's past can be a reclamation of knowledge, which in the minds of colonialists was a reason for discrimination. In Edward Said's work *Orientalism* he explains orientalism partly “as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, [creating] a discourse (Said 3). The Occident and the Orient that are the opposing poles in Said’s work can be applied to the European and African dichotomies of the South African colonisation. The knowledge of traditional elements of South African tribes was once part of the discourse of European colonists. As Said talks about knowledge he uses an example of Arthur James Balfour's lecture to The House of Commons on the reasons for England to stay in Egypt. Balfour presents his knowledge of Egypt and the reasons why the occupation should continue and Said says that “[t]o have such knowledge over such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it. And authority here means for 'us' to deny the autonomy of 'it' [...] since we know it and it exists, in a sense, *as we know it*” (32). As phrased by Robert Ross in *A Concise History of South Africa*, what Europe knew about this country was that “Colonial South Africa was founded by the premier capitalist corporation of the seventeenth century, the Dutch East India Company, and was taken over by the British at the height of Britain's Industrial Revolution” (Ross 3).

As the past of South Africa has been part of the knowledge and discourse used by Europeans who colonised the lands the desire to spread this knowledge without the stains of the racism that ran parallel is appealing. With Apartheid gone, knowledge of certain things, in the way Said explains as

ways of gaining domination over them, must become knowledge without domination. The rediscovery of the magical and the traditional in the setting of the new South African reality is, as Zinn writes, “extremely valuable” (Zinn 251) as it can re-evaluate the past within a new discourse.

Furthermore, to go back to Michel Foucault's statement that “knowledge is not made for understanding, it is made for cutting” (qtd in Lazreg 70) I would also like to point out that the village and the settlements, the communities where Toloki and Noria live, are communities that are *for* the poor black people, for them because of Apartheid. The Nationalist Party used this slogan, meaning literally separateness, as they won the elections in 1948. Knowledge here was used in Said's way; to dominate, as well as in Foucault's; to cut away. The Population Registration Act of 1950 set out to “assign everyone to one of the national categories” and despite there being “an undertone of intense racism within apartheid” this was done under the idea to “emphasise the importance of ethnicity” (Ross 116). As the Nationalist Party began their rule the ambivalence as to their intentions diminished, as did the rights of everyone who was not white.

At the end of the apartheid era in the 1990's where the story of Toloki and Noria takes place, the question of what a community is becomes paramount when it needs to change for the better. To change for the better and overcome the burden of the past is very much a real issue with no simple answers. However, it is within the larger picture that the significance of the small acts of strengthening the community is found. With the aid of Jürgen Habermas' philosophy regarding the post-World War II Germany, W. James Booth derives a few points. One thing he stresses is that a massive change in government, such as the Germany of today compared to the Germany under Hitler, does not erase the “persistence of memory, identity and responsibility even across such a radical regime change” (Booth 69). It rather shows the opposite, calling people to “question notions of a constitutional identity” itself, by illuminating a communal identity that “[is] not exhausted by constitutional or other political-institutional forms of persistence, nor disrupted by their alteration” (69). Sadly, when it comes to a change in government, after the Hitler regime or the Apartheid era, it is not enough to form a new

government and constitutional identity in order for communities of a life-in-common to change with it.

What it does is that it “makes the attribution of responsibility across time anomalous, and it works against or is indifferent to the collective memory-identities that pervade society” (70). Despite the difficulties, one thing that this allows for is a strong, beneficial, community in existence during the Apartheid era to continue in to the post-Apartheid life. *Ways of Dying* shows a struggle for a better community and in the socio-political environment of South Africa it truly becomes the way to success.

The story of The Young Tigers, their murder of Vutha and the absence of a public apology by the leaders to Noria is an example of what the new South African government tried to avoid by the establishment of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As Mda illustrated the failure of the community in this instance, the Commission sought to let know that “all stories could be told and amnesty would be granted to those who admitted to human rights violations – in other words murder and assault” (Ross 200). This allowed that “testimon[ies] could be heard in public, and also to see some at least of the former rulers doing penance for their actions” (200). Booth calls truth commissions, such as the TRC of South Africa part of the effort of “illumination and acknowledgement” for the sake of amnesty to protect “democracy from being torn apart by an absorption in the past and in its attendant spirit of revenge” (Booth 121). When Toloki encounters a village that sought its own justice of a crime through revenge he sees that

the villagers were numbered by their actions. They had become the persecutors, judges and executioners. But every one of them knew that the village would forever be enshrouded by the smell of burning flesh. The community would never be the same again, and for the rest of their lives, its people would walk in a daze. (Mda 66)

The on-going mantra between Toloki and Noria, that of them knowing different ways of how to live, can be interpreted as knowing ways to move on. When Toloki and Noria rebuild Noria's recently burnt down shack Megan Cole Paustian calls to attention that “[i]t is the imagination that allows Noria and Toloki to project a future to build for, and when the opportunity comes they build for the community

instead of for themselves” (Cole Paustian 7). The imaginative efforts that built a shack which “would certainly be at home in any museum of modern art” spawned them both to admire it, burst out laughing and exclaim in wonder that “[they] did not know that [their] hands were capable of such creation” (Mda 67). The small act of the two of them being able to succeed their expectations of creation after the destruction of Noria's home, the very day after it burnt down, becomes a very hopeful expectation for the destroyed home that is South Africa.

The imagination that allows a projection in to the future is something that Toloki and Noria work on together and another example is seen when Nefolovhodwe brings the figurines to their shack at the end of the novel. While the creation of the figurines that Toloki's father made while entranced for hours, sometimes days, by the monotonous singing coming from young Noria was not quite, by any accounts, a beneficial process for anyone involved. Noria learned how attention and rewards could be given to her in exchange for things she did, Toloki was ignored by his father and Jwara himself neglected his work and to bring in money for his family. Despite this, however, there is a magical potency to these figurines of imaginative animals, seen as the settlement gathers around the many boxes delivered by Nefolovhodwe after he claims to have been visited by the ghost of Jwara in his dreams. Seeking to rid himself of the haunting of a friend he once claimed to not remember at all, he brings all the figurines to Toloki in the settlement and as the people see what the delivery contains “[t]he children [fall] in to such paroxysms of laughter that they roll around on the ground” (Mda 210). What Toloki and Noria will do with the mountain of boxes they do not know, however, their suggestions are community centred. One figurine they will keep to “remind themselves where they came from” the rest they could either sell “as Nefolovhodwe suggested, and take the money to Madimbhaza's dumping ground” or they might just “build a big shack around them, and the children could come and laugh whenever they felt like it” (211).

These figurines come to signify three different ways of representations of community identity. One of them will become a statue in Toloki and Noria's home, to remind them of the past and the life

they once had. To sell them, as pieces of modern art, gives them a cultural value that will spread and live on, and the money will go to children in need. The third option, to build a shack for them, a museum of sorts, becomes a space marked out especially for memory of the past and, of course, the enjoyment of children now and in the future. The figurines tell of a place and time in which they were made and as long as they are viewed upon by people these questions will not disappear, even if the answers may erode over time.

This all takes place on New Years Eve and the carnivalesque celebrations where teenagers cross-dress, “boys wear dresses” and “girls jackets and ties borrowed from their fathers” in order to “go from house to house shouting 'Happe-eee!’” and “ask for delicacies such as cakes, ginger beer and sweets”, are winding down (Mda 194-195). The big party and the disruption of gender binaries, which the teenagers cross-dressing bring, signify the celebration of changes coming with the New Year. As the night ends people wander back home and going past Noria's shack “[they] look at the mountain of boxes that dwarfs the shack. [They] do not touch. [They] just look and marvel” (212). In the darkness the figurines appear to be “shimmering like fool's gold” (212) and according to Cole Paustian “[t]he heap of statues [...] has come to stand in for Toloki and Noria’s ways of living” (Cole Paustian 9) and as “[t]he smell of burning rubber fills the air” (Mda 212), in the light of the horrible memory of Vutha's burning body, “[j]ust pure wholesome rubber” (212) is to Cole Paustian a “sense that Toloki and Noria’s resistance has yielded greater success than the models that result in that awful kind of burning” and that the smell, in fact, “represent[s] a triumph” (Cole Paustian 9).

Moreover, this triumph of the community oriented way of living that Toloki and Noria work to achieve can be seen even before the story proper begins. The narrative voice of “the all-seeing eye of the village gossip” (Mda12) hints to the existence of a communal voice that can tell the encompassing story of Toloki and Noria from their lives as children up until now. As they say themselves “no individual owns any story. The community is the owner of the story and it can tell it the way it deems fit” (12). As Bennet and Royle give an explanation to narratology they introduce the idea of a story

through several key elements, some of which are

[n]ot only do we tell stories but stories tell us: if stories are everywhere, we are also in stories. The telling of a story is always bound up with power, property and domination [...] Stories always have something to tell us about stories themselves: they always involve self-reflexive and metafictional dimensions. (Bennett and Royle 41)

Similarities between this and Said's explanation to what orientalism is are multiple as the telling of a story evokes knowledge, and many stories, over many years, will evoke a discourse. Furthermore, as the discourse the West created for the East, it involved self-reflexive dimensions, which made orientalism very telling of the West, rather than of the East. As it is so, then the story told by a community about members of it both becomes telling of the community itself, and more importantly, it creates a discourse for itself. It ensures its own existence by telling stories of and about itself. Whether through the funerals and the Nurse, or the stories told by the children who survive because of Noria's work at the dumping ground, or by the village gossip, it creates the sound of a vital community as if shared lungs made the sound of breathing together. The community will live on, as it teaches itself ways of living through stories preserving the memory, history and the identity of a life-in-common.

Conclusion

The resolution that comes after oppositional forces colliding is community oriented in Mda's novel *Ways of Dying*. Just as a novel with such a name is more concerned about ways of living, the reconciliation of the opposites is a way to include, rather than exclude, and it shows the malleability of boundaries. The carnivalesque and the magic realism explored by Mda show ways of using past traditions in the modern age. This is according to W. James Booth's ideas on what a community is and how it is based on memory and shared historical narratives, a way to create a community identity of a life-in-common. Funerals become a ritual performance where the shared memory of a lost one is in focus, but moreover, the entire traditions associated with funerals becomes a shared aspect of a life-in-common. The new communities formed in the settlement camps need ways of strengthening themselves, if the violence and war is to end. One important factor to this is the work that the women of the settlements do. Through the multiplicity of the female characters, they come to signify all women through their many aspects commonly used in South African literature. Noria shows the traditional roles held by women in the community are essential to the vitality of the community and her subaltern voice can be found speaking in other ways, found by looking at the way the community exists.

Despite being faced with the injustice showed by the leaders who failed to deliver on their promise to make a public apology for the death of Noria's son Vutha, she continues to work for her people, not the leaders. The internal conflicts, the violence and instability in the country at the time of the novel show that a strong sense of community is needed for the violence not to escalate. It is important in the efforts to move away from the ending Apartheid era, present in the margins of *Ways of Dying*, to create a discourse that exists without the added stain of racism. When ethnicity was once used as a basis to exclude and separate people, the malleability of boundaries show that a better future can be built on a new discourse. Through the narrative voice of the community gossip that tells the very story of two of its own members, Toloki and Noria, this shows an important agency of the community

to find ways of strengthening itself. As Booth states, it is not enough for a new government to form in order to move away from the collective memory of past events to disappear, it does however, allow for a strong community at the time of Apartheid to continue to live on in the new South Africa.

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