

# Narrating Violence, Violating Narrative: Memory, Violence, and Transitionality in Zakes Mda's Ways of Dying

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## ABSTRACT

The return to democratic non-racialism in South Africa took a tortuous turn that witnessed several human violations. A funereal complex pervaded the entire social formation as partisan politics unleashed a harvest of deaths that transgressed racial boundaries at one moment, but also became more intense at intra-racial levels, especially the black-on-black violence. The mnemonic revivification of some of these violations has raised questions on how to delineate such transgressions without offending aesthetic ideals. In many of the narratives of transition into South Africa's liberal order, the narration of violence gets sensationalized, resulting in what Njabulo Ndebele perceives as the over-celebration of the spectacular. The implication is that the narration of violence oftentimes leads to a violence of representation. This essay explores Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* as a novel of South Africa's transition to democracy, and suggests through theorizing the concept of violation that the narration of violence could as well have led to a violation of the dynamics of narration.

**Keywords:** Memory, Violence and Representation; Post-Apartheid Imagination; Zakes Mda; South African literature, Transition; Ways of Dying.

## BIO-DATA

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Of all South African fiction writers after apartheid, Zanele Kizito Gatyeni Mda, known more popularly as Zakes Mda, has emerged as, perhaps, the most vibrant addition in the nation's republic of letters. Clearly, Mda is not a new name within the literary circle in Africa and beyond, having written and directed over thirty plays amongst his so many other creative engagements that include poetry writing and painting. As a novelist, however, Mda seriously engaged his fingers only after the demise of official apartheid, and it is salutary that he has come to join the most accomplished of South African novelists such as André Brink, Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee, etcetera, not only in terms of his prolific output, but more importantly in the nature of his narrative forms, thematic thrusts, and the apparent experimentalism that necessarily deflates the charge of the journalistic imperative in fiction by black South Africans.<sup>1</sup> So far, Mda has published eleven novels: *Ways of Dying* (1995), *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995), *The Heart of Redness* (2000), *Melville '67* (1997), *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002), *The Whale Caller* (2005), *Cion* (2007), *Black Diamond* (2009), *Rachel's Blue* (2013), *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe* (2013), and *Little Suns* (2015), among others. A fundamental thrust of Mda's novelistic oeuvre is his fascination with a developmental aesthetic that has engaged much of his career as academic and dramatist. To this end, Mda's interest in the mundane is eloquent in his sustained engagement with the pastoral, rather than the superficially urbane; an engagement with a narrative form that draws attention to the dilemma

<sup>1</sup> Lewis Nkosi's frustration with black South African writers' obsession with politics during the apartheid era led to his declamation of the general recourse by these writers to the reportorial narrative mode. Famously, he had proclaimed in his "Fiction by Black South Africans" which was originally published in 1966 in *Black Orpheus*: "What we do get from South Africa – and what we get more frequently — is the journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature". See *Still Beating the Drum*, p. 246.

of the rural communities, and that will challenge "the rural population" to the possibilities of engaging with its problems. If drama addresses these dilemmas by its peculiar function of 'conscientization' (1993: 1, 178), the novel should be embraced even more by its peculiar subtlety and detail, even at its most allegorical. Except for the adolescent narrative, *Melville '67* which resumes in the city of Johannesburg before the magical transposition of narrative space to the empire days of Timbuktu, all the major novels of Mda start from a pastoral environment to the urban, and quite often oscillate within two geographical spaces.

More importantly, however, Mda's narratives find immense relevance in his engagements with issues of historical and contemporary relevance, whether the issue so dominant is colonial or post-colonial. If Mda's narratives are stimulating in his experiment with style, the topicality of the themes are even more movingly so particularly in his provision of humour and detail in such issues of universal concern as memory, violence and alterity. These are issues so resonant in post-apartheid South African writings that the freshness with which they appear in Mda's fiction make the novelist an admirable contributor in the construction of new paradigms in the reading of post-apartheid fiction of English expression. In this essay, then, I endeavour to explore the contribution of Zakes Mda in this project of searching for new directions in post-apartheid writing. I shall attempt to do this through a theoretical and practical engagement with the major thrusts of the novel, especially in exploring the interplay between historical memory, violence, and narrativity. Memory is seen here as the implied interest as the novelist negotiates his narrative track in the nexus between violence and its representation.

## 2. THEORIZING VIOLENCE

It would not be out of place to note that the history of South Africa as it is in the rest of postcolonial Africa is one defined by series of violations. If the narratives inspired by apartheid legislation were statements on the psychologization and sustained dehumanization of the oppressed population of South Africa, there is need to understand that the narration of violence could be tricky as a careless presentation of incident could lead to a distortion of narrative decorum. This could lead to some form of glamorization of oddities so brilliantly articulated by Njabulo Ndebele in *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (1991/2006) as recourse to spectacle and the spectacular. The implication, then, is that the narration of violence could end up emerging as the violation of narrative and narrativity. Understanding the discourse of violence, then, could help in unearthing the historical and cultural personality of the African, whatever the region, just as a focalization on incident and the creation of suspense could enable our understanding of the presentation of character and the implications of the authorial inscriptions of the spectacular.

Violence, it is important to observe, is “distinct from power, force, or strength”<sup>2</sup>. In a simple idiom, violence connotes a lack of willingness; it projects an image of a victim and a perpetrator; it evokes memories of sadism, and sometimes, of sado-masochism. Violence entails a displacement; an injury; a physical or mental agony inflicted on a person, animal, or even the environment. Violence could be verbal in crude and insensitive usages of dehumanizing and humiliating idioms; violence could be cultural in terms of specific ethnic identities founded on the basis of retaining control over the weak and helpless; it manifests in sexual attitudes to men and women across cultures; to certain kinds of revered animals; to property inheritance, and even in

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*. Allen Lane: The Penguin Press, 1970.

nature's implicitly unpredictable relationship with humankind in forms of draught, earth tremors, and tidal waves. Violence is a defining principle and, certainly one of the architects of human creation. In African discourses of memory history, a recurrent decimal is the colonial violence against the colonized subjects: this form of violence often associated with Christian evangelism, and the consequent dismissal of African mannerisms is both political and cultural in its devastating effects on the colonial subjects.

It is this form of displacement arising from a calculated colonial domination that Hannah Arendt probably had in mind when she argues: “The very substance of violent action is ruled by the means-end category, whose chief characteristic, if applied to human affairs, has always been that the end is in danger of being overwhelmed by the means which it justifies and which are needed to reach it. Since the end of human action, as distinct from the end products of fabrication, can never be reliably predicted, the means used to achieve political goals are more often than not of greater relevance to the future world than the intended goals” (Arendt, 4).

Again, in fictional narratives, it has been suggested that the representations of violence sometimes end in a violence of representation. In what they describe as “the violence of the productive hypotheses”, Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse observe the narratological device implicit in the construction of protagonists whose sense of identity finds location in their ability to dominate other actants. The process of actualizing such private ambition eventuates in “the violence of the productive hypotheses”, or “the violence”, so that the representation of violence, in the end, becomes “the violence of representation” best defined in the context of “the suppression of difference” (Armstrong & Tennenhouse 1989, 8). If the reasoning of Armstrong and Tennenhouse is a little clouded, it finds support and

clarification in J.M. Coetzee's observation of the immense violence implicit in the representation of 'the native' and 'the boer' in early European travellers' narratives about Africa. In 'Idleness in South Africa', Coetzee (2007:13-37) illuminates the force and arrogance with which Western anthropologists, travellers and chroniclers vitiated the pride and identity of the indigenous peoples of Africa in their process of finding justifications for their later enslavement and colonization of the people. 'Idleness' becomes a recurrent idiom amongst other negative classificatory paradigms that point to the native as lazy, infantile, promiscuous, unhygienic, and cannibalistic. That the Hottentot (and later the Boer) would be perceived in these ways in the Western imaginary, Coetzee notes, points to the European's insensitivity and deluded sense of superiority. This is evident in their obsession with defining *difference* using euro-centric paradigms without sparing a thought for the sensibilities of their imagined *Other*.

In a way, South Africa provides fascinating paradigms in theorizing the nature, functions and typologies of violence. With a violence of representation that is as antiquarian as it is contemporaneous, the representation of violence in the historiography of the post-apartheid narratives resonates in a violence of representation that finds eloquence in systematic suppressions of actual experiences by governmental agencies on the one hand, and, on the other, the deliberate manipulation of truth by some activists so as to promote the hype of the victim. In this context, the conflict is inherent in the propaganda that manifests in self-justifying civil codes and the social immorality of the edicts. Writing in 'The Shooting at Uitenhage, South Africa, 1985: The Context and Interpretation of Violence', Robert J. Thornton (1990: 217-236) examines how the attempt to commemorate the Sharpville massacre in 1985 led to a unique form of 'violence' in the South African border town

of Uitenhage. The government's paranoia and trepidation over any form of mass revolt led to an immoral banning of funeral ceremonies. But the dead must be buried, and in an attempt to bury the dead, the masses must necessarily defy the law. The shooting that followed led to the killing of twenty-nine members of the public mourners by government's security agents. Thornton's recognition of "legitimate" and "illegitimate" forms of violence enables his theorizing of violence to seek the semantic turns of the concept beyond the explanatory: "Violence itself, raw and unthought, is meaningless. Whether or not violence is taken to be coercive, or the extent to which it can be seen as resistance, depends on the complex interplay of points of view, modes and metaphors of power and legitimation, and the narratives in which it is subsequently cast" (ibid: 218).

Read from the perspective of the ordinary citizenry as victims of state power, violence resonates as a tragic essence. Its representation in fictional narratives, however ornamented or aestheticized, constantly rekindles the victim's imagination as he traverses between memory and amnesia. In *The Culture of Violence* (1993), Francis Barker has drawn attention to the crisis of memory in early modern tragedy, and suggests that as observers, we are virtually handicapped, except to "witness in tragedy a compelling sense of the ways in which the problematics of forgetfulness and paranoid recall invest the figuration of power, and those in which remembrance and amnesia traverse the forms of resistance" (Barker, p. 212). Even while admitting that "historicism and its culturalist avatars and recensions have ever been symbiotes" (ibid, 211), Barker is strongly of the view that culture plays fundamental roles in social domination and considers "political power and social inequality" as "seductive strategies" for inflicting violence upon the people (ibid: x).

In South Africa, violence developed to the level of being considered 'a culture', at-

tracting immense humanistic scholarship as well as in imaginative writing. What Bhekizizwe Peterson (1994, pp. 35-54) once described as a 'predominance of coercion' now resonates in varying forms within civilian and regimented communities, and became the single most significant undoing of the transition era politics of the 1990s. So pervasive was violence during the period that it certainly constitutes a fundamental part of the nation's 'many memories'. Again, in fictional representations, we witness ramifications of violations in narratives as varying as Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*, André Brink's *Imaginings of Sand* and *Devil's Valley*, Mike Nicol's *The Ibis Tapestry*, Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun*, J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Jo-Anne Richard's *The Innocence of Roast Chicken*, and *Touching the Lighthouse*, Pamela Jooste's *Dance With A Poor Man's Daughter*, Imraan Coovadia's *Tales of the Metric System*, amongst others. In fact, in many of his post-apartheid writings Mda has explored various forms of violations to the extent that it is right to claim that he has made an important contribution in the construction of the 'emergent' paradigms in post-apartheid fiction of English expression. In *Ways of Dying* in particular, the transition era politics with its immeasurable degree of violence is mythologized in a manner that codifies the many violations as significant mnemonic sites in the narratives of the 'new' nation.

### 3. MDA'S 'MEMORY' AND THE MNEMICS OF TRANSITION ERA VIOLATIONS

Zakes Mda's development as writer and scholar is quite impressive, if not phenomenal. Known to be very versatile in the frontiers of the arts, Mda built his reputation as a dramatist, literary scholar, and painter. Following the collapse of official apartheid and the installation of non-racial democratic ideals in

the 'new' South Africa, Mda took his talents to experimenting in fictional narratives. The publications in 1995 of *Ways of Dying* and *She Plays with the Darkness* mark this significant transition in narrative medium, and he has since established himself as, perhaps, the single most important voice in the novelistic genre by black South African writers, having published about ten full-length novels, and an eleventh, the novella, *Melville '67*. While he has continued to write plays, his success in the genre of the novel has been acclaimed in scholarly circles. This ranges from Margaret Mervis's positive assessment of Mda's deployment of the magical narrative mode<sup>3</sup>, Grant Farred's repulsion at the thematic thrusts of his transitional narrative<sup>4</sup>, David Attwell's celebration of Mda's experimentalism<sup>5</sup>, and Bhekizizwe Peterson's recognition of Mda's retrieval of the historical memory of the amaXhosa<sup>6</sup> in the allegorical appeal for a developmental plan tied to the people's cultural sensibilities.

In *Ways of Dying*, a funereal complex pervades the 'new' order, and the existential oscillates between mortality and eternity. In a way, the interregnum of Nadine Gordimer's fame is evoked, but in a manner best captured by Michael Chapman: 'living and dying refuse(d) separate considerations' (Chapman, p. 411). Responses to Mda's *Ways of Dying* have been mixed. It moves from the optimally

<sup>3</sup> See Margaret Mervis, 'Fiction for Development: Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*'. *Current Writing* 10.1(1998): 39-56.

<sup>4</sup> Grant Farred, 'Mourning the Post-Apartheid State Already? The Poetics of Loss in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*'. *Modern Fiction Studies*, 46.1(2000): 183-206

<sup>5</sup> David Attwell. 'Apartheid and Post-Apartheid'. *Encyclopedia of African Literature*, 2003, pp. 25-27. More importantly, Attwell has in a recent study investigated Mda's *The Heart of Redness*, among others, within the framework of what he calls 'The Experimental Turn in Black South African Fiction'. See Attwell's discussion in *South Africa in the Global Imaginary*, 2004, pp. 154-179, and *Rewriting Modernity*, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Bhekizizwe Peterson. 'Mda, Zakes'. *Encyclopedia of African Literature*, 2003, pp. 323-4.

optimistic to a suspicion of an outright pessimism and post-apartheid decadence. While Margaret Mervis, for instance, reads *Ways of Dying* within the tenets of Mda's developmental aesthetic in which the central protagonist, Toloki, emerges as "[A] symbol of the transformative power of creativity" who "assists Noria in coming to terms with her grief over the 'necklacing' of her five-year old son, Vutha, by the young Tigers, and the burning down of her home by unknown members of her own community in a bout of senseless violence engendered by the power struggles which characterize the transition between the dying regime and a new dispensation" (Mervis, p. 46), Grant Farred is more readily repulsed by a pessimism triggered off by a seeming disenchantment with the new idiom of violence that marks the newly-liberated society. Mda's *Ways of Dying* for Farred, then, presents the predominant thematic thrust of post-apartheid fictional obsequies.

Mda admits in an interview that his novels are inspired by 'real life incidents'<sup>7</sup>, and if the spatio-temporal suggestiveness of the novel is to be relied upon, then it is fairly safe to conclude that the narrative echoes a significant moment in the annals of South Africa's transition to a liberal order. Constructed on the mnemonic tapestries of the traumatic, *Ways of Dying* exemplifies South Africa's transitional narrative at its most mimetic symbology. In this sense, there is no third global war; not

<sup>7</sup> For Mda, history must be evoked for proper reconciliation to take place. In what seems a consistent flash on the indescrapancies of the new black leadership, he reasons that "the willingness to be critical shows a deep love for country. Patriotism is not synonymous with political sycophancy. "My view of patriotism", he says, "is not love for politicians but love of a country". See 'The Free State Madonnas Prevail in Mda's Novel', an interview granted Maureen Isaacson. <http://www.theconnection.org/features/zakesarticle.asp>, and 'The Africana QA: Zakes Mda', an interview he granted Rebecca L. Weber. <http://archive.blackvoices.com/articles/qa/bk20040525zakesmda.asp>. Extracted from the Internet on February 28, 2005.

even the indiscretion and cruelty of the elements. But a fatality and bestiality that attend man's lowest ebb predominate the present, and life is rendered worthless in a recurrent cycle of human stupidity that supports its violent actions with a psychology of vengeance and counter-vengeance. Although the collapse of the apartheid state was already a foregone conclusion by 1990, the Nationalist Government did not relinquish power to majority rule until April 1994. Governmental affairs were still essentially being run by the minority white supremacists and, so, in practical terms, even where 'official apartheid' was already jettisoned, indications of the manifestations of its much-loathed policies were still prevalent through the provinces of the country. The much-trumpeted return to 'civil majority rule' was thwarted at every frontier by a team of ethnic militia fully armed and sponsored by the National Party government. The implication was a bitter rivalry for power and domination among the black communities, leading to brutal confrontations between the Mangosuthu Buthelezi-led Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), and the United Democratic Front (UDF), supported by the Youth Wing of the African National Congress (ANC).

There were many incidents of political violence all over the country during this period, and in KwaZulu-Natal alone, the number of killings arising from such political violence has been put at the loss of 20,000 lives<sup>8</sup>. With the so many killings that include the massacres at Shobashobane, the Richmond killings, the Nongoma assassinations among others, it is little wonder that the funereal complex that pervade *Ways of Dying* would, as the novelist confesses, be inspired by 'real life incidents'. Grant Farred has noted in what he describes as a "poetics of loss", the essential flaws of

<sup>8</sup> For a very concise discussion of the politically motivated violence during the transition to democratic non-racialism, see in particular Rupert Taylor (2002) 'Justice Denied: Political Violence in KwaZulu-Natal after 1994'. *Violence & Transition*, Series 6.

Mda's *Ways of Dying* as a transitional novel. Farred's contention derives from the novelist's fascination with the spectacular. As he puts it: "Preoccupied with the staging of spectacle(s), the novel evacuates itself of historical meaning" (Farred 2000: 203). While the interest in the fantastical, or perhaps, the spectacular might be the case, here, it is doubtful whether Farred's dismissal of the novel as 'flawed' is entirely true. Indeed, while the level of violence in the novel is very much reminiscent of apartheid violence, the new rhythm of violence is best understood in the context of the transition to democratic rule at a moment of siege and counter-siege, of power contestation that pervaded the South African socio-political imaginary between, and beyond racial constituencies and ethnic locations. It was a period in which, as Rupert Taylor writes, "a culture of impunity and a lust for revenge have outweighed the rule of law" (ibid 2002: 22).

The enormity of violence at the era of transition to general rule is the reason Gary Kynoch describes South Africa, first, as a "post-conflict society" that continues to "suffer horrific rates of violence" and, second, as one whose "endemic urban violence is not a post-conflict affair, but rather a continuation of generations of violence" (Kynoch 2004, 2, 3).<sup>9</sup> The aesthetic representations of violence in post-apartheid narratives seem to confirm Kynoch's and Taylor's studies since violence, it does seem, is one representational paradigm that resonates in fictional narratives across racial divide. For instance, Andre Brink's *Imaginings of Sand*, *Devil's Valley*, and *The Other Side of Silence* are all constructed on various ramifications of violation in spite of the novel-

<sup>9</sup> Of course, while focussing on the criminal dimensions of violence and conflict during the transition era, Gary Kynoch observes that in various contexts, "politicized rivalries overlapped with and were often secondary to gender, generational, territorial, ethnic and other identities". See Gary Kynoch, 'Crime, Conflict and Politics: An Historical Account of Township Violence in Transition Era South Africa'. WISER Lecture Series, 3<sup>rd</sup> May, 2004, p. 3.

ist's peculiar fascination with a historical "re-imagining" or "re-invention" as the novelist would call it. J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* derives its pungency in the representation of racial violence against the white Professor David Lurie, and his daughter, Lucy. In *The Ibis Tapestry*, Mike Nicol's postmodernism does not vitiate the spectacular violence of the narrative. Even Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun*, Jo-Anne Richard's *The Innocence of Roast Chicken* and *Touching the Lighthouse*, Pamela Jooste's *Dance with a Poor Man's Daughter* all present the subject of violation in varying degree. In the novels of Zakes Mda, violence manifests in some interesting modes that are, at once, both physical and metaphorical.

The mimetic dimension to the fatalistic vision evident in Mda's narrative, it seems, does not, however, suggest a 'mourning of the post-apartheid state' as Grant Farred has insinuated. For, indeed, the absurdity reflected in the mortality question in *Ways of Dying* is one informed by a "violence of transition", and certainly not by a post-apartheid angst and disenchantment. Derivable from the narrative is the recognition that the colossal nature of political violence and the associative trauma inflicted on ordinary people at the moment of transition to a non-racial order was alarming enough to constitute a site for national memory. It is this recognition that informs Mda's task to aesthetically "re-invent" and revivify the many ways of human extinction suggested by the violence of transition.

The narrative track is a fairly simple one: the stories revolve around the tragic incidents of death, dying, pain, sorrow, and the search for life and continuity. The futility of life and the ubiquity of death as man's daily companion combine to create an eccentric, idiosyncratic character, Toloki, a 'self-contented visionary' who takes to the noble engagement of serving the universe of humankind as a 'Professional Mourner'. If the violence of transition has created a situation of more deaths than births,



there is need to offer the dead the only worthy sense of dignity in form of proper mourning so as to ease their transition into the spirit-world of the ancestors. It is the story of Toloki and Noria - two fascinating friends through whom the novelist explores the human virtues of *compassion*, *selflessness*, and *resilience* in the midst of poverty and unprovoked hostility. As kids, Toloki and Noria had grown in the same pastoral vicinity, attended the same primary school, and had the familial consciousness provided by provincial life. In their separate ways, too, they suffered various forms of hostility and inhumanity from their fathers, and were later to leave for an unnamed city in search of their self-fulfilment, fame, and fortune. But this was not to be. Noria loses her first son, Vutha. After the loss of her second son, also curiously named Vutha, she is psychologically broken, and needed nothing short of a saviour to revive her from the immeasurable trauma. She retires into a 'private orphanage' called 'the Dumping Ground', where she helps bring up abandoned and orphaned children. Here, again, we "witness" Barker's notion of culture playing fundamental roles in social domination, or what he describes as "political power and social inequality" as "seductive strategies" for inflicting violence upon the people (Barker, *ibid.* x). Noria's much-awaited "salvation" was to arrive in that delicate moment of her life in form of her old school friend and 'home boy', Toloki. Toloki, on the other hand, becomes the founder of what he calls 'the noble Profession of Mourning'. The two were to be united by fate several years later during the burial of Noria's second son, Vutha the second. They soon take to each other, and decide to live together, and teach each other 'how to live' in a city best defined by its too many recorded deaths.

In advancing this simple narrative plot, however, Zakes Mda cautiously ventures into an experimental aesthetic, and it soon reveals that although we are presented a *topography*

and a *historical moment*, yet there is no specific identifiable location beyond a *coastal territory*, and within a *turbulent December month*. While Margaret Mervis would simply point to Cape Town as the geographical location of the incidents, this is not entirely suggested by the narrative. In fact, the only locatable territory is the coastal space, which could as well suggest any of the coastal sites of Cape Town, Durban, or even Port Elizabeth. This sense of place is confirmed by the resonance of coastal images: we are aware, for instance, that Toloki is "armed with a thick blanket that he keeps in his shopping trolley" during winter "when the icy winds blow from the ocean" (*Ways*, p. 11); at "the quayside", too, "he has watched *the cargo ships* clumsily disembark *sailors* into the arms of eager prostitutes" (*Ways*, p. 44); a place where *the salty winds* have ravaged his face" (*Ways*, p.45), and where he has made "connections with *dockworkers*" (*Ways*, p.50). Within this marine space, Toloki "goes to the *beach*", and, given his personal antics and codes of dressing, or non-dressing, "The *dockworkers*, the *sailors*, and their prostitutes think that he has finally snapped" (*Ways*, p. 91). He takes a rest at "the bus shelter after a long walk all the way from *the docklands*" (*Ways*, p. 109). These marine images are certainly not without foundation: For, indeed, long before his arrival at the city, he had heard that most people work as labourers at the *harbour*, and "on fishing trawlers", "men told stories of sea adventures", an experience that inspired him. He arrives in the city and, on discovering "how he could get to *the ships*", he finally takes "part-time jobs *loading ships*" (*Ways*, p. 112).

Beyond marine images that point to the coastal spaces of the un-locatable city, Mda attempts a further cautious placing of a temporal mapping, so that Grant Farred's identification of the narrative's temporal location in the specific historicisms of "post-apartheid" and future South Africa appears rather too meticu-

lous. While the narrative is confidently prognostic of a “post-apartheid” freedom, the temporal space is evidently a transitional moment that looks forward for a liberated civil order. It is no surprise, then, that women are perceived “singing” in ways that confirm their political consciousness: “*Their song is about the freedom that is surely coming tomorrow. They also sing about the enemy that will be defeated, and about the tribal chief who will die like a dog one day*” (*Ways*, p. 159). It is at this moment, too, that the youthful ‘Young Tigers’, a militant group so passionate about their emancipation from minority rule would embark on the mission of psychologizing and educating mere infants on “why the tribal chief was doing such dirty things to the people, and how the government had been forced to un-ban the political movement of the people and to negotiate with its leaders” (*Ways*, p. 170). The education of the young, it needs be stressed, here, was necessitated by what many had seen as unnecessary massacres arising from the conspiracy of the reigning government and the constituency of the unnamed “tribal chief”. The most recent incident in the narrative is the killing of 52 innocent citizens perceived as supporters of the rival, more nationally attuned political movement. Here, one observes, violence “harbours within itself an additional element of arbitrariness” (Arendt 4)<sup>10</sup>. In a way, *Ways of Dying*, as suggested in this temporal space, reads like a *roman à clef*, a fictional narrative that easily suggests living characters and incidents in the perceptual world.<sup>11</sup> A betrayal of this aesthetic

<sup>10</sup> Arendt (1970: p. 51) suggests that Governments often use violence in maintaining power. To this end, therefore, violence becomes a medium. As she puts it, “violence is by nature instrumental; like all means, it always stands in need of guidance and justification through the end it pursues”

<sup>11</sup> Generally defined as ‘a novel with a key’, this narrative form “can be ‘unlocked’ given the right ‘key’; in other words, one which refers to real people, places, or events in disguised form so that once one realizes what the work is about the hidden references all become apparent”. See Jeremy Hawthorn, *Studying the Novel: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. 1993, pp. 27-37.

transparency, incidentally, is not perceived in the dramatized pains and anguish of the ‘Professional Mourner’, since there are too many deaths, and too little mourners.

And while nowhere in the narrative do we encounter a ‘Nelson Mandela’, a ‘Mangosuthu Buthe’, an ‘F. W. de Klerk’, or the ‘National Party’, it is in the temporal space of the transitional moment with its many negotiations, betrayals, violations and counter-violence that the ‘factionality’ of the novel assumes its identity as an ‘emergent’ narrative. The many ways of dying indicate the many levels of anguish: children are orphaned, just as parents are rendered childless. This sense of aesthetic transparency is revealing, as we observe that the National Party was still in power. The implication is that we may – just may – be within a ‘post-apartheid’ space, but not a democratic South Africa. The minority white supremacists are still holding on to political power. The narrator presents a familiar picture at the burial of the 52 murdered citizens:

*The funeral was the biggest that had ever been seen in those parts. The president of the political movement was there in person, together with the rest of his national executive. He, the consummate statesman as always, made a conciliatory speech, in which he called upon the people to lay down their arms and work towards building a new future of peace and freedom. He called those who had died martyrs whose blood would, in the standard metaphor of all those who had fallen in the liberation struggle, water the tree of freedom. He called upon the government to stop its double agenda of negotiating for a new order with the leaders of the political movement, while destabilizing the communities by killing their residents, and by assassinating political leaders. He further called upon the tribal chief to stop his gory activi-*

*ties, and to walk the democratic path*  
(*Ways*, p. 171).

The narrators equally inform the reader of the dogged determination of the citizenry and residents of the settlement to rebuild their shacks after the burial: "The people were determined to show the tribal chief, and the dirty tricks department of the government, that they would not be destroyed. *Their will to survive, and to live to see the freedom that was surely coming soon*, was too strong to be destroyed by any massacre" (*Ways*, p. 172; my emphasis). This confirmation of the temporal space of the transitional moment to democratic rule in recent South African history presents Mda's narrative as a rationalized aesthetic reconstruction of transition era violence.

If 'death' and 'dying' constitute the defining criteria of South Africa's transition to democratic non-racialism, the success of its adaptation into fictional narrative does not reside in the narrative accuracy of its representation. In this way, Grant Farred's dismissal of *Ways of Dying* as a fundamentally flawed narrative finds support not necessarily in his reading of the novel as a 'mourning of the post-apartheid state'. In fact, while the narrative is basically of the post-apartheid category, its limitation is more akin to the spectacular representation of transition era violence, and its seeming flamboyant celebration of social buffoonery. While a characterological dissection of the narrative's actants might present cause for our collective sympathy for the nobility of the mundane in terms of their innate compassion and resilience, the reduction of human existence to an inherently senseless violent vocation vitiates the promise of hope that the narrative espouses. Mda's specific fascination with exploring modes of human extinction does not reckon with the implicit absurdity of its concomitance. Thus, whether it is in his relativization of the manner of execution – 'necklacing' and barbaric abandon-

ment – of Noria's two sons, Vutha 1 & 2; the frustration of Jwara and the domestic violence that ends in his beating up his wife; the verbal violence of Noria's mother, 'That Mountain Woman'; the racial violence seen in the deliberate and neurotic killing of black labourers at the Flour Mill or the many politically-motivated killings associated with ethnic rivalries and governmental intrigues, Mda's representation of transition era violence rests on the appallingly spectacular. Here, once more, is one of the many passages of Mda's conveyance of the massacre of 52 residents of the settlement:

*One night, when the settlement was deep in sleep, Battalion 77, supported by migrants from a near-by hostel, invaded. They attacked at random, burning the shacks. When the residents ran out, sometimes naked, the hostel inmates, uttering their famous war-cry, chopped them down with their pangas and stabbed them with their spears. The soldiers of Battalion 77 opened fire. They entered some shacks, and raped the women. They cut the men down after forcing them to watch their wives and daughters being raped. In one shack, a woman who was nine months pregnant was stabbed with a spear. As she lay there dying, she went into labour. Only the head of the baby had appeared, when it was hacked off with a panga by yet another warrior* (*Ways*, p. 170).

Here, once more, we encounter what was described earlier as "the violence of the productive hypotheses" (Armstrong & Tennenhouse p. 8). The everywhere-ness of the multiple narrator voice only contributes to the quest for a representational accuracy, so that the task of 'remembering' the violence of transition as a collective traumatic experience is eased by a sense of physical presence and the possibility of a witness. While the place of alterity in the

instance of a transition to democratic governance is in itself of a progressive global interest, it constitutes a problematic that, in the case of South Africa's unique historical experiences, paved way for all kinds of scheming, political manipulation and struggles for ethnic supremacy. The fatalism that defines South Africa's moment of transition, therefore, was enough to inspire an aesthetic adventure into modes of human extinction. Mda's choice of society's underdogs as the experiential summation of the memorable in transition era violations, however, presents a different set of challenges. Toloki's sojourn to an unnamed South African coastal city is to reveal the many shades of a funereal complex that pervade Mda's transitional narrative. The choice of the coastal city provides a sense of place, which also resonates in his later novels, *The Heart of Redness* (2000) and *The Whale Caller* (2005). But while we are not certain whether the location is Cape Town, Durban, or Port Elizabeth, we are re-assured by the evocative images that rekindle the aura of the sea, just as we are constantly confronted with the irritable loquacity and self-glorifications of the 'Nurses' who preside over the funeral orations.

But if *Ways of Dying* signals Mda's embrace of Njabulo Ndebele's appeal for an aesthetic consideration of the mundane, then the request for "a rediscovery of the ordinary" (Ndebele, 2006[1991]) equally signals a commitment to a rather catastrophic proposition. While the human essences of compassion, perceptiveness, and optimism, may be worthy of cultivation, its reduction to a representational aporia in Toloki, the eccentric dreamer of an absurd "noble profession of mourning", vitiates the virtues of the more practical challenges of man's quotidian existence in terms of the individual's life fulfilment, as well as the communal notions and anticipations of such accomplishment. Family life, for instance, is sacrificed at the altar of social buffoonery, and the man that flaunts his spiritual discipline and

recourse to celibacy is suddenly locked up in suppressed desire for a coital expression – a natural experience made even more embarrassing, even if understandably so, in Toloki's nightly ejaculations and wet dreams. It is sad enough that his childhood was not one of summer, given his many sordid memories of village life; it is even more so that his late father, Jwara, was all but a parent. But in spite of his resentment of his father's psychological distance, Toloki does not build a family of his own to show a superior social personality and progression from his father's universe. In a way, his father dies a sad family man, but Toloki never succeeds in building one at all.<sup>12</sup>

The novelist's salvational proviso for the Tolokis and Norias of the new generation resides in the spiritual openness and readiness to receive and adopt new modes of perception and ideals. In the context of his two central characters, it is dependent on their capacity to adjust to a positive match into the future. For Toloki, we find, is "willing to learn new ways of living", just as "Noria herself was quite willing to learn how to walk in the garden with him, to the extent that she is now a garden enthusiast in her own right" (*Ways*, p. 179). Toloki's humanity is finally resuscitated by Noria: "And Toloki, don't be ashamed to have dreams about me. It is not dirty to have dreams. It is beautiful. It shows that you are human. We are both human" (*Ways*, p.188). She provides for Toloki the same inspiration she gave his father several years earlier. Their friendship is defined by a creative principle aptly captured by Shadrack as 'creative partnership'.

Mda's projections of mundane representative figures as his protagonists seem, however, to present emptiness as virtue. The "noble

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<sup>12</sup> This observation is true, at least, till the end of the novel. If Mda follows up this narrative to show 'the end' of his protagonists, it should be seen in that light simply as continuity and a completion at the same time. In other words, the narrative of Toloki calls for a more expansive imaginative horizon.

profession of mourning” to which Toloki so much clings upon is an aberration as socially unacceptable as the experience of the transition’s brutality that inspires it. While Mda’s artistic intentionality might well be the desire to explore and project the mortality question, “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” (*Ways*, p. 89), as authorially suggested in the protagonist’s dialogue, identification with these characters does not allow for any ambitious socio-economic aspiration. Toloki’s eccentricity alienates him from his roots, and his resistance to his father’s craft and economic drive tells on his personal failures. Born in an African culture where the home-front holds a peculiar primacy, Toloki’s failure is not only seen in his inability to build a home, but also in his inability to hold on to his late father’s accomplishments, and to further extend the household.<sup>13</sup> At a very old age, his mother moves in with Xesibe, while his father’s compound dilapidates. Nefolovhodwe’s visit to late Jwara’s homestead signals this sense of Toloki’s alienation and ‘loafingness’. In his late father’s compound, “all the houses were in ruins, as no one had lived there for years. Grass and shrubs had grown all over, and it was impossible to tell that a proud homestead had stood there once upon a time” (*Ways*, p. 190).

To sum up this segment of our discussion, it could be reasoned that while Nefolovhodwe’s arrogance and insensitivity may appear harsh, the cultural position of Toloki as an only son – and even in situations where there are several children – as first son, his absconding from the village as a form of resistance had some odd implications. Such detach-

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<sup>13</sup> Even if most of Jwara’s creative genius rested on his superlative construction of ‘worthless iron monsters’ – the figurines – instead of ‘making things that will support (his) family’ (p. 195), Toloki’s resistance to his father’s insensitivity would have made a difference had he turned such failures to his own advantage.

ment and passivity pave way for ‘failure’. His austere choice to be a monk of the new order is a professional calling alien to his cultural sensibility, and further smacks of a cowardly path of escape from the challenges of life. If ‘professional mourning’ is a symbol of life’s violence, then the violence of transition is not entirely unharmed by the violence of representation. For, in the final analysis, a characterological dissection of Toloki does not provide much for emulation for the impressionable reader eager for socio-economic and psychological advancement. To this end, embracing ‘the ordinary’ is tantamount to embarking on a trip to no destination.

#### 4. MDA’S PARADIGMS OF READING ‘THE NEW’: CONCLUSION

We have attempted, so far, to establish the immense contributions of Zakes Mda in the construction of the new paradigms in post-apartheid South African fiction of English expression. These range from his unique interest in the retrieval of the historical and cultural memories of the many peoples of South Africa to the aesthetic responsiveness to the dilemmas of the ‘new’ nation since the moment of transition and after. To these ends, Mda has applied himself to the re-invention of a past that has stubbornly refused to elapse, and a present that insists on taking sustenance from that past. In Mda’s South Africa, the past is anything but a ‘foreign country’, as it consistently colonizes the socio-historical and political lives of individuals and the peoples. It is in this respect that memory remains, perhaps, the most functional agency in the apprehension of that historical and cultural pasts. It is the business of aesthetic recollections that a past defined principally by its human violations and dubious constructions of ‘difference’ would ‘emerge’ as the collective and private statements of the many constituencies of the nation. Mda has eloquently articulated

these many violations and, more importantly, has drawn attention to the uniting elements that define the cohesive identity of many indigenous ethnic communities of South Africa before the 'double colonialism' – British and 'Boer' colonisations – that followed the incursion of European adventurers. The externalisation of white racism that found expression in the notorious apartheid policies and their implementation presents itself as a profound site of South Africa's collective commemorations.

But Mda is not in any way a one-track writer. The sheer versatility that he has demonstrated across genres of arts and the humanities indicates his commitment to a developmental aesthetic, which had preoccupied him as a cultural theorist and scholar. His adventure into the novelistic form is a decision that has added an intensity of passion to his quest for a totalising retrieval and preservation of African memories in the detailed cultural medium of literature. That he embarks on personal investigation and research of the many incidents of the past attests to this commitment for a trip into a future defined by a consciousness of the past. In the final analysis, Mda's narratives are as personal as they are collective; as national as they are continental; and, as ethnically inspired as they are globally relevant in the contemporary interest in the discourse of the postcolony. Whether it is *Ways of Dying*, *She Plays with the Darkness*, *Melville '67*, *The Heart of Redness*, *The Madonna of Excelsior*, *The Whale Caller*, *Cion*, *Black Diamond*, *Rachel's Blue*, *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe* or even *Little Suns*, Mda has made a valuable contribution in the growth and development of modern African literature in particular, and in the construction of new modes of perceiving South African fiction of English expression after apartheid. Pierre Nora (1989), in 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire', captures the thrust of our discourse in his dissection of the modern understanding of the psychology of remembering:

*The transformation of memory implies a decisive shift from the historical to the psychological, from the social to the individual, from the objective message to its subjective reception, from repetition to remembrance. The total psychologization of contemporary memory entails a completely new economy of the identity of the self, the mechanics of memory, and the relevance of the past* (Nora, p. 15).

The preceding analysis has explored Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*. In doing so, I have tried to look at the novel through the thrusts of recollection, representation of violation and the violation of representation. The theoretical procedure employed in the process is as post-colonial in its engagement as the analytical process is devoted to illuminating the novel within the context of the post-apartheid cultural imaginary. Clearly, the representation of violence in *Ways of Dying* is marred by a violence of representation. In the final analysis, however, the mnemonics of political transition converge with those of the nation's historical memories, and Mda's narrative of violation emerges as a significant statement of socio-historical commemoration for the vulnerable South Africa's post-apartheid, postcolonial subjects.

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