Ways of Dying
The depiction of Life and Death in Zakes Mda’s novel

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Abstract

This bachelor's essay focuses on the depictions of life and death in the novel *Ways of Dying* by Zakes Mda. It claims that the novel is mainly focusing on a concept of life although it is set in a time in South Africa which is filled with death. The theory being used in the essay is mainly the postcolonial theory by Elleke Boehmer regarding terror since her definitions of terror corresponds very well to what is written in the novel. To add to this postcolonial theorist the essay has a feature of the structuralist binaries to enhance the focus upon the dichotomies of Life and Death. The essay discusses the situation of violence in transitional South Africa as described by the novel and focuses mainly on violence and politics to investigate the depictions of death. The representations of life in the novel are mainly shown through the magical realism, the story telling and the funerals which are visited by the main character Toloki. The essay explains that the novel is mainly focused on the binary opposite of life because of among other things the ending and the depictions of the funerals.
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1. Introduction

1.1 Introducing the novel

One of the main points which Zakes Mda makes in his novel *Ways of Dying* is that even though one lives in a country as divided as South Africa was during the transitional period where the novel is set, there are many ways of living and many ways for a person to find his own happiness. As the title of the essay suggests the main themes in the novel are life and death and because of that this essay will focus mainly on the binary opposites of life and death and how they are depicted in the novel. Toloki is together with Noria the main protagonist in the novel and it takes place in the days between Christmas and New Year’s Eve in post-apartheid South Africa. The plot is centered around these two characters who both originate from the same unnamed small village a long distance from a large violent, also unidentified, city in South Africa. The plot in the novel is unraveled through the actions and memories of Toloki and Noria and through their eyes a positive image of the society is conveyed. Toloki, a former boerewors salesman, has invented a profession which he calls a “Professional Mourner” to make a living. He attends funerals and mourns for the dead where he receives an amount of money according to what the family of the deceased can afford and although comparing his services to that of a lawyer or a doctor having different fees for different services and curing different illnesses (17). In this time of struggle Toloki is more keen to look towards monks in the East (as described by Toloki himself) in comparing his profession as a professional mourner with another, “He sees himself in the dazzling light of the aghori sadhu, held in the same awesome veneration that the devout Hindus show the votaries” (15). Furthermore Toloki believes that his weird diet of green onions and Swiss cake “gives him an aura of austerity that he associates with monks of eastern religions” (15). And because of Toloki’s profession and his way of looking upon himself as an austere man with
more qualities of a monk instead of a man, the funerals and what happens at the funerals all become central to what happens in the novel and in the progression of the characters. He comes across the path of Noria, a former prostitute, and a woman who seem to have some magical features. Her laughter is infectious and her singing enables creation in men. Noria, a character which has suffered great loss during her lifetime supplies Toloki with a way back to society from his self-chosen exile.

Set in this troubling time, shortly after the abolishment of the apartheid regime, the struggle for survival in the townships and settlements together with the constant violence is making for a harsh living for the protagonists. It is because of this setting during the transitional period in South Africa, where the nation is trying to find its own ways of dealing with the troubles that have occurred during the apartheid regime, problems such as "ethnicity", segregation, poverty, political issues and gender appear for Toloki and Noria. The reason why the word "ethnicity" is put in quotation marks will be investigated further in the analysis since the term has a very complex background in South Africa but mainly because it has some ambiguous meaning throughout the novel. Some of these problems have emerged since the apartheid regime made up schemes to classify the citizens into different groups since apartheid was based on the idea of "race". Although those schemes have now been broken, the fall of apartheid and its hierarchies has given different ethnic groups in South Africa justifications for reclaiming borders of their homelands. Patricia Davison describes the apartheid system and continues to describe the present South Africa,

In post-apartheid South Africa this has changed [the classification schemes and perpetuating racial stereotypes] and cultural diversity has been embraced within the symbolic construct of nation building. In practice, however, accommodating ethnic difference without resorting to essentialist notions of race and culture remains a challenge. (151)
Even though the country now embraces cultural diversity, achieving this in practice is far from complete as Davison declares. The political theme in the novel is marginalized which has effects on the novel as Richard Samin argues “The ambivalence which the reversal of focus between the political and the ordinary and the contradictions of the main characters generate is reinforced by the theme of death” (193). Combining Samin’s ideas on marginalizing politics with Jan Gorak’s analysis of Mda’s plays, which can be applicable on his first novel Ways of Dying as well, gives the essay a deeper analysis on life. Gorak argues that the political theme is marginalized in Mda’s plays and that it is political movements cannot prosper in them, “Mda's rotting fetuses, slime, and vomit give no purchase, no direction for political commitment to grow.” (485).

Within the novel Mda gives hints on different events which take place during the time period of the novel but never names them with their real name or what actually happened, an interpretation of these persons and different events will be given in the analysis section, 2.2, of the essay. The constant themes throughout the novel are the dichotomies life and death, making one’s living in a post-apartheid society and how two persons can find love and make a life among all of the chaos which is constantly present in the novel.

1.2 Thesis claim, research questions and structure

In the novel Ways of Dying by Zakes Mda the author uses the funerals visited by the main character Toloki as a celebration of life in contrast to the racial tensions between different ethnic groups in post-apartheid society. The thesis claim is thereby connected with the violence in transitional South Africa mainly through the question of life and death. My intention is to use my research questions “How does the violence in Ways of Dying affect the depicted societies in the settlements?”, “How do the different political views of the characters Toloki and Noria affect their view on life and death, where life in the novel is represented by story-telling and magical realism and death by terror?” and “How is life represented at the
funerals in *Ways of Dying*. These research questions will all highlight different aspects of life and death in the novel and my aim is to clarify how Zakes Mda is using this death ridden society as a contrast to emphasize and focus on life in the novel. The aim is also to highlight the question of “ethnic violence” in the novel and to problematize mainly the depiction of violence between different classes and between different ethnicities. Thereby showing how while in a country which is suffering from vast amount of violence the citizens can find a way to celebrate and live their life.

The research questions and my thesis statement are both strongly connected to the binary opposites of life and death and what is interesting about these dichotomies is that they are not as clear as one might think. At first glance they may seem very clear since if you are dead, you cannot be alive and vice versa. But giving it some deeper thought, life and death is something that we all deal with on a daily basis, to some extent. A general idea which I have and which the novel suggests is that a fear of death influences your life. Having death as the only constant in society would surely numb one against the fate that all human beings share. The main character of the novel, Toloki contemplates on the connection between life and death, “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?” (98).

The life in the novel is mostly represented by the features of magical realism together with the story-telling which Mda uses, it is thereby creating a contrast to the violence and the death and dying in the novel. The magical realism in the novel is an artistic expression by the characters and a representation of life and living in the novel which is put into contrast to the violence and the death in the society. It is because of this additional feature to the novel that in the end makes the novel a story about life and living. The constant presence of death in the novel is closely related to my first research question, “How does the violence in *Ways of Dying* affect the depicted societies in the settlements?” and since the characters live in post-
apartheid South Africa where violence is very common, a natural death is an abnormality as described by a Nurse in the novel.

The son had died a normal death. Perhaps I should say an abnormal death, because he died peacefully of natural illness in his sleep. Normal deaths are those deaths that we have become accustomed to, deaths that happen every day. They are deaths of the gun, and the knife, and torture and gore. We don’t normally see people who die of illness or of old age. (Mda 157)

Living in a society where violence has become an everyday occurrence which the characters are forced to accept to the extent of a natural death being seen as an abnormality is extreme and the focus of the research question mainly on the individual depicted in the novel and how the violence affects the life of the individuals on an everyday basis. The constant violence in the novel affects not only the first research question but all three of them since Toloki’s and Noria’s political views are influenced by their society, which is colored by death, and the funerals would not be happening as frequent as they do in the novel without having death as a constant.

1.3 Theoretical Framework and Definitions

The definition of the word terror which I will be using in the essay is the same one as the one provided by the post-colonialist Elleke Boehmer where she uses some terms from Achille Mbembe, “Terror according to this logic can be defined in terms taken from Achille Mbembe’s exposition of the necropolitical, as a politics exercised through the imposition of death and near-death” (145). Mbembe is in this term influenced by Frantz Fanon’s ideas on colonial violence and that the necropolitical state will hold their citizens continually in a close relation to death. A definition which ties the terror exerted in the novel very close to my thesis claim and the aim for this essay. Because of this definition which Boehmer provides, the issue of terror is very relevant to the novel. The violence in the novel is mainly exercised by
politicians and when it is not used by politicians, the violence has political reasons such as a quest to gain power. Boehmer continues in her article “Postcolonial Writing and Terror” to argue that postcolonialism “correlates with struggle, subversion, the nation, the region, resistance to the global status quo” (143). This reasoning leads her to the conclusion that theories and meanings of terror are closer related to postcolonialism than those of globalization. The war on terror which the Western world is waging is an unwinnable war and it has made the term, terror, to an empty term. Fighting against an enemy which no one knows where they are and when they will strike, where they originate from has made the states fighting this war become convinced that terror is everywhere and thereby being more terroristic themselves, this leading to the point where the term has lost its meaning. The theories concerning terror which Boehmer presents correlates with the novel on some key points, the state which exercises power and expose their citizens to violence through Battalion 77 to reinforce their reign and the anti-government tribal chief who uses terror as a resort to gain power.

As the novel is set in post-apartheid South Africa and written by a black author it seems most viable to focus mainly on post-colonial theory since “Theories of style and genre, assumptions about the universal features of language, epistemologies and value systems are radically questioned by the practices of post-colonial writing” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 11). Mda has some very unusual features in his storytelling which I have not come across previously when reading traditional literature, such as western classics being taught in the Swedish educational system. This inability to see the changes in literature in a postcolonial country together with as Barnard writes “the new urban circumstances to which Mda responds” (281-282) might be why critics of the novel have been having problems with classifying the work into on off the general genres (282) (although she writes “for the sake of the argument, we might consider it as a unique South African black Kunstlerroman””) (282).
Related to this difficulty I have chosen to add a small feature of the structuralist binaries of life and death to my main post-colonial approach. The consequence of studying the dichotomies and using this structuralist feature is that it will be more focus on the binaries themselves together with Boehmer’s postcolonial theory on terror which supplies a more in-depth study of the context. Since one of my focuses in the study of the essay is to investigate Mda’s depictions of violence and another are the Nurse’s orations at the funerals, the structuralist approach with the binary opposites of life and death will be in focus.

By using Boehmer’s question “Do the shaping forces of narrative and poetry provide an alternative response to situations of terror?” (142) on Zakes Mda’s novel the aim is to highlight the life and living in the novel in contrast to death and terror. Since I claim that Mda is highlighting life in the novel while terror and death is constantly present the answer to her question should be interesting.

**Life** can be categorized as that which prospers although it deals with death. If one of the characters in the novel would constantly contemplate when he/she is going to die or if who will take his/her life the character would have nothing else to do than worry. Thereby the life of that character would be altered to the extent that the character would miss out on large parts of his/her life and thereby that character would not be living its life. But if the character is constantly tormented and afflicted with death and still manages to live their life and strive to make the most of it this will be analyzed as a character which is living its life. As Noria does in the novel, although she suffers the death of her child twice and she suffers the death of her mother she manages to live her life and still prosper at the end of the novel. Life in this essay is strongly connected to living as in living one’s life to the fullest and not the physical definition that the person is breathing and simply having a heartbeat. **Death** is defined as the opposite of living, dying. But not just the physical meaning of dying but as one character can
suffer a slow death by dying inside when afflicted with much pain and suffering and when one ceases to live their life.

To define magical realism I was inspired by the words of Zakes Mda himself while he is describing his own work.

I draw from the same sources as the creators of magical realism hence the "magic." I say "magic" in quotes, you see, because the world from which my fiction draws hasn't got that line of demarcation between the supernatural on one hand and what you would call objective reality on the other hand. The two merge and live side by side. Those who live in that world can't separate the two. In fact, that's how they live their lives. What in the Western world you consider as magic is part of their day-to-day lives, you see, and it is part of their real world. It is part of their realism. (Kachuba)

Mda is clearly not intentionally trying to put himself into a genre but the words which he used to describe his works are quite important. The word supernatural and reality are two words that he used to define magical realism and it is my definition as well. **Magical realism** is the merging of the supernatural and the reality.

2 Analysis

2.1 "Ethnic" Violence

The novel takes place during the transitional period of South Africa, the period that took place after the fall of the apartheid regime and the inauguration of the ANC (African National Congress) party. The transition from the apartheid regime to the new democratic country with a new regime was by no means an easy one. Peter Bouckaert has written an article regarding the transitional period and mentions how the political violence sweep across the country.
the process of negotiations soon came to take second stage to the rising tide of violence, as the rivalry between the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) erupted into an all-out war in KwaZulu Natal and the townships surrounding Johannesburg. The ANC accused the apartheid government of complicity in fomenting the violence from the very beginning, and history would later show that elements within the apartheid government had indeed played a central role in the spiral of violence by training Inkatha "hit-squads" and engaging in a dirty tricks campaign aimed at destabilizing and discrediting the ANC. (246)

Bouckaert writes about the troubles that happened in transitional South Africa which is also highlighted in Nokuthula Mazibuko’s essay “Love and Wayward Women in Ways of Dying”, “The novel spans apartheid South Africa from the late 1960s to the transition to democracy in the early 1990s and reflects the surge of violence and confusion that happened just before the 1994 elections.” (115) and the setting in this disorderly time for the nation is crucial to the novel.

South Africa, the Rainbow Nation, is a diverse country, with many different groups, referring to class and ethnicity mainly, which had a system of defining “ethnicity” which put all the people into different groups that defined their lives. The novel suggests that these different groups do not agree with each other at all times and it gives several examples where the violence is depicted as “ethnic” and the crudest example of what they in the novel might define as “ethnic violence” is when Vutha the Second is given a burning necklace after he left his mother (189-91). The “ethnic violence” in the novel which culminates with the burning necklace is essential to the novel since without the violence it could just as well be set anywhere in the world and the problematic situation in South Africa would not be in focus as it is. What in the novel is seen as “ethnic violence” is something that I would rather define as “political violence”, because he who is described as the tribal chief in the novel, Mangosutho
Buthelezi, and his warriors are using ethnicity as an excuse to gain more power. Buthelezi is just as the village and the city in the novel, unnamed. By that reasoning the violence is mainly political. The Young Tigers, the so called protectors of their settlement, are punishing Vutha the Second for being a “sell-out” (189), a snitch for the hostel dwellers and Vutha is be their reasoning working against their own political agenda.

The novel revolves around the characters and their actions, reactions and failing to act when violence fills their lives. In this sense the main characters are very different from each other, Toloki on the one hand being accustomed to death and profiteering from it. Noria on the other hand, who already has lost one son, sets off in a rampage when she finds out of the death of Vutha the Second (190). This comparison may be unjust since Noria lost her child and Toloki is attending the funerals of strangers and Toloki thereby has no emotional connection to the deceased. Another example of Toloki’s reactions toward death is when he finds out his father has died (111) and he once again is not showing any emotions. But since the death of Jwara is not connected to the violence in any sense I will not investigate this further. This example shows how different the protagonists are and how their attitude towards death affects their actions. Noria’s reaction in contrast to Toloki’s reaction is a very large hint to their differences in attitude towards death. Connecting this to the general society depicted in the novel it is clear that Toloki, who does not try and change things prospers in his own way because he accepts things as they are. While Noria, a woman who struggles to improve the community and tries to make life better, constantly is beset with new troubles it is clearly a suggestion from the novel. If you fight the establishment you will suffer, if you accept it there will be possibilities for prosperity.

There are several instances in the novel where violence is depicted as ethnic violence, after Vutha the Second’s death Noria’s shack is petrol bombed as an example. Shadrack, the cab driver is another example. He has lost his drivers and his son and he himself
was kidnapped and he says about the murder of his son; "what is worse is that I am of the same ethnic group as those hostel dwellers. The tribal chief [Mangosutho Buthelezi] who has formed them [zulu "warriors"] into armies that harass innocent residents merely use ethnicity as an excuse for his own hunger for power." (55). This observation made by Shadrack, is one of few features in the novel which questions if the violence is truly "ethnic violence". If Shadrack's argument is correct, that it is an excuse to gain more power, the violence would not be connected to ethnicity but politics. But since ethnicity is obviously very important to Shadrack, he does not vent his thoughts any further, but the thought of the fact that the chief Mangosutho Buthelezi is taking advantage of the question of ethnicity for his own power struggle seem to be very appalling to him. The importance of ethnicity to Shadrack is once again shown by his own words when he is assaulted by three police officers. "I want you to know what they did to me. They were like crazed people. They punched me. They dragged me out of my kombi and kicked me. I tried to scream but they throttled me. Then they loaded me like a sack of potatoes into the police van." (141) Shadrack is telling Noria and Toloki of what the white afrikaners had done to him and he explains how they look and that they were wearing right wing symbols. In a society highly afflicted by violence a random kidnapping and battering would not be rare, but Shadrack instead focuses on the fact that the kidnappers were white and he is using a derogatory word such as "boer". This instance of violence between white and black people is very rare in the novel, since white people are almost completely absent in Ways of Dying. That absence makes the few occasions of white presence in the novel all the more remarkable and since the two occasions where white people are present both concern white people committing horrible acts towards the black people in the novel it can provide the belief that all white people are like this in transitional South Africa. Another example of how the ethnic violence often has political undertones, as in the case of Buthelezi and Shadrack's encounter, is given in the novel.
In a recent massacre in the settlement, which was carried out by some of the tribal chief’s followers from the hostels, assisted by Battalion 77 of the armed forces of the government, as many as fifty-two people died, including children. Some children were orphaned overnight. They are now here at the dumping ground. (168)

This massacre can be an allegory of to the massacres carried out by supporters of the IFP (Inkatha Freedom Party) who massacred people at among other places Boipatong and Bisho, slaughtering 49 and 28 people respectively. Although the characters draw the conclusions on many occasions that the violence is based on ethnicity, as the chief and his actions, it actually has political undertones, making the violence not ethnic violence but political violence. Battalion 77 is in the novel described as being set up by the government and containing armed forces and mercenaries from other countries and the use of other countries and the violence towards the minority living in the settlement supplies the reader with a conclusion that the violence is caused by ethnicity.

Taking these different acts of violence into consideration it is important to understand as I have emphasized that the violence in the novel is not ethnic but political. The violence in the novel is constantly affecting the characters and making the environment which surrounds them into a very hostile one. This creates a society that seems to have a mentality of “us against the world”. Evidence of this is given the first time Toloki goes into the settlement in the novel, “Dirty children follow him. They dance in their tattered clothes and spontaneously compose a song about him, which they sing with derisive gusto.” (49)

Although Toloki ignores them and excuses their behavior because of their age the message is clearly given, outsiders are not welcome here. And the fact that after spending one night in the settlement it is obvious to others than Noria and Toloki that an outsider has come to the settlement, Malehlohonolo is making indecent insinuations about the relationship between Toloki and Noria furthermore adds to the message that outsiders are not welcome. All these
examples of the society closing in on itself to provide protection can be the cause of other reasons than that of violence, for example unemployment and poverty. These two examples can both act starting points for the “us against the world” mentality to manifest itself in the society. But poverty and unemployment are closely related to violence and in the novel the focus is mainly on violence and thereby my conclusion of my first research question is that the society has been forced to fend for itself to be able to prosper and that because of the violence in the society, the settlement has become a closed settlement and very suspicious against outsiders.

2.2 Politics in contrast to Magical Realism

The different political elements in the novel, i.e. Battalion 77 and the tribal chief, are signs of real events delivered in code by Mda. Rita Barnard who writes about, among other things, the South African transition, gives in her essay an answer to who “the tribal chief” depicted in the novel is in reality (279). The Zulu leader Mangosutho Buthelezi who is also the leader of the IFP (Inkatha Freedom Party) and together with the description of the Zulu migrant workers which Farred supplies (190), it becomes clear that the migrant workers and hostel dwellers in the novel are the Zulu. Furthermore what historian Peter Bouckaert writes on the transitional violence gives an explanation to that Battalion 77, which performs atrocious acts in the novel, is as they say somewhat correctly in the novel that they are “the armed forces of the government” (168), the battalion is not an actual battalion but as explained later “foreign mercenaries from a destabilized neighboring country” (171). As Bouckaert writes “elements within the apartheid government had indeed played a central role in the spiral of violence by training Inkatha “hit-squads”” (246) it is thereby shown that the settlers in the camps are correct in their conclusion that the government is in fact involved in the violence that occurs throughout the novel. This violence by Buthelezi and his “hit-squads”
and by Battalion 77 correlates very well with Boehmer’s suggestion “that in the globalized world terror is a force that has been incorporated everywhere” (145). Since the colonial powers used terror as a way to enforce their rule the terror is mirrored by those who have been oppressed to make their own way to power through terror. The same thing is happening in the novel where Battalion 77 is terrorizing the people in the settlements on behalf of the government as well as the tribal chief and his men are terrorizing them because of their own ambitions.

The different political views of the main protagonists are very important since their political opinions affect their actions. What is interesting is that both have the same origin and a traumatic past and thereby should be very similar in their attitudes toward life and death. But their political views is what essentially changes their attitude towards the way they as individuals manage the issues of life and death and their political view is what distinguishes them from each other. Toloki is a secluded man who has known success when he sold boerewors and had his own shack but he has chosen to marginalize himself from society and to live in waiting rooms. He does not take sides in any political debate and has thereby chosen to marginalize himself regarding politics as well and instead he focuses on his vocation, “Toloki’s emotional abstinence is demonstrated most obviously in his preoccupation with his own asceticism.” (Farred 190). What Grant Farred fails to recognize to some extent is that committing to politics is closely related to acknowledging that there is a problem in society according to what one feels is right. But since Toloki casts his feelings aside in benefit of his vocation he is also neglecting his own emotions towards other human beings and the society. Thereby he actively marginalizes himself in the political debate and also actively marginalizes himself as a human being. An example from the novel where Toloki frowns upon politics is when it disturbs his mourning,
This politicking was interfering with Toloki's inspired mourning. He calmed the crowd down, and told them to concentrate on the business of mourning. Although the issues that the people were angry about were important, they could always discuss them when they got back to the squatter camps and townships. (23)

This clear position on what is proper or not on a graveyard which Toloki takes in front of a crowd is a clear sign that he does not want anything to do with politics, at least not while he is practicing his mourning, just as Farred argues. The other protagonist, Noria, also had her success, as a former prostitute, while she today lives in an informal settlement by helping and receiving help from others in the community although she says that “I do not take things from men” (71) because of her history with men as a prostitute. Farred argues correctly that “Noria is a feminist figure actively involved in improving life in the community.” (185). She does this by among other things looking out for young Danisa and some other children while their parents are at work, along with her work at Madimbhaza and by getting water for the shebeens. The work that she takes upon herself is service occupations for the settlement and her work makes the community work at a Grass root level. Taking this in mind the background of the two characters makes it very clear in the novel that Toloki does not want to take a stand politically (or he takes a stand in being outside of the political discussions) while Noria is very active in her quest to take the community further in her feminist approach to society. This is where one can see the vast difference between Noria and Toloki, Noria is actively trying to help the society and change it while Toloki is deliberately marginalizing himself.

These clear political views of the protagonists give them a certain look upon life and their own personal way of approaching life and death. Since Toloki who is described as ugly makes his living off funerals which is connected to death and the chaos that ravages society and because he is so close to death, it becomes his companion throughout his life. Noria on
the other hand is a beautiful woman, a mother of two deceased children, a former prostitute, and a source of inspiration for different artists. She is a character which is close to the opposite of the ascetic, ugly and creative Toloki. Noria is trying to live life, although she has been through traumatic experiences, she still continues on with her life and her agenda. These utter differences in the characters make for a vast contrast between the protagonists and although they are very similar in heritage and in the sense that they both have suffered great personal loss in their lives it is the differences that make them individuals. The attraction between them that grows throughout the novel is for Toloki troublesome and it becomes evident that life is a troublesome thing for the character who is closely accompanied by death,

What he is feeling now is perhaps akin to what people have described as love. But then he made up his mind a long time ago that he was not capable of such feelings. They are common feelings for common people. They are taboo in his vocation, since he has cast himself in the mould of holy men in remote mountain monasteries. (51-52)

Toloki, having created this profession for himself has made a choice, just as he made in choosing not to take part in the struggle against apartheid or to take part in any political debate. Toloki can refuse to commit physical acts of love as well as to actively take part in any political discussions and thereby marginalize himself in both aspects and thereby choosing not to live life to the extent that Noria chooses. But he cannot control his feelings towards Noria and what other people discuss and when he reacts to the political debate at the funeral, he returns to society from his marginalized state of being. As Farred argues “Toloki is focused mainly on himself and his interests, esoteric though they be.” (192) and this further adds to the depiction of Toloki as a man who has chosen to marginalize himself, rather than being marginalized.

Toloki’s answer to the question if he is afraid to die is numb exactly like his previous reaction towards Jwara’s death “Toloki returns the laughter, and says that it is true
that death is his constant companion, but where one can avoid one’s own death, one must do so.” (96) Toloki’s relationship with death is the same relationship that he has towards politics, avoiding it so that it might go away. The political theme in the novel is not as present as other themes as death, life and love etc. and the lack of politics correlates to what other critics have written on Mda’s other works as well as *Ways of Dying*. According to Jan Gorak this is a common trait for Mda’s plays “Instead of extracting from the false divisions of township life a larger plan of political action, he bombards his audience with imagery of filth, excrement, and vomit” (483). Thereby one could expect the same from one of his novels, especially one of his early works. As Richard Samin argues, “The defamiliarising effect generated by the marginality of the political theme and by the unconventional treatment of the theme of death is further reinforced by the use of written and story-telling traditions.“ (194) The marginalization of politics in the novel which Samin argues in his article is very peculiar in a novel set shortly after the fall of apartheid and during apartheid since politics affected people in very different ways. By defamiliarising the reader with the context Mda supplies the reader with an element of surprise and a feeling that anything is possible.

The politics in general in the novel has an effect for the characters and it is mainly their political efforts that have effects for the protagonists. What they do can be narrowed down to political issues or the lack of political issues as an example there is Toloki’s choice of marginalization and Noria’s reaction when she does not get an excuse from the local politicians for what happened to Vutha. By having the political theme defamiliarised the novel is suggesting that the political climate at the time was influencing a vast majority of the events at the time. This makes the violence in the novel seem more like “ethnic violence” which it is actually not and the same defamiliarisation paves way for the magical realism.

The magical realism of Noria’s singing is in the novel a celebration of life and although it leads to the demise of Jwara, her singing is described as a way of pleasing the
spirits and people gathered to hear her sing. Even the birds and bees joined in the singing with their chirping and buzzing and her voice enables the ability in Jwara to create different figurines. The creation which her voice enables in Jwara and later on also in Toloki is a symbol of life, since the community is gathered together and the singing also invigorates the animals to take part in society. In the end of the novel Noria sings for Toloki, enabling him to create “colourful pictures of children’s faces, and of children playing merry-go-round in the clouds.” (199). This gathers the society around them, children join in and watch, passers-by stop and stare and the community is gathered around the two. Although it is not only Noria’s singing which supposedly has magical effects, Toloki says that “Noria’s laughter has the power to heal troubled souls.” (95). The character Noria on the whole seems to have magical traits which develop throughout the novel. The taxi driver Shadrack gives a description of the relationship between the two protagonists, as a creative partnership (200) which is all connected to the concept of life. Another feature of magical realism in Ways of Dying is when Toloki uses pictures and parts of Home and Garden magazine to wallpaper Noria’s shack and taking her through an imaginary walk throughout the house and their garden,

This is the lovely entrance that graces their private garden. Four pillars hoist an overhead trellis laced with Belle of Portugal roses. A bed of delphiniums, snapdragons, cosmos, and hollyhocks rolls to the foot of the arbour. Noria and Toloki take a brief rest in the wooded gazebo, blanketed by foliage and featuring a swing. Noria likes to sit on the swing, and Toloki enjoys pushing it for her. (112-113)

The fantasy which they both travel through together is a feature which emphasizes the life of the characters, the characters are allowed to transcend the troubled society and all the violence which constantly affects their life and instead enjoys themselves. This alternate way in which the novel approaches a society like the one depicted with fundamental problems such as daycare, water, food and violence gives the novel a positive look on life. It is in passages as
the previous where it is made clear why the defamiliarisation is important. If the political theme had been present together with the violence the magical realism could have been countered by a more cruel power. The positive ending of the novel mirrors that view which the narrator tries to give,

Somehow the shack seems to glow in the light of the moon, as if the plastic colours are fluorescent. Crickets and other insects of the night are attracted by the glow. They contribute their chirps to the general din of the settlement. Tyres are still burning. Tyres can burn for a very long time. The smell of burning rubber fills the air. But this time it is not mingled with the sickly stench of roasting human flesh. Just pure wholesome rubber. (212)

This ending gives the idea that at the start of the new year, they start a new life and the author gives hints that the new life will be a better one, saying that the air is not filled with the smell of burning children, the education which Toloki gives the children and the figurines that are worth some money all predicts that the life of Toloki and Noria will be better in the future than it was in the past.

Taking Boehmer’s question, “Do the shaping forces of narrative and poetry provide an alternative response to situations of terror?” (142) into mind it is clear that Mda with the magical realism in the novel is giving an alternative answer. The response which Mda’s novel gives with the creation which Noria brings forth in Jwara and Toloki is a hint that there is something magical in mankind, something which is not possible to explain. Viewing this mystical quality of the characters in contrast to the violence depicted throughout the novel gives exactly that alternate response which Boehmer is looking for. The final suggestion made by the narrator in the end of the novel, is clearly that life goes on, even though all the atrocious things that happen around us and in other countries.

2.3 Funerals
Throughout the novel the funerals play an important role as a reoccurring theme and it is through the funerals that the reader gets to follow Toloki in his profession. The funerals follow a certain ritual and the focus of the funeral is largely on the Nurse. The Nurse is a "designated" person who has a "duty to tell how this child saw his death" (Mda 1) and in doing so, telling the attendees what the last words and the last acts of the deceased were. Irene Visser has an own description of the Nurse's function at the funerals in the novel, "The function of the Nurse at the graveside appears to be to testify to the ills of society, not to the eternal peace of the afterlife" (5). I do not fully agree with Visser's definition of the Nurse's function. The role which the Nurse fills at the funeral is much wider than that of an orator serving his or her critique against the society and that they have a reminiscing function to celebrate the lives of the different deceased persons throughout the novel. Barnard writes that

The very basis of all narrative genres - the implicit contract between teller and audience - is no longer clearly understood. Each funeral scene therefore involves some kind of debate or negotiation about the conventions that should apply; there is no consensus whether factual accuracy, eulogy, self-expression, communal solidarity, social critique, or consolation should be the decisive factor in the Nurse's performance. (282)

According to the evidence put forward by Barnard, the Nurse's function is not that clear as Visser wants it to be and because the function is not defined by the audience at the funeral the oration will be disturbed by the audience since they believe the nurse is doing something wrong according to their belief in the function of the nurse. The debate and negotiation regarding what should happen is also a sign that life is in focus, what happens during the present for the characters is in focus.

I argue that the Nurse in particular, has mainly a reminiscing function to celebrate the life of the deceased and that the funerals in general is a ceremony for celebrating the life of
the one that has passed away instead of a general funeral of mourning where people dress in black. A nurse says in the novel:

We grew up together in a faraway village in the inland provinces. When we were little boys we looked after calves together, and when they escaped to suckle from their mothers, our buttocks received the biting pain of the whip together. When we were older we graduated together from calves to cattle, and we spent months in cattle posts in the snowy mountains (154).

What is interesting about this citation is that the Nurse is going well beyond his function as described in both the novel and by Visser. Although he says later in his oration how his died and how his friend was hurt by society, his emphasis of what they have done together and how he has spent his life is in focus of his oration, celebrating his life. As Courau and Murray write in their article the Nurse is giving “a subjective narrative of the life of the deceased” (106) and by doing so the orator is in fact giving an account of his life, and thereby celebrating his life.

The orator continues with his speech as is expected of him, by telling how the patriarch saw his death and is later sidetracked by the ills of society, speaking about how Shadrack’s son and drivers have been killed, just as Visser argued, “testifying the ills of the society” (5). At the funeral the Nurse neglects to speak of the afterlife and thereby the focus lies on the life of the deceased. Furthermore the Nurse gives a description of how the ritual of “the cutting of the hair” (157) and Courau and Murray’s interpretation of that rite is that “This is suggestive of a rite of purification, and is also a public way of reinforcing the structures of power within the community, of defining relationships on the basis of patrilineage” (107). This strongly correlates with my own interpretation of this ritual that it takes place to honor the life of the deceased. The ritual is a symbol of how the family is moving on with their life by getting their hair cut and the loss of the hair symbolizes the loss of a family member.
Toloki has noticed that funerals create more funerals and he believes that he gets confirmation of his thesis when attending a funeral where a death has occurred during “the cutting of the hair”.

The sad tale confirms what Toloki has long observed. Funerals acquire a life of their own, and give birth to other funerals. The old man’s funeral has come about as a direct result of his son’s funeral. This was also the case back in the village many years ago, when the choir girl was shot dead at a school-mate’s funeral. Indeed, every day we hear of car accidents in which people on their way to or from the funerals of friends or relatives are killed. (160)

The idea which Toloki has is proven correct in the novel and the deaths at the funerals are in fact signs that life goes on. Since transitional South Africa in the novel Ways of Dying is filled with death of various kinds it becomes a part of the characters’ everyday life. Because the everyday life of the people is filled with death it would only be unnatural if the funerals were an exception to the daily life which they are accustomed to. The funerals are in general very connected to the concept of life which I described in the introduction, that life is that which prospers even though it deals with death, and life in that sense is an idea which is connected to laughter.

The Nurse at the Zionist funeral had a booming voice. Soon, all ears at all four funerals were directed towards him, and people were no longer paying attention to their own funerals. He made a naughty joke about the deceased, and everyone at the various funerals in the cemetery burst out laughing. This happened at the same moment that the priest at the funeral where Toloki was mourning was engaged in the most serious part of the ritual that of praying for the soul of the deceased so that it should be happily received into the portals of heaven by none other than St Peter himself. Even the priest
couldn’t help laughing. Everybody laughed for a long time, for it was the kind of joke that seemed to grow on you. (163).

This passage is a suggestion from the narrator that starts at an earlier point in the novel, where Noria’s friend died laughing while they were still in the village. What the narrator suggests with the girl who died laughing together with the Nurse at the Zionist funeral is that life and death are connected. By reversing the two components towards the end of the novel he is illustrating that they in fact are closely tied together in many aspects, that after death comes laughter, life still goes on even though something terrible has happened. The narrator are with these passages about laughter and death suggesting that life is superior to death novel and thereby it is the binary of life that is the most dominant the two throughout Ways of Dying.

3 Conclusion

Reconnecting to my research questions, “How does the violence in Ways of Dying affect the society depicted in the settlements?” “How do the different political views of the characters Toloki and Noria affect their view on life and death, where life in the novel is represented by story-telling and magical realism and death by terror?” and “How is life represented at the funerals in Ways of Dying?” it is clear that the society depicted by Zakes Mda in the novel is to a large extent a society which is ridden by death but it is the depictions of life that are emphasized in the novel. The different depictions of violence in the novel which are upon first glance caused by ethnicity, are actually caused by characters and groups with political motives. The violence in the novel is mainly committed by Battalion 77, the migrant workers and hostel dwellers on orders by the tribal chief and the Young Tigers. The chief in particular is using ethnicity as a basis for violence to gain more power and influence and thereby one could not classify the violence as caused by ethnicity. The Young Tigers are struggling for freedom and for rights while battling the chief to protect their settlements. This hostile
environment together with the threat of being evicted, since they do not own their own land, makes the inhabitants of the settlements take certain precautions to protect themselves. Women such as Noria are watching the children while the others are at work and they contribute to the settlement by fetching water for one another. This makes the society fend for itself and trying to push outsiders away, as the children tried with Toloki. The magical realism which Mda uses, mainly regarding Noria’s singing and laughing but also regarding Toloki and his imagination, is a contrast to the darkness of the political violence and it is a way of emphasizing life although death is constantly present.

The different political views of the two main protagonists Toloki and Noria, affect their view on death very much, the similarities of the two characters but especially the differences between them are what make their political view differ to the extent that their attitude towards death is changed. Noria’s constant work within the society where she (and later they) live in gives her an attitude towards death that is more upset and outraged towards the events that occur. Her reaction after the death of Vutha, both the first and the second, is more emotional than that of Toloki’s. Noria’s strong reactions towards death and the terror in the society are closely tied to her work within the society. Her strong reaction towards death can also be traced to her not having dealt with death to the extent of other community members. The death of Vutha the Second sends her in a rage throughout the night but she does not get any response from anyone in the community, one reason could be that they are familiarized with the concept of death. Toloki on the other hand has chosen to marginalize himself from the society and by choosing his lifestyle and profession and to not take any side regarding politics in contrast to Noria.

And while the political theme throughout the novel is also marginalized to the extent that the only hints of political movements is that of violence it closely relates politics to death. Because the relation between politics and death is obvious in the novel and how they affect
each other on a nationwide level I argue that the political views of the characters affect their views on life and death very much. Throughout the novel Toloki is depicted as a character which is numb towards death and although one might argue that it is because of his profession his lack of emotions shown when Jwara dies proves otherwise. His emotionless connection to death is closely related to his choice to marginalize himself politically. The numbness of Toloki and the defamiliarisation in the novel together creates a hole in which the magical realism fills instead of the politics. The lack of politics in transitional South Africa is a step away from reality and a step closer to the supernatural.

Since the funerals depicted in the novel mainly revolve around the Nurse, although seen through the eyes of Toloki, it is apparent that the task of the orator is very important in order for the funerals to serve a purpose. The memorial services with the function of the Nurse as I described together with the ritual of “the cutting of the hair”, provide the conclusion that they are not focused on death or on mourning but instead focused on life. The funerals with the infectious laughter, the funeral of the girl who died laughing together with the funeral where the Nurse describes the life in detail of the deceased all point to the same conclusion; life is in focus in the novel called Ways of Dying.

Boehmer’s question which I presented in the introduction, “Do the shaping forces of narrative and poetry provide an alternative response to situations of terror?” (142), is mainly answered in the section regarding Mda’s magical realism. The novel in itself is a novel filled with depressing events and violence but since Mda has added some features which give the novel a touch of magical realism it becomes a more pleasant story about the reunion of two peculiar characters from the same village. This narrative which Mda supplies definitely provides an alternative response to the situations of terror, that no matter what happens in your society or settlement that life still goes on, mainly represented by Toloki and Noria. The two protagonists in the novel are constantly confronted with different kinds of terror, the
terror of losing a close relative and the political terror exerted upon them from both inside and outside the settlement.

The joint conclusion for all my research questions is that the focus of the novel is not as hinted by the title, death, but on its binary opposite, life. The settlements find a way to prosper although constantly exposed to violence; the political views are affected by this constant terror in the society but still the funerals focus on life.
Works Cited


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