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## **Magic Realism in Zakes Mda's**

***Ways of Dying (1995) and She Plays with the Darkness (1995)***

by

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## **DECLARATION**

I declare that this thesis, apart from the quotations acknowledged within it, is my own investigation and research. It has not been submitted previously in part or in full for any other degree or to any other university.

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Venugopaul Naidoo

..... December 1998.

## ABSTRACT

I shall argue in this thesis that Zakes Mda's novels *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) are magic realist texts that are representative of the hybrid nature of this literary mode. Furthermore I shall demonstrate that *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) share common elements with a variety of magic realist texts. Mda's own creative and literary consciousness has been shaped by an intellectual background stemming from tertiary education at Ph.D level, his teaching positions at various international universities, and his knowledge of African folk-culture. The seemingly contesting streams of Western education and African mysticism are not presented as sources of conflict in Mda's novels, but rather as syncretic forces of potential transformative power. Mda displays in his project as a novelist, the continuing concerns of black writers who saw the novel as a tool for socio-political change. My thesis therefore also investigates the extent to which Mda's use of magic realism in the novels mentioned above, signals a radical shift in literary representation by South African black writers who wrote in English.

Mda's novels transcend Black Consciousness-inspired protest that characterised black literature in the 1970's and 1980's. His use of tropes associated with magic realism, African folk-culture, the apocalyptic and carnivalesque has enabled him to create a discursive space for South African black writers on the international stage, and foregrounds a movement towards literature

that offers opposition to being classified as merely “black writing”. The death of the old order in South Africa and the birth of a new one, invites questioning and analysis of the position of the self during a period of cataclysmic change. That the apocalypse brings with it both death and renewal could be seen within the context of postmodernist visions of the erosion of the self and death as the ultimate reality. Mda’s novels, *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), are the first English narratives by a South African black author that can claim affinities with postcolonial writers such as Carpentier, Márquez, Okri and Rushdie. These writers reflect in their narratives, the infinite possibilities of magic realism in reclaiming the self submerged by the colonial experience.

I shall attempt, in Chapter One, a survey of specific theoretical assumptions relevant to magic realism. Chapter Two will provide biographical details of Zakes Mda the playwright, poet, theatre practitioner, film producer and novelist and the importance of magic realism in his writings. Chapter Three is an analysis of Mda's published plays and points to the early uses of elements consistent with magic realism in his work. Chapters Four and Five are investigations into Mda's use of magic realism in *Ways of Dying* (1995) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995), respectively.

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*This thesis is dedicated to:  
my parents for their lessons in perseverance  
my wife's parents for instilling in me the power of belief  
my children, Darrin and Nerissa, for being my anchors in reality  
and most of all my wife, Pushpa Rani,  
for the magic of her love...*

## INTRODUCTION

The term magic realism is an oxymoron that suggests the co-existence of two contradictory elements, the supernatural and realism in a text. The term was coined by the German art critic, Franz Roh, who in an essay written in 1925, praises its use in Post-Expressionist paintings. Since Roh's initial formulation, however, the term has undergone various revisions, especially with regard to its use in literature and literary criticism. Our concern here is with the literary application of magic realism, rather than its use in paintings.

Magic realism is now commonly regarded as an international literary phenomenon. Latin American writers such as Aljoeo Carpentier, Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Isabel Allende and Mario Vargas Llosa, have promoted magic realism as a popular international literary mode. Carpentier's *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of the World*, 1949), and Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*), first published in 1967, are regarded as "canonical texts of this mode" (Angulo 1995:xi). Writing during the "boom period" in the late Fifties and the Sixties, Latin American writers have drawn attention to magic realism as a literary movement best suited for depicting the stories of people in "third world" communities. Contemporary postcolonial writers in English, such as Salman Rushdie, Ben Okri, and Vikram Chandra have also found in magic realism a mode most favourable for expressing the realities of their particular societies. As Boehmer puts it, "Drawing on the special effects of magic

realism, postcolonial writers in English are able to express their view of a world fissured, distorted, and made incredible by cultural displacement" (1995:4). Even writers such as Gunter Grass, Toni Morrison, Milan Kundera, D.M. Thomas and Angela Carter who do not write from a typical Third World context, have used magic realism in their texts. These writers have chosen to situate the characters in their stories on the margins of society, thereby demonstrating affinities with the marginalised people in Third World locations.

In Zanemvula Kizito Gatyeni (Zakes) Mda's novels, *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), the protagonists are depicted as being located on the peripheries of their respective societies. These protagonists are constructed as characters who are empowered through their association with the supernatural to decode the historical realities of their times.

Mda's novels, *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), signal a radical shift in literary representation in English by South African black writers. Mda has used magic realism extensively in his novels to construct alternative visions of reality. Critics and reviewers, however, have not always recognised this important element in his literary work. Research has revealed that to date only three reviewers have alluded to the use of magic realism in Mda's novels. These are Helen Moffett (1996), Keorapetse Kgosietsile (1995) and Dorothy Driver (1996).

In her review of *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) in *The Cape Librarian* (1996) Moffett applauds Mda's skill as a novelist. Indeed if Moffett's review is to be accepted unequivocally then Mda's novels,

mentioned above, cannot be faulted. As academic editor of Oxford University Press, publishers of *Ways of Dying* (1995a), one could accuse her of not being a disinterested commentator on Mda's novels. The validity of Moffett's criticism, however, is not in contention here. What is pertinent is that she situates both novels within the context of South African literature and asserts that Mda's novels

certainly mark a potential watershed in South African writing. They have several innovative qualities that break new ground in current local fiction writing. Possibly the most striking of these is their use of magic realism, usually associated with Latin American novelists (1996:14).

Keorapetse Kgositsile, the well known South African poet, in his review of *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), published in *The Sunday Independent* (1995), does not make direct reference to magic realism. Kgositsile's review titled "History, myth and magic are interwoven to create a palpable world", does make reference, however, to "magic" in Mda's novels. Kgositsile points out that from the very first page of *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995a)

Mda asserts the existence of the world of his characters as convincingly real. In this world tradition and custom, myth and legend, the mysterious, the magical, as well as known historical events and actual personalities are inextricably intertwined. Mda renders them all as real, as palpable as the paper in your hands (1995:22).

In his reading of *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995a) and his comments on Mda's intertwining of history, myth, custom, tradition, legend and magic, Kgositile is actually pointing to Mda's use of magic realism in his novels.

Like Moffett and Kgositile, Driver is positive in her appraisal of *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b). She also draws attention to Mda's use of magic realism as an important element in the aforementioned novels. Driver states that both novels

have been recognised by reviewers as considerable achievements: energetic and imaginative, with the kind of risk-taking that makes them innovative in their field. *Ways of Dying* has been especially highly praised, displaying as its main character a self-styled Professional Mourner whose approach to the horrifying ways in which people die in South Africa produces a carnivalesque quality unusual in South African fiction; achieved here in part by Mda's masterly combination of realism and supernaturalism, in what some critics have called after the South American models, magic realism (1996:123-124).

While reviewers, like the ones mentioned above, have been positive in their responses to *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) Achmat Dangor, a novelist in his own right, has criticised Mda for the "proliferation of badly constructed sentences and malapropisms" (1996:22). Dangor's own ineptitude as a reviewer is revealed, however, when he fails to identify Mda's use of magic realism at a crucial moment in *Ways of Dying* (1995a). He points out that:

There are moments of beauty in the book (that reveal the true potential of the story and Mda's true depth of talent): the haunting description of Jwara's "gaunt death"; the walls of a squatter shack pasted over with illustrations from *Home and Garden* and transformed into a gardened place by the intertwining imaginations of Noria and Toloki (1996:22).

What Dangor refers to as "the intertwining imaginations of Noria and Toloki" is in fact one of the most poignant examples of magic realism in the novel. Dangor's criticism, however, has not gone unchallenged by the reading public. In a letter to the editor of the *Sunday Independent*, in which Dangor's review appeared, Thakane Mokoena, a Wits Medical School student, states the following:

It is very clear to me that Mr Achmat Dangor does not agree with the political content of Zakes Mda's new novel (*The Sunday Independent*, February 4 1996).

Fair enough. But then he goes further to say that the author should not have allowed it into print. That, of course, is ridiculous. Why should Mda write the novel if he would not allow it into print? In other words Mda should censor himself - depriving the hundreds who are enjoying the novel and the millions who will derive great pleasure from it in years to come.

*Ways of Dying* is not a political novel. Yet your reviewer sees it fit to grasp the political straw. He has not commented on the novel.

The review is full of petty observations that clearly indicate the depth of characterisation and the poetry of Mda's novel merely floated above the reviewer's head. He is only capable of understanding naturalistic-realistic situations and is therefore incapable of grasping the simplicity of the magical world that Mda creates...

I have an ethical problem when novelists try to review the work of fellow novelists ... It is like asking Chicken Licken to evaluate and pass judgment on the quality of Kentucky Fried Chicken products.

Having read *Ways of Dying* more than once, I can bet Mr Dangor my last dollar that this novel will create waves internationally. I will eat my felt hat if it does not bring home a number of important awards (1996:11).

Mokoena's faith in Mda's ability as a novelist and the literary value of *Ways of Dying* (1995a) is evidently well placed. In 1997 the novel won the English Academy's Olive Schreiner Prize and the M-Net Book Award, adding to the Honourable Mention of the Noma Award, and the Special Mention of the CNA Award, in 1996. In 1995 Mda also received the Sanlam Literary Prize for *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b). According to Mda both novels are also presently being filmed for cinema and television. Mda's achievements in this regard are worth noting in view of the limited number of novels in English written by South African black authors, and the fact that few black novelists have enjoyed the critical acclaim that Mda has received.

Black literary commentators such as Mphahlele, Modisane and Nkosi have pointed out that historically the novel as a sociopolitical tool was avoided by South African black writers. They maintain that writers favoured the short story, autobiography, poetry and the writing of plays. In pointing out the preference for short story writing in particular, by South African black writers during the sixties, Es'kia Mphahlele asserts: "During the last twenty years the political and social

climate of South Africa has been growing viciously difficult for a non-white to write in. It requires tremendous organisation of one's mental and emotional faculties before one can write a poem or a novel or a play. This has become all but impossible" (1962:186). Mphahlele makes this point again in his article, "The tyranny of place and aesthetics. The South African case" (1987) when he states: "Autobiography, the short story, the sketch, and verse, come more easily than the novel to the South African black ... You can get quickly to the point, pressure your language for quick delivery of your anger. This is an aesthetic" (1987:53).

A similar claim is made by Bloke Modisane: "Everything you do must be done today. Only today is important. You cannot budget for six months in order to write a novel. The short story, therefore, serves as an urgent, immediate, intense, concentrated form of unburdening yourself - and you must unburden yourself" (1963:113).

Barnett lends support to the statements made by Mphahlele and Modisane when she asserts that for South African black writers the short story was a more suitable mode of expression because as she puts it, "from the beginning of fiction writing in English by black South Africans, it was situation rather than individual characters and their interaction which interested authors" (1985:113). Furthermore Barnett (1985:113) points out that the focus on the individual that the novel advocates is alien to African culture. In this regard Nkosi too has asserted that: "...the novel - the traditional novel at any rate - proposes the 'individual' as the centre. To be truly dynamic, to have progression, the novel further proposes as one of its essential mechanisms 'conflict' between 'individuals' or between an

individual and a group, between the individual and his environment. Its main characteristic is the exploration of individual character and as such it is an art form that best serves bourgeois society or manifestations of incipient bourgeois society. The novel, it has often seemed to me, must distort the African past and tradition in order to contain it within its framework ... The novel, much more than drama, represents therefore a radical departure from native art forms" (1981:5).

The "situation" referred to by Mphahlele and Modisane with regard to South African black writers' lack of interest in writing novels in English did not change significantly during the seventies and eighties. Few novels of note were published in English by South Africa black writers during this period. Some of these novels are Dikobe's *The Marabi Dance* (1973) and the so-called "Soweto novels": Serote's *To Every Birth its Blood* (1981), Tlali's *Amandla* (1986), Sepamla's *A Ride on the Whirlwind* (1981) and Mzamane's *The Children of Soweto* (1982), which is actually a novel trilogy. The "Soweto novels" were inspired by the Soweto youth uprising that occurred on June 1976, and are influenced by the rhetoric of Black Consciousness. Without exception the "Soweto novels" mentioned above are an attempt to portray a realistic account of Soweto during 1976. These novels have failed to attract any critical acclaim mainly because the writers have constructed novels that verge on what Nkosi, in another context, has referred to as "the journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature" (1965:125). Nkosi has also criticised *The Marabi Dance* (1973), stating that, its "combination of bad taste, clumsy construction and wooden characterisation must seem ... [to] exceed anything we have yet encountered in

African writing" (1981:80). Ironically Nkosi's own novel, *The Mating Birds* (1987), is a pastiche of flashbacks and psychological ramblings that detract from the story-line.

While the comments made by Mphahlele, Modisane and Nkosi might hold true for the lack of novels in English by black writers, it must be pointed out that a number of novels have been written in the black languages. Ntuli and Swanepoel (1993) and Gérard (1971) have documented novels written in Zulu, Xhosa, Setswana, Southern Sotho and other black languages. In seeing the novel as essentially a Western literary preserve, Mphahlele, Modisane and Nkosi have failed to recognise the developments in the writing of the novel by black writers in their own languages. An important aspect of many of these novels is the influence of African folklore and orature and those elements that we have now come to recognise as being consistent with magic realism.

If the comments by Mphahlele and Modisane are to be accepted unequivocally, then Zakes Mda has perhaps attempted the "impossible". Mda, as our discussion will demonstrate, returns in English to the South African novels written in African languages. Mda has not only gained international recognition as a playwright, poet and artist, but he has also written the first novels in English by a black South African writer that transcends traditional forms of protest that characterised black literature written in English during the apartheid years. He has achieved this distinction through his use of magic realism. Mda's novels demonstrate contiguities with the elements of magic realism evident in the novels of writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Ben Okri, Salman

Rushdie, Isabel Allende and Milan Kundera. Mda's novels, however, also display traces of the type of magic realism typical of the novels written in indigenous languages by writers such as A.C. Jordan, Thomas Mofolo, R.R.R. Dhlomo, C.L.S. Nyembezi and John Dube. Elements of magic realism present in these indigenous texts, such as the appearance of the supernatural, non-linear time, the practice of magic, the trickster figure, the importance of family history and values, and the appearance of ancestral spirits, are also common in both *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b). Mda has pointed out that he had experimented with elements that are congruent with magic realism quite early in his career as a writer. In referring to his plays he has stated that, "The earliest ones starting with "Dead End", "We shall Sing for the Fatherland" and "Dark Voices Ring" all have in common elements of magic realism. At the time I did not even know that there was a literary movement such as magic realism" (Naidoo 1997:249). According to Mda, "Dead End" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990) was written in 1966, while he was still at school (Holloway 1988:81-82).

Magic realism as a literary mode in English has not found many practitioners among South African black writers. Examples of South African writers that come to mind, who have successfully used this mode of writing in English, are Mike Nicol, Ivan Vladislavic and Breyten Breytenbach. Etienne van Heerden's *Ancestral Voices* (1987), translated from his Afrikaans novel *Toorberg* (1986), has gained wide critical acclaim, winning for the author the CNA Prize in 1987 and the prestigious Hertzog prize for Prose in 1989. Black writers such as Thomas Mofolo, A.C. Jordan and John Dube, probably through the influence of

Rider Haggard, have elements in their work that prefigured contemporary modes of magic realism. According to Ntuli and Swanepoel a number of Haggard's novels were translated by black writers: "... his *King Solomon's Mines* appeared in Zulu as *Imigodi yenkosi u Solomon* (1958), by J.F. Cele; again by Jolobe; and in Southern Sotho as *Merafo ya morena Salomone* (date and translator unknown)" (1993:24). Ntuli and Swanepoel (1993) also point out that *Nada the Lily* was translated by F.L. Ntuli in Zulu and appeared as *Umbiso kaShaka* (1954). Furthermore *She* was translated into Xhosa by G.B. Sinxo as *Uzibaningashekazi* (n.d.), in Setswana by M.O.M. Seboni with the title *Khumagadi* (1969) and in Zulu by A.V. Nyembezi as *Ulowokazi* (n.d.).

The African romances written by Haggard in the late 1880's, mentioned above, all have in common the presence of the supernatural, the inexplicable feats of witch-doctors and magicians, references to history, and the erasure of the boundaries between the "real" and the "supernatural". The existence of two "cultural codes" (Chanady 1985:12) in Haggard's novels, Western realism and African mysticism, suggests affinities with the magic realist texts that would be written decades after Haggard's popularity in the 1880's. Haggard's African romances embodied the historical realities of European encroachment into Africa in the late 1800's while allowing for the free flights of the writer's imagination. Superficial similarities in the elements of magic realism and Haggard's African romances are also evident in the following observation by Northrop Frye: "If the essential raw materials for romance are magic and otherness, then the 'ju-ju' in Africa provides the former and the savagery and blackness of Africans provides the

latter" (1957:306). Furthermore, Frye sees romance flourishing "in transitional periods when society is torn, where alternatives are grasped as hostile but unrelated worlds" (1957:306). A characteristic feature of magic realism, as we shall see later in our discussion, is the fact that it narrates the stories of individuals and communities caught up in transitional periods. As Cooper puts it, "Magical realism thrives on transition" (1998:15).

Like Frye, Fredric Jameson also relates the romance to societies in transition: "Romance as a form thus expresses a transitional moment ... its contemporaries must feel their society torn between past and future in such a way that the alternatives are grasped as hostile and somehow unrelated worlds ... the archaic nature of the categories of romances (magic, good and evil, otherness) suggests that this genre expresses a nostalgia for a social order in the process of being undermined and destroyed by nascent capitalism, yet still for the moment coexisting side by side with the latter" (1975:158). It is interesting to note that the comments made by Jameson on the romance are similar to his observations on magic realism. He states that magic realism "depends on a content which betrays the overlap or the coexistence of pre-capitalist with nascent capitalist or technological features" (1986b:311) and should be seen as, "a kind of narrative raw material derived essentially from peasant society, drawing in sophisticated ways on the world of village or even tribal myth" (1986b:302). The point that must be emphasised here is that Jameson's argument on what constitutes the structures of romances and magic realism essentially points to certain similarities in these literary modes. Magic realism however differs from romance markedly in that its

primary aim is to intensify reality by defamiliarising the ordinary by making it magical, and therefore more noticeable. Romance on the other hand is concerned mainly with fantasy, heroism and escapism. In magic realist narratives the protagonist is quite often an anti-hero who battles against the forces of history.

Haggard's African romances are important to our discussion because of his influence on South African black literature in indigenous languages. The novels by those black writers who were influenced by Haggard share with his African romances similar tropes such as the quest, the powerful influence of the supernatural, disruptions in time and the heroism of the protagonists. An essential feature of Haggard's romances, and the novels written in South African indigenous languages influenced by him, is that these texts are fundamentally concerned with fantasy. Magic realism, however, is firmly rooted in historical realities. History in magic realist texts is the equivalent of the wicked witch in fairy tales, it is the powerful force that pervades life and visits upon the characters the realisation of their insignificance in an absurd world, and the need to fight against this force.

In their introduction to *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (1995), editors Zamora and Faris, quote Ortega y Gasset who comments that a writer's choice of literary genre reflects "at one and the same time a certain thing to be said and the only way to say it fully" (1995:5). Mda displays in his choice of magic realism as a literary expression, the continuing concerns of black writers who see the novel as a tool for socio-political change. His effective use of magic realism has enabled him to engage positively with the reconstruction of the black self during the trauma of socio-political transition and transformation in South

Africa. For Mda these changes have not only necessitated the choice of a particular literary mode, but they have also meant a change from writing plays to novels. As he himself has stated, “there is no line of demarcation for me. I’m an artist and I do what comes to me at the time - I write a play, or novel or a poem, or paint. It just so happens that I have the material that needed the kind of elaboration that is only possible in a novel” (Collins 1995:23). Commenting further on this transition to novel writing Mda states, “I write about absurd situations. My theatre is also part of the absurd, and I have transferred that to my novels” (Collins 1995:23). Mda’s choice of the novel, rather than drama, to record the “absurd situations” prevalent after the demise of legislated apartheid, is consistent with the narratives of postcolonial writers such as Borges, Carpentier, Márquez, Okri, and Rushdie who have used the novel, and particularly magic realism as a strategy, to effectively document socio-political transition in their countries. In this regard magic realism has been viewed by its practitioners as

... a mode suited to exploring - and transgressing - boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical, or generic. Magical realism often facilitates the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction. The propensity of magical realist texts to admit a plurality of worlds means that they often situate themselves on liminal territory between or among those worlds - in phenomenal and spiritual regions where transformation, metamorphosis, dissolution are common, where magic is a branch of naturalism, or pragmatism (Zamora and Faris 1995:5-6).

While there is evidence of African story-telling influences in Mda's novels, there are also strong affinities with the type of magic realist texts common to the Latin American "boom" years of the late Fifties and the Sixties, and other locations, pointing to the hybrid nature of the magic realism inherent in Mda's novels. Commenting on whether the Latin American writers had influenced his novels Mda has stated:

But as Africans we always live with magic. When I wrote the novels I was at a stage where I was familiar with the movement called magic realism. When I wrote the novels I had read people like Marquez. I had read *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. I read that and I fell in love with that mode of writing, precisely because I felt that the Latin American writers were doing what I had always been doing myself (Naidoo 1997:250).

Mda is apparently asserting that essential to the magic realism that he employs in his novels is the myths, mysticism, orature and belief systems that are rooted in the African folk traditions. The value of folklore and the inspiration of oral literature therefore cannot be overstated. In their survey of South African literature in African languages, Ntuli and Swanepoel (1993) point out that the intrinsic value of oral art is its influence on written texts. They maintain that novels, short stories and plays written in South African black languages "often repeat the didactic and moralistic objectives of folk-tales" (1993:16). Commenting on the value of folk-tales internationally, Calvino has noted that, "Every animal, every object, every

relationship took on beneficial or malign powers that came to be called magical powers but should rather, have been called narrative powers, potentialities contained in the word, in its ability to link itself to other words on the plane of discourse" (1990:224). In the transition from oral folk-tales to writing, black writers retained the elements of folklore such as trickster figures, the power of the supernatural, non-linear time, historical antecedents, and the focus on the family. It is interesting to note that these elements also feature in magic realist texts.

When Mda states that "here in Africa there is magic happening all the time" (Naidoo 1997:250) and that when he discovered magic realism as a literary mode he realised that it was what he "had done much earlier" (Naidoo 1997: 250), he is pointing to a powerful influence on his work: the stories that have their origins in pre-colonial African communities. Commenting on the importance of the ancient story-tellers in Africa, in his prologue to his collection of short stories *Indaba my Children* (1985), Credo Mutwa states: "These people were told the history of their Tribes, under oath never to alter, add or to subtract any word. Anyone who so much as thought of changing any of the stories of his tribe that he had been told fell immediately under a High Curse which covered him, his children and his children's children. These tribal story-tellers were the Guardians of the *Umlando*" (1985:viii). Implicit in Mutwa's comment is the fact that in black culture story is synonymous with *history*. All the short stories in *Indaba my Children* (1985) are folk-tales that are structured on magic and the interaction between man and sub-human creatures and man and the gods. In presenting these stories as *history*, Mutwa is asking the implied readers to accept that the magical events described

are an intrinsic part of African realities. The use of the imagination and the elements that we have come to recognise as being characteristic of magic realism are therefore accepted as being an inherent aspect of black history. Gérard's pertinent observation in this regard is worth quoting at length:

In non-literate societies, imaginative oral art is the undifferentiated medium of all intellectual activity. It contains the whole body of the group's knowledge-philosophical, historical, and scientific. Myths embody man's earliest accounts of the events that are supposed to have given rise to his own existence and to that of the surrounding universe. Narrative poems, carefully preserved through the centuries, contain the records of the high deeds that justify the tribe's sense of dignity and continuity. Praise poems extol the valour of the warriors, in whose prowess and conquests the honour and power of the society originate. Folktales contain the patrimony of wisdom and skills which have been bequeathed by generations precariously fighting for the inner cohesion of the tribal group and for its subsistence in the hostile world of men and natural forces. The primary purpose of oral composition does not reside in aesthetic achievement. Art and beauty are subordinated to the expression, preservation, and communication of memories and values that are essential to the survival of the society and to its sense of collective identity. The clear-cut demarcation established by modern Western thinking between scientifically ascertained fact and imaginative interpretation is therefore irrelevant: any amount of hyperbolic or allegorical distortion is legitimate provided it serves the ultimate societal purposes (1971:51-52).

Gérard's comments are relevant in that he points to the importance of oral art, and in particular the influence of the folk-tale on magic realism. His assertion that there

is no clear demarcation between “scientifically ascertained fact and imaginative interpretation” in pre-modern societies, alerts us to the fact that magic realism in such contexts derives from the merging of the boundaries between the scientific, the historical, and the philosophical. To put it simply, magic realism in these societies is another way of viewing life. It is not surprising therefore that Mda should comment that: “I make things to happen the way I want things to happen, however much that might contradict what you might call objective reality ... Whether in the so-called objective reality things happen in that way, or not, is not the issue for me” (Naidoo 1997:250). In signaling the principle that underscores his particular mode of magic realism Mda is pointing out the strong influences of traditional African oral art and belief systems on his prose. Commenting on these influences Mda has argued that, “Things that seem to contradict the laws of reason, happen in my novels, even in my plays for that matter. They are put there as a matter of fact, as though they do not contradict empirical reality” (Naidoo 1997:256). Magic realism therefore also serves to reflect the tensions and conflicts that arise when societies that have a strong tradition of oral story-telling are faced with the demands of what Mda calls “empirical reality” (Naidoo 1997:256).

Ndebele’s comments on the clash between African traditions and Western “civilisation” are worth noting: “African folk culture has an independent life of its own right bang in the middle of ‘civilisation’, of western ‘rationality’. The surrounding ‘superior’ civilisation is rendered of no consequence whatsoever. It is as good as not there ... Indeed, as Soyinka asserts, the rational and non-rational constitute a single sphere of reality in African lore” (1991:54).

The magic inherent in folklore and stories that originated in ancient African societies is an expression of their realities. The influence of folktales on magic realism in general and Mda's novels in particular is evident in the protagonists' capacity for magical feats and their associations with the supernatural. In *Ways of Dying* (1995a), Toloki and Noria, are able to physically experience the locations depicted in the glossy illustrations of *Home and Garden*, a kitsch magazine that appeals to the rich. Dikosha, the protagonist in *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), has the ability to communicate with the centuries-old Bushman paintings which come alive. Msimang (1986:132) has pointed out that characters in folktales are endowed with supernatural powers, and can perform any feat no matter how impossible it may appear to the people of the real world. This is acceptable because in folktales we deal with fantasy. However, in order for these fabulous characters to have meaning for real life, they must interact with lifelike characters. Folktales therefore deal with two worlds, the magic world that is imposed on the real world. Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1953), is a classic example of the intertwining of the oral influences of the folktale and the events that take place in the "real" world. The nameless narrator of the novel is also imbued with magical powers that enable him to change his physical form.

In *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) Mda continues in the tradition of writers such as Thomas Mofolo, A.C. Jordan, R.R.R. Dhlomo, Sol Plaatje and Credo Muthwa who drew their inspiration from ancient African folk-tales. These writers have attempted to use their texts to reflect on the effects of history on traditional societies, a theme common in the magic realist

texts discussed in the chapters that follow, and in African literature. Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* (1967), for example, is loosely based on the life of the Zulu King, Chaka. The novel is structured on certain historical details concerning the life of Chaka, fictional episodes in the life of the hero, the influences of magic and the supernatural, and the conflicts that arise in the pursuit for power. Ntuli and Swanepoel (1993:36) assert that Mofolo's *Chaka* is not an historical novel as many commentators would have us believe but rather history was used as a point of departure in the novel. *Chaka* (1967) therefore has many of the elements that are typical of magic realism. Some of these elements are the use of historical figures, the intervention of magicians, witch-doctors and ancestors, the magic potions to be used in love and war, the appearance of spirits and inexplicable disturbances in nature. The elements of magic realism in *Chaka* (1967), suggest both African and Western influences, as Mofolo was influenced by Christianity and the novels of Rider Haggard and Marie Corelli (Gérard 1971:109, Newbolt 1967:ix). Mofolo weaves his tale against the backdrop of historical figures and locations but allows for the free intervention of the supernatural and the mystical. Chaka is presented as a hero who leads a charmed life because of the power of "medicines" (1967:15). The witch-doctor proclaims that "he will kill, but will not be killed" (1967:15). The magical nature of Chaka's heroic qualities are intensified by the description of unnatural incidents in the fourth chapter titled "Chaka is Visited by the Lord of the Deep Water" (1967:25). The supernatural appearance of the monstrous snake and the mist that emerges from the river that envelops Chaka (1967:26-29), point to the strong influences of African folklore. The

implied reader of *Chaka* (1967) is expected to believe that both the snake and the mist that emerge from the river are essentially “real”. In Mda’s *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), the narrative voice informs us in the opening paragraph that the, “mist has a mind of its own. It does what it wants to do when it wants to do it. No one can stop it!” (1995b:1) Later in the story we are informed that when Shana tried to escape from the mist: “the mist was at his heels. It caught up with him and threw him to the ground. The mist began to suffocate him” (1995b:167). The parallels between Mda and Mofolo in the representation of the awesome power of nature is indicative of the strong influences of African mysticism on both writers.

Another important aspect of *Chaka* (1967) and the texts by Dube and Jordan, discussed below, is the magic of place. In *Chaka* (1967), for example, the river is said to be “so awesome a place even in the day-time that no man would bathe there alone: it was a place fit only for the ‘tikoloshi’ (water-devil). Chaka used to bathe there alone, but that was because he was Chaka” (1967:26). Similarly in Jordan’s *The Wrath of the Ancestors* (1980) the village is described as a magical place where the spirits of the ancestors dwell. In Dube’s *Jeqe the Bodyservant of King Tshaka* (1951) Sitela, queen of the Tonga witch-doctors and diviners lives on an enchanted island where she teaches and practises her craft as a healer.

John Dube’s *Jeqe the Bodyservant of King Tshaka* (1951) is another story that combines the history of the legendary Zulu King, Chaka, with the fictional adventures of Jeqe, his bodyservant. Magic and the supernatural play a decisive

role in the novel and in fact are the primary factors in shaping the destinies of all the characters, including those of King Chaka and his brother Dingane. The influence of magic is evident early in the text: "Then there was one who by means of charms gained power over the other tribes..." (1951:3). The novel makes constant reference to the power of magic and Jeqe eventually becomes a powerful witch-doctor. The narrative offers comments such as "...he possessed medicines to destroy and bewitch and other medicines to make the king beloved of his people, respected by all and full of courage" (1951:3). The narrative voice states that both King Chaka and his half-brother, Dingane, are influenced by the power of magic: "then Dingane and his friends sought out wizards and witch-doctors to bewitch the king with their spells" (1951:26) and that Chaka "was terrified of witchcraft" (1951:30). There are also references to the supernatural powers of Sitela, queen of the Tonga witchdoctors and diviners. The constant references to the supernatural, witchcraft and the power of "medicines" in *Chaka* (1967), *Jeqe the Bodyservant of King Tshaka* (1951), and *The Wrath of the Ancestors* (1980) points to an essential difference between these texts and more contemporary modes of magic realism. In the texts by Mofolo, Dube and Jordan, mentioned above, magic and the supernatural are quite often malignant forces capable of destruction. Also, these forces of the occult are the preserve of only those who have been ordained to receive such powers. This is quite unlike the elements of the supernatural in more recent magic realist texts where ordinary people are empowered by magic to experience the supernatural. In *Ways of Dying* (1995a), for example, Vutha is born twice and in *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), Dikosha communicates with

people who were drawn on the cave walls and she does not grow old. Vutha and Dikosha are presented as ordinary people, who have paranormal experiences. In Mda's novels mentioned above individual tragedies are played out against the background of carnivalesque images, pointing to the absurd reality of life. The absence of carnival in the texts mentioned by Mofolo, Dube and Jordan is a crucial difference between Mda's novels and those by indigenous black writers. Furthermore, the classical notions of the tragic-hero, which by definition meant that he had to be someone of great importance in a particular society, is a feature of the texts by Mofolo, Jordan and Dube, mentioned above. There are obvious parallels between Mofolo's *Chaka* (1967) and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In his novels, however, Mda has chosen to portray the lives of ordinary people who acquire magical powers, a feature that is characteristic of magic realist texts.

A.C. Jordan's *The Wrath of the Ancestors* (1980) is also the tragic story of a chief, someone of great importance in a community. The lives of the protagonists, Zanemvula, the new Chief of the Mpondonise, and his wife, Thembeka, are disrupted when she kills a snake that threatens to harm her sleeping child. Thembeka's action results in her isolation, and tragically her death, because the snake is regarded as the spirit of Zanemvula's father. Both Zanemvula and Thembeka have the advantages of a college education, but the tribe sees this as further evidence of Thembeka's modernity and her defiance of the ancestors. Thembeka's killing of the snake is regarded as "the curse of death. For it is the doom, aye, the very annihilation of a people" (1980:188). The conflict between the "power of magic" (1980:9) of the ancestors and the pragmatism of a modern

woman is the focal point of the plot of *The Wrath of the Ancestors* (1980). The tragic death of Thembeka and her child at the end of the novel spells out the belief that the preternatural powers of the ancestors are far greater than the modern ideas of youth. In Mda's *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), Dikosha communicates with the ancestral spirits and they grant her the gift of healing and the "power to see songs" (1995b:53). The presence of the ancestors and their magical powers in this novel suggests the influence of African spirituality.

In the novels discussed above, the voice of the ancestors points to the fact that according to traditional African beliefs, death merely means entry into the spirit world. The prevalence of this belief is also evident in the novels of black writers outside South Africa. The Nigerian writers, Ben Okri's and Amos Tutuola, for example, in their magic realist novels, depict the spirit world as being accessible to the world of the living. Okri's *The Famished Road* (1992) and *Songs of Enchantment* (1994) are essentially stories of the interaction of the world of the spirits and the world of the living. The narrator, Azaro, states that he inhabits the "interspace between the spirit world and the Living" (1992:5). Similarly, Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1953) is the chronicle of the nameless narrator's journey to the world of the dead, or what he calls "Dead's Town" in the quest for his tapster, who died after falling from one of the tallest palm trees. The erasure of the boundaries between the world of living and the world of the dead is a common feature of magic realist texts. Commenting on magic realism, and more specifically the treatment of death in O.K. Matsepe's novels, Grobler notes that: "This eventual destination may only be reached through a transition from one reality to

another. Life is but a temporary stay in a passing world. Earthly time and man's lifespan become minute and insignificant as measured against his eventual stay in his final destination - eternity - which he reaches only through a peculiar transition" (Grobler quoted by Ntuli and Swanepoel 1993:113).

The use of the trickster figure that is so prominent in both *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) is another example of the influence of African folk-tales. Characters such as Toloki, Nefolovhodwe and the Archbishop in *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and Radisene, A.C. and the Nigerians in *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) are all urban trickster figures who, to different degrees, have made careers out of deceiving people. Msimang (1986) and Canonici (1995), have both made reference to the magical abilities of the trickster figures in these stories. The folktale of *Uhlakanyana*, for example, is the story of a trickster who talks before he is born, can transmogrify and has the ability to outwit everyone around him. The supernatural abilities of trickster figures is also a common feature of magic realist texts that have originated from Africa and other postcolonial contexts. Mda's treatment of the trickster figures in his novels is consonant with Canonici's observation that tricksters

seem to possess a high degree of mental and moral elasticity, which makes them at the same time shunned and admired. They express the ambivalence resulting from an imperfect fusion between the cheat and the hero; between the innocence of a child and merciless selfishness. They further represent the victory of brain over brawn, of subtlety over brute force, of small and weak over big and strong (1995:43).

The strong influence of African folk-culture on Mda's novels therefore cannot be discounted. Mda's novels, however, also demonstrate affinities with magic realist novels from Europe, Latin America, and other postcolonial countries. Mda's use of the carnival in both his novels under discussion, is just one element that the novels have in common with the magic realist texts emanating from Europe and Latin America. In the chapters on the novels the syncreticism and hybrid nature of Mda's novels will be argued in detail.

At this stage, however, it must be mentioned that Mda's own use of magic realism has enabled him to create a discursive space for South African black writers on the international stage, and a literature that offers opposition to being classified as merely "black writing". In this regard Mda comments: "I just get down to writing. I do not tell myself that I should be writing African literature that should be written as a black or a white. I have a story to tell and I tell my story" (Naidoo 1997:257).

Mda first gained international recognition as a playwright. In recent years, however, he has demonstrated a preference for writing prose rather than plays. The publication of *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) has established him as a South African novelist of note. *Melville 67* (1998), a novella mainly for children, has been published recently, and a novel with the working title *Ululants*, is due for publication in 1999. All of these texts have in common the use of magic realism as a literary mode. In explaining his

preference for writing prose rather than plays Mda has stated that in the novel “there’s a broader, freer world” (Collins 95:23).

A focal point of the “world” that Mda explores, is Southern Africa coming to terms with the problems of transition during times of political upheaval. In *Ways of Dying* (1995a) the focus is on South Africa in the transition period when a new political dispensation for South Africa is being negotiated. *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) is situated against the background of political coups in Lesotho covering over twenty years, with the last coup being in 1994. Commenting on literature written during transitional periods, Johan van Wyk has observed that:

The transition is in many ways traumatic and productive. In literature it can lead to specific literary features. Such periods produce a literature of mass meetings and processions: a literature depicting a group psychology and mass omnipotence which asserts itself against the State that has lost legitimacy. The confrontation between the masses and the State often leads to violence, death, arbitrary repression and persecution. The inversion that takes place when the people take control of the State's functions, and the visibility of the people in mass gatherings on the streets, evoke images of the carnival. A resurgence of repressed instincts embodied in images of violent death, birth and sexuality, accompanies the breakdown of the older order. This resurgence of the repressed in turn implies regression: a loss to some extent of the reality principle (so that the form of this literature evokes the dream and mysticism). Death combines with rebirth, and the apocalyptic with the carnivalesque (1997:80).

In *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), Mda uses tropes common to magic realism, such as the carnivalesque, the apocalyptic, and distortions in linear time, to create a space for the re-constitution of the black self in South Africa and Lesotho after periods of intense political change. The adoption of such tropes suggests Mda's affinities with postcolonial writers who, through the use of literature, attempted to depict the effects of the colonial experience on individuals and communities.

In exploring Mda's use of magic realism as a literary mode it is worth considering the view of postcolonial literary theorists Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin that:

The crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that post-colonial writing define itself by seizing the language of the centre and replacing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place. There are two distinct processes by which it does this. The first, the abrogation or denial of the privilege of 'English' involves a rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication. The second, the process of capturing and remoulding the language to the new usages, makes a site of separation from the site of colonial privilege (1989:38).

Mda's novels reflect on the transition in Southern Africa in the post-apartheid period. Mda's writing is not restricted by the boundaries imposed on black writing informed solely by essentialist ideologies such as Négritude and Black Consciousness. Both *Ways of Dying* (1995) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995) have continuities with magic realist texts that record conflicts during times

of socio-political change. Similarly, Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1978), Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1983), Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *Shame* (1983), Okri's *The Famished Road* (1992) and *Songs of Enchantment* (1994), and Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1996) are examples of just some of the texts in which magic realism has been used as a literary mode to convey the effects of social and political chaos, on individuals and societies.

Like Black Consciousness-inspired literature, Mda's novels celebrate elements of African folk-culture such as orature, communal life, myth, and mysticism. In *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), however, Mda differs from Black Consciousness and "struggle" literature that sought to emphasise the notion of a collective self rather than the focus on the individual. In his novels Mda's concern is on both individual and group perceptions of reality in an absurd world. This has enabled him to tell the stories of people who have been excluded from history, yet strive to assert a common humanity. The characters in Mda's novels narrate the self by invoking aspects of African spirituality such as mysticism and ancestor worship, which serve as agencies for social cohesion.

In his book *When People Play People* (1993a) and articles such as "Marotholi Travelling Theatre: Towards an Alternative Prospective of Development" (1994a), Mda has argued that black communities have the resources to create their own narratives and thereby rewrite themselves into history. The resource that he has in mind is the stories that come from the rich

tradition of African folk-culture and orature. Implicit in Mda's argument is the notion that social mobilisation becomes possible when language is used as a tool for empowerment, even if that language is a vernacular language. In his article "Learning from the Ancient Wisdom of Africa: in the creation and Distribution of Messages" (1994b), for example, Mda highlights a story told in Zulu by a boy, in the context of the *chakijane* (mongoose) trickster folk tales. Mda finds the boy's story "very original, very humorous" (1994b:140) and in this article he goes on to emphasise why communities need to become producers of their own narratives. In both *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), Mda has used trickster figures who are integral to the plot of these stories. These trickster figures represent important links with African folk-tales. In *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), Mda makes a strong case for the recovery of aspects of African tradition and heritage. One of the ways in which an African community can recover its own history, Mda seems to suggest, is by initiating an archeological process that recovers the texts of the past. Such texts in the African situation are performances of magic, artifacts, cave paintings, songs, dances and orature.

Furthermore, Mda brings to his project as a novelist the equivocation of the symbiosis of life and death, and the carnivalesque and apocalyptic, in ways that coincide with Zamora's view that: "The narrative strategies which we have come to categorise loosely as magic realism are part of [the] complex process of generic innovation in ... contemporary fiction, and the myth of apocalypse has played a significant role in that process" (1993:189). Like the magic realist text mentioned

above, and those to be discussed in the chapters that follow, *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) focus on the assertiveness and resurgence of individual and collective energies that challenge traditional hegemonies. Négritude and Black Consciousness that advocated a sole collective black self, based on communal needs, are replaced by the reality of individual demands. The combination of these factors facilitate group identity, and group consciousness. These centrifugal and centripetal forces, simultaneously fragment and solidify the black self that is constituted in the present.

It is my intention in this study to investigate the extent to which *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) are magic realist texts that are consistent with texts in the similar mode that have emanated from postcolonial contexts. Also, writers such as Gunter Grass, Toni Morrison, Milan Kundera and D.M Thomas, will be considered. These writers, as I have mentioned earlier, although not from typical Third World societies in the African, Asian or Latin American sense, have chosen characters who are marginalised by their respective societies, thereby establishing their affinities with the marginalised people in postcolonial localities.

I shall attempt, in Chapter One, a survey of specific theoretical assumptions relevant to magic realism. This chapter will also examine the theory of Bakthin especially his discourse on “grotesque realism”, in so far as it relates to elements of the carnivalesque which are present in both Mda’s texts and the texts of magic realism.

Chapter Two will provide biographical details of Zakes Mda the playwright, poet, painter, theatre practitioner, film producer and novelist. Some of the insights into Mda's life, I believe, will provide an understanding of the importance of magic realism in his writings. This chapter will also focus on whether there are any statements by Mda that suggest links with authors such as Márquez, Rushdie, Okri, Allende, Kundera and Morrison, who are some of the main representatives of magic realism.

Chapter Three is an analysis of Mda's published plays and points to whether there are elements that recall magic realism in his work. The influences of Mda's plays on his novels, if any, cannot be ignored, as he himself has stated, "...[my] theatre is also part of the theatre of the absurd, and I've transferred that to my novels" (Collins 1995:23).

Chapters Four and Five are investigations into Mda's use of magic realism in *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), respectively. A comparative analysis of various magic realist texts with *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) will be useful in establishing the mode of magic realism in Mda's novels.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter will discuss Mda's use of magic realism by drawing links to the broad terrain of magic realist texts that have emerged from Africa, Europe, Asia, and Latin America. The differences and similarities between Mda's novels and those by more renowned practitioners of this literary mode, such as Gabriel García Márquez, Toni Morrison, Ben Okri, Isabel Allende, and Salman Rushdie, will clarify the extent of the structural and thematic use of magic realism in the two novels by Mda.

Mda's use of magic realism, a literary mode made popular by postcolonial writers, might suggest that his novels fit neatly into the category of postcolonial literature. Therefore it might be tempting to assume that postcolonial literary theory is best suited for the purposes of interpreting Mda's novels. The application of postcolonial theory, however, cannot be easily appropriated to analyse novels that reflect the South African situation. Debates as to whether South Africa can now be truly classified as a "postcolonial" country, is only one of the issues that problematises any unmediated usage of postcolonial literary theory. Furthermore, my research has revealed more differences than principles of unity in the articulation of postcolonial theory. The post-structuralist orientation of

critics such as Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, for example, is at odds with the totalising nature of postcolonial literary theories formulated by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin.

In spite of these differences postcolonial literary theory offers valuable insights into the literature that has emerged from the “peripheries of Empire”. It is my intention to produce a theoretical model that pertains specifically to the novels of Zakes Mda, and generally to South African novels that might be written in a similar idiom.

In structuring such a theory I will also draw on the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, in particular, his discourse on “grotesque realism” and the language of carnival. Bakhtin saw laughter as a weapon in the subversion of social hierarchies, and as a means of social renewal. Writing during a period of socio-political oppression in Stalinist Russia, Bakhtin conceived carnival as an implicit criticism of Stalin, and the stagnation of Russian society during the 1930s. Bakhtin’s notion of carnival is useful in considering Mda’s application of the trope in his novels.

In formulating the theoretical backdrop that should inform this study I have sought not to apply a particular “ism”. I shall focus instead, on theory as a flexible frame that outlines Mda’s plays and in particular his novels. This, I believe, would provide insights and initiate debate, rather than absolute interpretations of Mda’s work. In this regard Mda himself has stated in an interview with Charlotte Bauer of the *Sunday Times*, ‘My head is clogged with theories and I have to get rid of it all in my head - not think ‘is this post-modernism, is this post-

structuralism?" - and just write what I feel" (1995:20). Mda's statement on the absence of a specific theoretical framework in his novels, is itself, it can be argued, also a theory. The debilitating effects of theory on the creative energies of a writer invites discussion on the "intentional fallacy". The debate as to the relevance of theory, however, is not the intention of this chapter. What is relevant, is the articulation of a theory that would enable us to analyse the use of the elements of magic realism in *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b).

### **Towards a Definition of Magic Realism**

If magic realism is an oxymoron that suggests the combination of two contradictory elements, magic and realism, then a superficial understanding of magic realism would imply a simple understanding of "magic" and "realism". Magic realism, however, as our discussion will demonstrate, entails far more than a combination of "magic" and "realism". Definitions of "magic" and "realism" will be useful, however, in contextualising magic realism as a literary mode.

Magic through the ages has been associated with the supernatural and the art of illusion. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines magic as the "Supposed art of influencing the course of events by occult control of nature or of spirits, witchcraft." The *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary* defines "magic" as "Any supernatural art; sorcery; necromancy. Sleight of hand. Any agency that works with wonderful effect". These definitions imply that essential to any understanding

of “magic” is the acceptance that magic is concerned with the supernatural, and occult practices, for the purposes of manipulating that which is considered to be natural or “real”.

In his extensive study of magic as recorded in the several volumes of *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1923), Frazer has distinguished between what he has termed “homeopathic magic” and “contagious magic”. According to Frazer homeopathic magic is imitative in that it attempts to effect results by imitation, for example, attempting to kill someone by driving sharp objects through a doll representing that person. Contagious magic on the other hand attempts to affect a person by the use of the person’s body material such as hair or nail clippings. Both these types of magic feature in magic realist texts. Frazer’s study is instructive in that it draws attention to the fact that magic has influenced both primitive and modern societies, in positive and negative ways. In drawing links between the beliefs of societies through the world in the power of magic, Frazer suggests that magic has offered societies throughout the ages the means of coming to terms with their particular concepts of reality. In fact Frazer goes so far as to suggest that magic was primitive man’s science because it initiated experiments into the unknown. What is apparent from Frazer’s study and contemporary writers such as Banta (1994), Soyinka (1976) and Mutwa (1985) is that magic has had a deep connection with the human psyche since the beginning of time. In this regard it has spawned many of the myths that inspired literature. Myth is indeed one of the essential structuring devices of magic realist texts, as we shall see in the chapters that follow.

Traister (1984) has observed that magic has featured early in English literature, and offers *Doctor Faustus*, *The Tempest*, and *Friar Bungay* as very different plays that have magicians as major characters. She maintains that this is possibly because magic played an important role in Renaissance thought. Traister's references to the tensions between magic and religion and between magic and science are informative in that they point to the fact that magic in Renaissance literature allowed for stories that "had no need to correspond closely to the real world" (Traister 1984:21). This reference to the early division between magic and reality invites discussion on realism in literature.

*The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines "realism" as the "Scholastic doctrine that universals or general ideas have objective existence." "Realism" as a literary term, however, goes beyond this dictionary definition. According to Sachs realism is "a coherent programme of literary aesthetics emerged in Western literature about 1850" (1966:317). Sachs contends that realism thrived in an age when science was developing rapidly and when class structures were breaking down. He points out that realism tended to emphasise the daily life of the common man, often focusing on the squalid and offensive, and its style was sober and impersonal (1996:317). Furst (1992) also views realism as a product of rationalist epistemology that, retreating from the fantasies of Romanticism and was influenced instead by the impact of the political and social changes as well as the scientific and industrial advances of its time (1992:1). Evidently realism as a literary genre had frowned upon the free flights of the imagination that was associated with fantasies, and chose rather to focus on "reality".

The concept of realism in literature, however, is rather complex. Evidently there have been several incarnations of realism. Auerbach, for example, has observed two modes in the literary representation of reality in European literature as demonstrated by the differences between the *Odyssey* and the Bible: "On the one hand fully externalised description ... displaying unmistakable meanings, few elements of historical development and of psychological perspective; on the other hand ... multiplicity of meanings and the need for interpretation, universal-historical claims, development of the concept of the historically becoming, and preoccupation with the problematic" (1991:23). Auberbach, in his interpretation of realism in the European novel, sees history and Biblical myth being displaced by the realistic novel.

Belsey (1980), has drawn attention to the differences between "expressive realism" and "classical realism". She points out that expressive realism as theorised by Ruskin takes into consideration that "Art is mimetic and expressive" (1980:9). Furthermore Belsey informs us that "Ruskin argues that the two qualities are in fact not two but one. In portraying the truth the artist expresses a personal and particular incisive perception of that truth" (1980:9). Belsey sees classical realism as

still the dominant popular mode in literature, film and television drama, roughly coincides chronologically with the epoch of industrial capitalism. It performs, I wish to suggest, the work of ideology, not only in its representation of a world of consistent subjects who are the origin of meaning, knowledge and action, but also in offering the reader, as the position from which the text is most readily intelligible, the position of subject as the

origin both of understanding and of action in accordance with that understanding (1980:67).

Belsey's view of classical realism is informative in that it suggests that classical realism limited the imagination in that it did not make any allowances for characters to experience what Franz Roh referred to as the mystery that pulsates behind the represented world (1995:15). If classical realism coincides with the rise of industrialisation, as Belsey points out, then the emergence of globalisation and the technology which has given us computer generated "virtual reality", has necessitated the interrogation of how we perceive that which is "real". As Brink puts it:

What we term 'reality', it should be clear to the twentieth-century reader, is no more than a historically and culturally determined *construct*, a system of received, and accepted, ideas of how we believe the world to be: it is based on *perception*, or what Erasmus termed 'opinions' - but perception already presupposes interpretation and imaging, in other words, translation (1998:30).

The narratives of magic realism are indicative of the need for both implied authors and implied readers to construct their respective worlds through their particular perceptions of reality. As Raymond Williams points out, the departure from realism in the contemporary novel stems from the tension that results from changing "perceptions, interpretations and organisation" (1972:590) of knowledge in a world that is constantly changing. Even if these conditions have led to the

climate in which magic realism has thrived, one cannot ignore the powerful literary influences of writers of the realist tradition such as Honoré Balzac, Emile Zola, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Gottfried Keller, Ivan Turgenev and Leo Tolstoy.

If magic realism as a literary mode is merely a combination of magic and realism then we would simply have to accept that writers who have popularised this genre have combined elements of magic and realism in a formulaic manner to construct their texts. Any study of magic realist texts would reveal, however, that this is not the case. Magic realism has gained international recognition as a popular literary mode that enables its practitioners to produce texts that reflect the immense power of the imagination. In this regard Zamora and Faris point out that:

An essential difference, then, between realism and magical realism involves the intentionality implicit in the conventions of the two modes ... [R]ealism intends its version of the world as a singular version, as an objective (hence universal) representation of natural and social realities - in short, that realism functions ideologically and hegemonically. Magical realism also functions ideologically but ... less hegemonically, for its program is not centralizing but eccentric: it creates space for interactions of diversity. In magical realist texts, ontological disruption serves the purpose of political and cultural disruption: magic is often given as a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, motivation (1995:3).

While the differences between realism and magic realism are apparently easily articulated, some critics have asserted that magic realism has resisted clear definition. It is not the counterpoint of realism, nor is it an alternative form of

realism. It is, as our discussion will reveal, evidently a textual attempt at demonstrating a multiplicity of realities. The perception of these realities, however, will differ in accordance with the position adopted by subjects involved in the act of viewing reality. In the world of the text where language is the signifier and meaning the signified, as Saussure would say, it becomes apparent that words will always fall short of capturing reality. While realism maintains boundaries between subjects and objects, magic realists in their denial of Western rationalism, have attempted to erase boundaries “or semiotically - to remove the bar between signifier and signified” (Simpkins 1995:156). In doing this, however, the magic realist writer does not lose sight of the “realism” in magic realism. Unlike fantastic literature and surrealism, where characters inhabit worlds that are far removed from the world of everyday reality, magic realist characters are firmly anchored in the familiar world of recorded history but are able to experience time and space on different levels. This is the essential difference between magic realism and fantastic literature and surrealism. As Chanady suggests, “In contrast to the fantastic, the supernatural in magical realism does not disconcert the reader, and this is the fundamental difference between the two modes” (1985:24). In his *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (1994) Breton defines surrealism as:

Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express - verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner - the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern (1994:26).

Breton's definition of surrealism locates it within the realms of unrestricted imagination.

Difficulties in defining magic realism have also been pointed out by literary commentators such as Jameson (1986b), Angulo (1995), Slemon (1995) and Cooper (1996, 1998). Jameson who first "encountered it in the context of American painting in the mid-1950's" (1986b:301) points out the initial difficulties in distinguishing magic realism from fantastic literature and realism. He goes so far as to suggest that the term "magic realism" should be abandoned altogether were it not for the fact that "it retains a strange seductiveness" (1986b:302). Jameson views magic realism from a Marxist perspective stating that "magic realism now comes to be understood as a kind of narrative raw material derived essentially from peasant society, drawing in sophisticated ways the world of village or even tribal myth" (1986b:302). Although referring to "peasant society", Jameson fails to contextualise magic realism as a literary phenomenon that has manifested itself differently in countries throughout the world, in both rural and urban areas. The magic realist novels by Grass, Rushdie, Allende, Chandra and Mda, for example, are not specifically or only located in the rural areas.

Commenting on the difficulties in defining magic realism Stephen Slemon points out: "In none of its applications to literature has the concept of magic realism ever successfully differentiated between itself and neighbouring genres such as fabulation, metafiction, the baroque, the fantastic, the uncanny, or the marvelous, and consequently it is not surprising that some critics have chosen to abandon the term altogether" (1995:407).

Cooper (1998:16) agrees with Jameson's Marxist reading of magic realism and advocates the notion of a "third space" (1998:1) which she locates between Marxism and post-modernist theory (1998:1). She supports her argument that magic realist literature stems from a reaction to capitalism by stating that "at the heart of the emergence of magical realism in the Third World is the fact that these countries encountered Western capitalism, technology and education haphazardly. Communications - road and rail - were set up where raw materials required transportation; elsewhere areas remained isolated and only indirectly transformed by new economies" (1998:15). Like Jameson, Cooper fails to allow for the fact that magic realism as a literary mode is not solely a reaction to capitalism. It is also rooted in realism, which according to Belsey (1980) derives from *early* capitalism. In this regard the European influences on magic realism cannot be ignored even though it cannot be denied that the folk traditions of South America and Africa had many elements of magic from time immemorial. These traditions, however, lacked the ideas of "the Enlightenment with its impressively self-confident faith in reason and in reason's access to the real..." (Brink 1998:1). Societies that were not exposed to the ideas of Enlightenment were unable to objectify and measure their world, hence realism is not a characteristic feature of their folk-culture.

Doody (1996:xvi) suggests that *The Golden Ass*, written by Apuleius, is the first magic realist novel ever written. Doody's reference to *The Golden Ass*, probably written between A.D. 160 and A.D. 180. This novel also recalls novels such as Petronius' *Satyricon* (A.D. 66), Boccaccio's *Decameron* written around 1344, and *Don Quixote* (1605-1616) by Cervantes, all of which have elements

that are commonly associated with magic realism. It is interesting to note that Auerbach's comments on the The New Testament in the Bible suggest that it is very much a "magic realist" text: "What we see here is a world which on one hand is entirely real, average, identifiable as to place, time, and circumstances, but which on the other hand is shaken in its very foundations, is transforming and renewing itself before our eyes" (1991:43). The "magical" incidents in the New Testament has evidently inspired a number of writers. The ascension to heaven of Remedios the Beauty in Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1978), and the immaculate conception of Vutha the Second in *Ways of Dying* (Mda 1995a) and the triplets in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (Chandra 1996) are just some of the more obvious examples.

It is apparent that European writers experimented with magic realism as a literary mode long before it was popularised by the Latin American writers such as Márquez, Carpentier and Feuntes. Baldick and Haffman have located the origins of magic realism in Europe. Baldick asserts that "The term was once applied to a trend in German fiction of the early 1950s, but it is now associated chiefly with certain leading novelists of Central and South America..." (1992). Haffman suggests that from 1890 onwards, the period that marks the beginning of modernism, there has been a move by artists in Europe that has "led to an entirely new conception of the world of things - to the discovery of reality as the magical other" (1965:167).

Critics such as Bradbury and McFarlane have also seen modernism as "a new era of high aesthetic self-consciousness and non-representationalism, in which

art turns from realism and humanistic representationalism towards style, technique, and spatial form in pursuit of a deeper penetration of life" (1991:25). This comment by Bradbury and McFarlane suggests that the advent of modernism marked the beginning of writing that transcended the confines of the "real". The break from realism that modernism signaled would later become more pronounced in post-modernism.

Commenting on the differences between modernism and postmodernism McHale states that "the dominant of modernist fiction is *epistemological*. That is, modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as ... 'How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?'" (1987:9). For McHale "the dominant of postmodernist fiction is *ontological*. That is, postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like ... 'which world is this? What is to be done in it?'" (1987:10). McHale's definition of postmodernism has affinities with the ontological nature of magic realist texts.

Wendy B. Faris has also suggested that postmodernism has contributed to the evolution of magic realism. In her article "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction" (1995), Faris identifies the following as the primary characteristics of magic realist fiction:

- (i) The text contains an 'irreducible element' of magic, something that we cannot explain rationally (Faris 1995:167). In terms of the text unusual happenings are viewed as though they are "really" happening. Remedios the Beauty, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1978), "really" ascends to heaven. Similarly

Toloki and Noria in Mda's *Ways of Dying* (1995a) "really" walk into the exotic world of magazine pictures that adorn the wall of her shack.

- (ii) The story is anchored in the real world, thereby maintaining the "realism" in magic realism, distinguishing it from much fantasy and allegory (Faris 1995:169). The point here, as mentioned earlier, is that magic realism does not shed the "realism" tag in magic realism. Facts and details and objects that determine everyday life are given magical qualities. The treatment of time and history in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1978), *Midnight's Children* (1981), *The White Hotel* (1981) *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) are all examples of the interruption and rewriting of history and the transformation of linear time for the purposes of the narrative.
- (iii) The reader may accept or reject the occurrences of magic in the text, thereby pausing from time to time between an apparently contradictory unfolding of events (Faris 1995:171). The birth and death of Noria's son on two separate occasions in *Ways of Dying* (1995a) is not as easy to accept as is the eternal youth of the dancing girl Dikosha in *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b).
- (iv) The reader experiences the closeness or the erasure of the boundaries between two worlds "[There is a stress on] the magic of fiction rather than the magic in it" (Faris 1995:172). Faris argues this point by stating that the magic realist vision exists at the intersection of two worlds, and uses the example of a subject or object positioned at an imaginary point inside a double-sided mirror that reflects in both directions. Furthermore boundaries between the world of the living and the dead become fluid and are easily crossed as in *One Hundred*

*Years of Solitude* (1978), *Midnight's Children* (1981), *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1953), *Beloved* (1988), and *The White Hotel* (1988).

(v) Magic realist texts subvert conventional ideas about time, space, and identity (Faris 1995:172). The abrogation of linear time and the movement of subjects from the present to the future and past or from any one time zone to the next. The transformation of time and space through magic is an essential feature of magic realist narratives such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1978), *Midnight's Children* (1981), *The White Hotel* (1988), *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b). In Mda's novella, *Melville 67*, the protagonist Thabang exists in two worlds and in two time periods. He lives in Melville, Johannesburg in the present, and as a warrior in the Kingdom of Ghana in the fourth century A.D.

Faris has also listed the following elements of magic realism which she maintains indicates affinities with postmodernism:

- Metafictional dimensions are common in contemporary magical realism: the texts provide commentaries on themselves, often complete with occasional *mises-en-abyme* [italics mine] - those miniature emblematic textual self-portraits...
- The reader may experience a particular kind of verbal magic - a closing of the gap between words and the world, or a demonstration of what we might call the linguistic nature of experience...
- The narrative appears to the late-twentieth-century adult readers to which it is addressed as fresh, childlike, even primitive. Wonders are recounted largely without comment, in a matter-of-fact way, accepted - presumably - as a child would accept them, without undue questioning or reflection; they thus achieve a kind of defamiliarization that appears to be natural or artless.

- Repetition as a narrative principle, in conjunction with mirrors or their analogues used symbolically or structurally, creates a magic of shifting references...
- Metamorphoses are a relatively common event (though not as common as one might think). They embody in the realm of organism a collision of two different worlds...
- Many of these texts take a position that is anti-bureaucratic, and so they often use their magic against the established order...
- In magical realist narrative, ancient systems of belief and local lore often underlie the text...
- ... a Jungian rather than a Freudian perspective is common in magical realist texts; that is, the magic may be attributed to a mysterious sense of collective relatedness rather than to individual memories or dreams or visions...
- A carnivalesque spirit is common in this group of novels. Language is used extravagantly, expending its resources beyond its referential needs (1995:175-184).

Faris supports the claims made by writers such as Carpentier that magic realism thrived in Latin America because of the unique nature of its socio-political climate. Furthermore she suggests that magic realism remains a distinctive mode in Latin American fiction, because in dismantling European codes of realism it enabled a broader transculturation process to take place, a process that created the space for postcolonial Latin American literature to establish its identity.

Like Faris commentators such as Pache (1985), Slemen (1988), Hutcheon (1989) and Cooper (1998) have also situated magic realism within a postmodernist literary paradigm. Hutcheon (1989:31), for example, maintains that, that the challenges offered by magic realism to genre distinctions and the conventions of realism are certainly part of the enterprise of post-modernism and postcolonialism. Not all postcolonial literary theorists, however, share the view

that magic realism is the common factor in postmodernism and postcolonialism. Kumkum Sangari, for example, has categorically voiced her disagreement with this view. She argues that the novels of writers such Márquez and Rushdie are framed within a social and political context within which the search for meaning is one of the main concerns of these writers. Sangari (1987:430) draws attention to skepticism about meaning by postmodernists in Europe and America, in support of her argument that magic realism is not a postmodernistic enterprise.

Writers such as Carpentier, Flores and Leal, to use Chanady's term, have "territorialised" magic realism as a uniquely Latin American/Caribbean literary phenomenon. Their views on its application, however, are often contradictory as will be seen in the discussion below. What is clear however, is that Latin American writers have seen magic realism as a mode particularly suited to questioning and rejecting the institutionalised hegemony of the European world view. The Western view of reality shaped by rationalist thinking, which has determined the form of realist novels is, according to Magee (1978:58), founded on the principle of the assumption that there is a dualism between the the observers and the world that they are observing. This dualism, according to Magee, pervades Western philosophy and science and is only peculiar to the West, especially in the last three or four centuries.

What is emerging from our consideration of the viewpoints expressed above is the realisation that realism and magic realism in literature can only function to the limits allowed or imposed by language. Magic realist writers,

however, recognising the limitations of language have attempted to intensify reality through the use of magical devices.

The following model, that I have devised, might offer clarity in this regard:

In the story of Aladdin and the Magic Lamp, Aladdin is able to achieve his wishes by conjuring up the Genie who lives in the magic lamp. By simply stroking the lamp, the Genie appears and awaits Aladdin's bidding. Aladdin and the Genie can be read as metaphoric and metonymic representations of the act of writing and creating meaning. Aladdin is both author and reader, the Genie both meaning and the imagination. The stroking of the lamp would represent the act of writing through the medium of language. In this model constructed in the spirit of the magic in magic realism, the self that engages in the act of writing, and the meaning that s/he creates are both connected by the lamp or language. Neither can give meaning to his existence without the medium of the lamp. Consciousness as we know it, is determined by our ability to use language.

Magic makes possible the existence of the Genie in Aladdin's world, the world of space, time and causation, without being bound by these determinants and without having to return to the lamp. Thus we could say the Genie, or our metaphor for language and imagination, are free of the restrictions imposed by realism.

The realists might point out, however, that should the Genie choose to live only in Aladdin's world he loses the ability to be a Genie. They might even see the lamp as an essential constituent of his being. Magic realist writers would not deny the needs for the Genie to remain in contact with the lamp and to return to it. The

lamp, they would realise, determines who the Genie is, and that it imbues him with the infinite power of magic to fulfill Aladdin's wishes. The realists might only acknowledge the value of metaphor in this model and see Aladdin, the Genie and the lamp as separate entities, each performing a specific function. The magic realist, however, combines metaphor and metonymy and the three aspects of our model could easily become interchangeable. Metonymic representation in our model would suggest further the possibility for Aladdin, the Genie and the lamp to exist in a time and space of their choice. This would imply that the magic realist text is written by the self that is the author or the self that is the subject of narration. It would also suggest that while the meaning of what is real, is inhibited by language, it is also freed by the imagination which Genie-like grants the wishes to re-constitute a particular reality. It is language then, or rather the magic realist conception of it that frees the imagination and hence the writer and reader, or in our theoretical model, Aladdin and the Genie. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1978), for example, the text is "deciphered" by Aureliano who uncovers the "story" of his life from a Sanskrit text narrated by Melquíades. In *Midnight's Children* (1981), characters inscribe their own histories by moving Genie-like from one part of the world to the next. It would seem then in magic realist texts the world is not a two-sided sign as Saussure, has suggested, but rather a multiplicity of signs, each interacting with the other. This might be further clarified by the Hindu concept of *Maya*, the illusionary nature of "being" that Nietzsche has also made reference to in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1909). One can understand, therefore, the attraction that magic realism has for writers in postcolonial countries where

there is a general belief that the self is capable of transcending the limitations of space and time.

The belief in reincarnation, the spirits of the ancestors, and the self as a fragment of a Unified Self are just some of the essential constituents of such a belief. These mythical beliefs, combined with the “magical” landscape of the Latin American countries has led to the particular strain of magic realism that has emerged from this region.

What should be evident from our discussion thus far is that magic realism is a literary mode that has originated from the ideas formulated in Europe. In its literary manifestation, however, it received a unique treatment in Latin America, Africa and other postcolonial countries, where the literary models from the centre were questioned, appropriated and adapted. Furthermore the unique folkloric elements from these countries were incorporated to create modes of magic realism peculiar to them. Magic realism as a literary mode has evidently drawn its inspiration from the conflict and simultaneous existence of pre-modern folk communities with bureaucratic modern institutions, their alienation from these structures, and their need to use language in innovative ways to describe their particular constructions of reality. As Reckwitz (1993:17) points out: “Where normative and socially accepted constructions of reality stand revealed as being problematical, thereby necessitating the exploration of new, unfamiliar aspects of reality, the established literary figurations normally used to encode our visions of the world are no longer sufficient” (1993:17).

It is reasonable to argue that contending views on the origins of magic realism should alert us to the fact that there is no essential magic realism, but it in itself is a shifting signifier having different meanings for different people at different periods in history. In Mda's case his particular mode of magic realism draws from a variety of sources, thereby making his novels both a syncreticism and hybridisation of these influences. This will be demonstrated in our discussions of his novels.

### **Magic Realism: A Historical Survey**

The term magic realism was coined by the German art historian and critic Franz Roh in 1925 to describe the aspects of Post-Expressionism in painting, characterised by sharp-focus detail and a return to realism. In later criticism the term has been used to describe various types of painting in which objects are depicted with photographic accuracy but because of contradictory elements or unusual juxtapositions convey a feeling of unreality. It is doubtful, however, whether Roh would have anticipated the complex debates that would subsequently arise in appropriating and defining magic realism as a literary mode. While painting and literature are said to be mimetic, viewpoints as to the manner in which they construct reality have initiated a wide range of philosophical and literary debates. Roh's own attitude to painting is a case in point, as it evidently stems from a perception of reality shaped by the experience of living in Germany at a time of social and political tensions resulting from the First World War.

Writing on Post-Expressionist paintings in Germany, Roh commended the new style of painting which broke away from expressionism. Published in 1925 (See 1995), the same year as Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, his *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Europaischen Malerei (Post-Expressionism, Magic Realism: Problems of the Newest European Paintings)*, contains the first critical use of the term "magic realism". In this publication Roh commends the reaction of Post-Expressionist painters against Expressionism. Roh viewed negatively art that displayed "an exaggerated preference for fantastic, extraterrestrial, remote objects" (1995:16).

The term magic realism, as used by Roh, pertained specifically to post-expressionist paintings. The "magic" and "realism" that Roh discovers in post-expressionist paintings provided the name for the new movement in art that he had originally called "Post-Expressionism". In reference to his coining and use of the term "magic realism" he states:

I attribute no special value to the title "magical realism". Since the work had to have a name that meant something, and the word "Post-Expressionism" only indicates ancestry and chronological relationship, I added the first title quite a long time after having written this work. It seems to me, at least, more appropriate than 'Ideal Realism' or 'Verism,' or 'Neoclassicism,' which only designate an aspect of the movement. "Superrealism" means, at this time, something else. With the word "magic" as opposed to "mystic," I wish to indicate that the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it (1995:15-16).

Roh has evidently used the term “magic realism” as a means of convenience to categorise the movement in art that rejected Expressionism, and depicted the familiar and ordinary, in new ways.

Although he points out the positive and refreshing ways in which magic realism differs from Post-Expressionism, Roh does not give any clear definition of this new movement in art. In Roh’s formulation, the term magic realism signified an intense engagement with realism, contradictory to the contemporary use of the term in literature where it implies a text’s departure from realism in order to depict alternative visions of reality. If nothing else, Roh’s naming of the new movement as “magic realism”, albeit in an artistic context, created an awareness of a new aesthetic in search of reality that the artist had to discover. In a Germany recovering from the ravages of the First World War, magic realism in art offered fresh perspectives for reinterpreting the real. As Irene Guenther comments in her article “Magic Realism, new Objectivity, and the Arts during the Weimar Republic” (1995) “The goal of this post-World War 1 art was a new definition of the object. ... The juxtaposition of “magic” and “realism” reflected far more the monstrous and marvelous *Unheimlichkeit* within human beings” (1995:36). Guenther points out that Roh’s *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus* (1925) was immensely successful as a treatise on magic realist art and more especially as his formulations were appropriated and transformed into literary concepts (1995:55).

Roh's concepts were very influential in Latin America, mainly in the field of literary criticism and in the writings of Arturo Uslar-Pietri and Enrique Anderson Imbert. Roh's formulations also impacted on Johan Daisne and Hubert Lampo in the Netherlands. In Germany the influential writers such as Ernest Junger, Alfred Doblin and W.E. Suskind also came under the influence of Roh. Furthermore the movement received favourable reception in Italy and Belgium. In spite of the effect Roh's book had on writers, it actually makes very scant reference to magic realism as a literary device. Roh has identified two literary tendencies, one which had links with Rimbaud, and the other with Zola. He has also made reference to evidence of magic realism in the writings of Carl Sternheim, Heinrich Mann, George Kaiser, Berthold Brecht, and Walter Mehring.

Guenther's own investigation into the appropriation of magic realism by literary critics and writers has led her to discover that the Austrian, Alfred Kubin, was one of the first writers to use magic realism as a literary device, as evidenced in his novel *Die Andere Seite (The Other Side)*, published in 1909. Guenter quotes Kubin who states that the principal meaning of his book was the "insight that it is only in the bizarre, exalted, and strange moments of existence that the highest values lie, but that which is painful, indifferent, everyday, and irrelevant contains the same mysteries" (1995:57). Kubin's novel is said to have exerted a powerful influence on subsequent German and Austrian literature and he is believed to be the precursor of magic realism in literature in these countries.

Magic realism gained wide currency as a literary form in Germany after 1948. It not only became established, but it also influenced the writings of

Austrian and German literary figures such as Franz Werfel, Alfred Döblin, Thomas Mann, Ernest Jünger, Franz Kafka, Robert Musil, Hermann Kasack, and Günter Grass. The fact that Kafka is included in this list of writers is significant in view of debates as to his influence on Latin American authors.

Guenther's claims that Roh's publication in 1925 had a decisive influence on writers in Spain have been contested by Latin American writers such as Alejo Carpentier. Guenthier is of the opinion that the Spanish translation by the *Revista de Occidente* in 1927, directly influenced European writers who had settled in Central and South America during the time of the Second World War. Roh's original ideas on magic realism, however, have undergone various forms of transformation. It is debatable therefore whether Roh has actually had any influence on contemporary writers who use magic realism as a literary mode. This argument has also been advanced by Carpentier, who does not acknowledge the influence of Europe in the textual evolution and spread of magic realism in Latin America.

There is a tendency by Latin American and other non-European writers to claim magic realism as a uniquely non-European phenomenon informed by the particular myths, cultures, languages, traditions, histories and geographical specificities of these non-European peoples. Difficulties in defining magic realism as a uniquely non-European phenomenon are indicative of the complexities that arise in any search for a cohesive theory that underpin it. Reality and magic or illusion are locked in perpetual opposition yet simultaneously conjoin to form

disjunctures and syncreticism in the magic realist narratives, thereby providing the ideal context for the magical, or what Carpentier called *lo real maravilloso*.

Carpentier coined the term *lo real maravilloso americano* to characterise what he believes to be a solely Latin American method of literary representation. His views on the subject are expressed in the preface to his first novel, *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of the World*, 1949), also published in 1967 in a collection of his essays, *Tientos y diferencias* (*Approaches and Distinctions*). A series of his lectures was published in 1981 in *La novela hispanoamericana en vísperas de un nuevo siglo* (*The Hispanic American Novel on the Eve of a New Century*).

Carpentier argues that the type of magic realism formulated by Roh does not describe that which is found in Latin American literature. He is rather dismissive of Roh and asserts that what Roh called *magical realism* was simply painting where real forms are combined in a way that does not conform to the daily reality of the Latin American people (1995:104). He is equally dismissive of surrealism which he views as a “*manufactured mystery*” that has no purpose (1995:104). Carpentier’s own notion of the “marvelous real” was inspired by the unique architecture and landscape of Haiti, during his stay there. He places the “marvelous real” above surrealism and the European-type of magic realism as formulated by Roh. Central to his argument is the belief that the unique nature of the Latin American landscape and cultures demanded modes of representation that could not be found in literary modes imported from Europe. In defending the

“marvelous real,” Carpentier believes that he is highlighting the work of writers who depict the specific flavours of what constitutes Latin America.

Although Carpentier calls for a literature that expresses the singular nature of Latin America, he does not provide any convincing definition of “marvelous realism”. In spite of the inconsistencies in Carpentier’s theories no study of the history of contemporary magic realism can ignore the contributions that he has made in contextualising magic realism in Latin American writing. Carpentier saw close links between what he called the “marvelous real” and the spirit of “the baroque”. By “baroque” he meant those aspects of literature, architecture, art and music which displays diverse cultures and nationalities that comprise the Latin American and Caribbean regions. As he puts it in his article, “The Latin American Novel” (1985), “To describe a baroque world, we needed a baroque style: the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ merged when faced with a baroque reality” (1985:154). Carpentier attributes the unique nature of Latin American fiction to the intersection of the “baroque” inherent to the various cultures with “the marvelous real”.

Carpentier evidently has a sense of “the marvelous real” based on his admiration, reverence almost, for the Latin American socio-cultural and geographical landscapes. What must be pointed out, however, is that in spite of Carpentier’s denial of the influences of surrealism, the word “marvelous” was also used by surrealists and their definition coincides with his, as evidenced by Breton’s *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (1994). Carpentier sees Latin America being uniquely positioned for the magical, “Because of the virginity of the land, our upbringing, our ontology, the Faustian presence of the Indian and the black man, the revelation

constituted by its recent discovery, its fecund racial mixing [*mestizaje* ], America is far from using up its wealth of mythologies. After all, what is the entire history of America if not a chronicle of the marvelous real?" (1995:88). Carpentier's reference to "racial mixing" and "mythologies" would suggest that these are important constituents of the "marvelous real" or magic realism. The tremendous power of myths on the Latin American and Caribbean people will be taken up for discussion later in this chapter.

Carpentier's views on "the marvelous real" have also been echoed by influential Caribbean writers such as Jaques Stephen Alexis and Wilson Harris. Both writers celebrate their nations' cultural diversity, and central to their views is the belief that there is a need to inculcate in their people a sense of self that is not informed solely by European norms and values. Implicit in the thinking of these writers is the view that European rationality, premised on Cartesian principles of individual reason, be replaced by the recognition of a communal and folk self. Thus the exaltation of the people and their religious and cultural heritage is an important theme in the literature of the region. Consider, for example, the following explanation of what informs the creative impulse of Haitian artists:

Haitian artists made use of the Marvellous in a dynamic sense before they realised they were creating a Marvellous Realism. We became gradually conscious of ~~the~~ fact. Creating realism meant that the Haitian artists were setting about speaking the same language as their people. The Marvellous Realism of the Haitians is thus an integral part of Social Realism, and in its Haitian form it follows the ~~same~~ preoccupations. The

treasury of tales and legends, all the musical, choreographic and plastic symbolism, all the forms of Haitian popular art are there to help the nation in solving its problems and in accomplishing the tasks which lie before it. The Western genres and organons bequeathed to us must be resolutely transformed in a national sense, and everything in a work of art must stir those feelings which are peculiar to the Haitians, sons of three races and an infinity of cultures (1995:197).

Both Carpentier and Alexis are actively involved in mythologising the cultural and social diversities of their “people”. One immediately notices here the type of mythical construction of a unified “people” and common identity derived from the philosophy of Négritude developed by Aimé Césaire and Leopold Senghor, and black nationalism advocated by Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi. The failure of these movements in recognising the split subjectivities within black nations has been documented elsewhere by writers such as Es’kia Mphahlele and Wole Soyinka. Alexis’ reference to Haitian artists “speaking the same language as their people” is important, however, as he alerts us to what has become one of the salient features of magic realism: the celebration of the folk-tales and the celebrations of the peasants. This is what Alexis refers to as the “treasury of tales and legends, all the musical, choreographic and plastic symbolism, all the forms of Haitian popular art...” (1995:197). Mda too sees magic realism as a literary mode that celebrates the lifestyle and values of peasants. In *When People Play People* (1993a), for example, Mda has alluded to the power inherent in the individual stories told by peasants. Mda has made a strong case for what he has called “Simultaneous dramaturgy” and “forum theatre”. In both cases peasants in the

rural villages are allowed to interact with the actors and thereby play an active role in telling and acting out their stories.

Angel Flores is credited with having introduced magic realism as a concept in literary criticism (Chanady 1985:17). In his article “Magical Realism in Spanish American Literature”, published in 1955, he does not employ Carpentier’s term “the marvelous real” in his description of South American literature. He chooses rather the term “magical realism”, an obvious borrowing of Roh’s “magic realism”, to describe the literature that he has surveyed in Latin America. Flores also disagrees with Carpentier’s contextualising of magic realism as a uniquely Latin American and Caribbean phenomenon. In his discussion of the literature produced by Jorge Luis Borges, he traces links with Europe, in particular the writings of Franz Kafka. Indeed, he cites 1935 as the year in which magic realism as a literary mode made its arrival in Latin America. Flores regards Borges’ *Historia universal de la infamia (A Universal History of Infamy)*, published that year, as being significant in that it appeared in Buenos Aires, shortly after Borges’ translation into Spanish of Kafka’s short stories. Flores also observes the influence of Chesterton, H.G. Wells, Arthur Machen, Marcel Schwob, Ellery Queen on Borges, but he maintains that Kafka’s influence on him has been the most “profound and revealing” (1995:13). In drawing up the socio-literary map in which magic realism flourishes, Flores attempts to construct a literary model that is essentially historical, yet defined by geographical and cultural determinants. He views magic realism as a literary movement that gains momentum only after it is popularised by Borges.

Flores regards Borges' short story "The Garden of Forking Paths", as being the text which firmly established magic realism as a literary force in Latin American countries. He cites examples of writers in Cuba, Mexico, Ecuador, Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina who were directly influenced by a circle of writers led by Borges, Mallea Bianco, Silvina Ocampo, and Bioy Casares. Flores refers to all these writers as "[m]eticulous craftsmen" and goes on to add that, "one finds in them the same preoccupation with style and also the same transformation of the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal" (1995:114). An important aspect of magic realism for Flores is the existence of time as a "timeless fluidity" and the fact that the unreal happens as a part of reality. He quotes the example of Gregor Samsa, a character in Kafka's short story "The Metamorphosis" (1978) who wakes up one morning and finds that he has been transformed into an insect: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect" (1978:7). Flores argues that Samsa's condition is accepted as being an almost normal event by the other characters. While Carpentier offers a descriptive account of magic realism ("the marvelous real"), Flores has attempted an analysis of the elements that constitute magic realism. His study of magic realism has led him to conclude that, "The practitioners of magical realism cling to reality as if to prevent "literature" from getting in their way, as if to prevent their myth from flying off, as in fairy tales, to supernatural realms" (1995:115-116).

The statements by Flores on magic realism, however, has not gone unchallenged. While recognising the contributions made by Flores to the debates

on magic realism, Luis Leal disagrees with Flores' definition of magical realism mainly for two reasons. He does not consider all the writers listed by Flores as being authors of texts that belong to the "movement" of magic realism. Furthermore he does not accept that the movement was started by Borges in 1935 and established between 1940 and 1950. Although Leal acknowledges that the term magic realism was first used by Franz Roh, he credits Arturo Uslar Pietri for being the first person to have used the term in a literary sense, in his book *Letras y hombres de Venezuela (The literature and men of Venezuela)*, published in 1948. To support his argument Leal quotes Pietri who states in his book: "What became prominent in the short story and left an indelible mark there was the consideration of man as a mystery surrounded by realistic facts. A poetic prediction or a poetic denial of reality. What for lack of another name could be called a magical realism." (1995:120).

In tracing the establishment of magic realism in literature as a Latin American phenomenon, Leal also acknowledges the work done by Carpentier. Leal's articulation of magic realism is perhaps the first attempt at a comprehensive definition of magic realism. He points out that:

Unlike surrealism magical realism does not use dream motifs; neither does it distort reality or create imagined worlds, as writers of fantastic literature or science fiction do; nor does it emphasize psychological analysis of characters, since it doesn't try to find reasons for their actions or their inability to express themselves. Magical realism is not an aesthetic movement either, as was modernism, which was interested in creating works dominated

by a refined style; neither is it interested in the creation of complex structures per se (1995:121).

Leal rejects Kafka's influence on Borges or as the source from which Latin American writers have obtained their inspiration for the use of magic realism. He points out that the difference between Kafka and writers such as Borges who use magic realism "is the creation of infinite hierarchies" and "the principal thing is not the creation of the imaginary beings or world but the discovery of the mysterious relationship between man and his circumstances" (1995:121-122).

Like Carpentier, Leal locates the literary practice of magic realism firmly within the Latin American geographical region. In his formulation of the principles that constitute magic realism he turns to the work of Latin American writers such as Arturo Uslar Pietri, Miguel Angel Asturias, Alejo Carpentier, Lino Novas Calvo, Juan Rulfo, Felix Pita Rodriguez, Nicolas Guillen and argues his point that, "Magical realism is not magical literature either. Its aim, unlike that of magic, is to express emotions, not evoke them. Magical realism is, more than anything else, an attitude toward reality that can be expressed in popular or cultured forms, in elaborate or rustic styles, in closed or open structures". (1995:121).

In Leal's formulation the magic realist writer does not have to explain the mystery of events, unlike fantastic literature in which the supernatural conflicts with a world governed by reason. According to Leal the magic realist writer experiences an almost transcendental state that allows him to interpret the multi-dimensional world that we live in. Amaryll Chanady (1985) has observed that whereas Flores stresses fantasy as an essential impetus for the creation of

innovative fiction, Leal explicitly rejects the limitations imposed by reason. She comments further that for Leal magic realism is an attitude towards reality rather than a literary mode or technique.

Leal's definition of magic realism evidently imbues the writer with the ability to transcend the limits of language as s/he tries to "untangle" it. Problems with Leal's formulation arise when one questions whether words can successfully express emotions, and whether the magic realist writer is privileged over other writers in his experience of the "supreme state". His statements, however, have affinities with what Michael Dash has called "the positive imaginative reconstruction of reality developed in the consciousness of the folk, by the contemporary writer" (1995:200). In advocating the writer's conscious engagement in redefining the limits of reality, Leal is evidently stating that writers are free from the restrictions imposed on them by reason. What Leal is actually stating here is that logic and the psychological domain, which are important aspects of Western discourse, have a limited role in magic realism. Leal claims that magic realism is rooted in emotion rather than reason. Such a claim would assume the use of language to express such emotion. It is precisely this that makes his argument problematic. Representing magic realism or realism for that matter through the medium of language creates the problem of overcoming the limitations of language. Ironically, while Leal and Carpentier, to use Chanady's term, have tried to territorialise the imaginary, and to locate the search for the "magic real" within the Latin American and Caribbean countries, their views are quite consonant with Nietzsche's assertion that "underneath this reality in which we live

and have our being, another and altogether different reality lies concealed, and that therefore it is also an appearance..." (1909:23). The notion of alternative forms of reality in literature cannot be viewed as the sole preserve of Latin American and Caribbean writers. Nietzsche's reference to another reality beneath the one in which we live has its counterpart in palimpsest, the textual strategy of layered narratives, and intertextuality. Both these strategies imply the links between texts. As Barthes (1988) has pointed out, the text does not contain a single meaning, but is rather the space in which a number of other texts that have been influenced by other writings merge and clash. Arguments by Carpentier and Leal have relevance, however, when one considers the unique ways in which Latin American writers, in particular, have used magic realism as an expression of their socio-historical conditions. Also they have highlighted the innovative attempts made by native writers to use language in new ways to express illusion and reality through the medium of the text, and the complex nature of assigning value to what is meant by magic realist fiction or realist fiction even.

These debates and ideas will be useful tools in our exploration of the elements of magic realism in Mda's novels, *Ways of Dying* (1995) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995). Our analysis of the devices and strategies that Mda has used to construct his novels will hopefully inform us to what extent the elements of magic realism in Mda's novels are consistent with those in the other magic realist texts mentioned in our discussion. Mda's texts cannot be viewed in isolation or within the context of a single literary tradition. The shaping influences of various modes of magic realism and whether Mda's novels are hybridised

produced of these influences will be revealed in our discussion of *Ways of Dying* (1995) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995).

### **Bakhtin and Grotesque Realism**

Bakhtin's notion of carnival and "grotesque realism" are of special significance to the study of magic realism. While "grotesque realism" cannot be regarded as being fully consistent with magic realism it does have in common with magic realism the opposition to bureaucratic ideologies and dogma. Indeed the carnivalesque is a common trope of magic realist texts, as we have noted earlier in Faris's principles of magic realism: "A carnivalesque spirit is common in this group of novels. Language is used extravagantly, expending its resources beyond its referential needs" (1995:184). In *Rabelais and his World* (1984), Bakhtin discusses carnival as a subversive means of inverting rigid hierarchies in society. Change, regeneration and growth in society is advanced through carnival, which assumes importance as a secret weapon against the institutions of the state and church. As Michael Holquist points out in his prologue to *Rabelais and his World* (1984), "The 'grotesque realism' of which so much is made in this book is a point-by-point inversion of categories used in the thirties to define Social Realism" (In Bakhtin 1968:xvii). In attempting to find new ways of countering the oppression of the Social Realism imposed on the Russian people, Bakhtin turns to the carnival as a means of demonstrating the power of laughter. Bakhtin sees carnival as a powerful force in social transformation. Carnival, according to Bakhtin, recognises the

multi-layered nature of society, which corresponds to what he called heteroglossia. In positing the positive aspects of carnival Bakhtin makes the claim that: “Carnival … embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part” (1984:7). Implicit in Bakhtin’s idea of the carnival embracing “all the people” is the belief that carnival makes all people equal, thereby questioning the assumptions of social hierarchies. In this respect carnival has affinities with magic realism in that both seek to defy the boundaries of class, space and time. By stating that carnival has “laws of its own freedom” Bakhtin sees carnival as having the power to overcome social and language barriers. Carnival, then, becomes the positive means by which time and space can be appropriated by the common “folk” so that they could escape from reality of Stalinist Russia. As Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd (1989:35) point out the democracy of carnival is a collective democracy grounded in the bodily functions of the present, and the rediscovery of the discourses of the concrete, rather than in abstract notions of identity and history.

This view of reality, and the attempt to dehistoricise the present has strong affinities with the project of magic realist writers whose characters define their own histories. Commenting on the role of history in *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) Mda has pointed out that in his novels he has attempted to write the histories of the little people: “Those grand historical events had a great effect at a personal level on those little people who had no part in them. But it is crucial to

emphasise that the characters themselves are also creators of history and they struggle to create their own histories" (Naidoo 1997:258).

Mda's use of carnival in *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She plays with the Darkness* (1995b), has enabled him to portray characters who use laughter as a means of survival. This is congruent with Bakhtin's presentation of the carnivalesque as a mechanism that makes possible social equalities through the suspension of established subject positions and patterns of speech. Toloki and Dikosha the chief protagonists in *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) respectively, are social outcasts. The narrative voice in these novels often resorts to carnivalesque language in relating their stories. According to Bakhtin (1984) "festive laughter" establishes links between people. Carnival and the various devices it uses to elicit laughter, offer new ways of perceiving and even interpreting reality. Folk-culture and carnival play an important role in defining social realities in Mda's novels and many of the magic realist texts discussed in the chapters that follow.

For Bakhtin the "essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation." (1984:21). He sees this "degradation" as being important in bringing to earth all that is "high, spiritual, abstract" (1984:21). The primary idea here is that there can be no growth and renewal until the physical self is affirmed. The opposition between hierarchies and the ambivalent role of carnival imagery in highlighting the constant flux between life and death are central to Bakhtin's thinking on the grotesque body. He draws a clear distinction between the "grotesque body" and the "classical body" to show us that the grotesque body is constantly renewed

since it is “unfinished”. The “classical body”, however, is rounded and finished. The perfection claimed by the “classical body” ironically also spells its death and makes it sterile and inanimate. Bakhtin’s distinction between the “classical body” and the “grotesque body” can also be read as metaphors for the distinction between magic realism and realism. In Mda’s novels, *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) carnival is used effectively to highlight the absurdity of life. Our discussion of Mda’s novels in the chapters that follow will also include references to his use of carnival.

Bakhtin’s main focus in *Rabelais and His World* (1984) is the role of laughter in literary history. Folk humour played a powerful role in the early Middle Ages, however it is during the Renaissance that it enters official literature. This corresponds with the time in which magic played an important role in literature as pointed out earlier by Traister (1984).

The value of carnivalesque imagery for Bakhtin is its ability to create a discursive space in the novel for highlighting and deriding established hegemonies. This again is contiguous with the purpose of magic realist texts. In his commentary and analysis of *Rabelais and his World* (1984), Bakhtin celebrates the positive aspects of grotesque realism as a revitalising creative force in literature as opposed to Socialist Realism:

The fact is that the new concept of realism has a different way of drawing the boundaries between bodies and objects. It cuts the double body in two and separates the objects of grotesque and folklore realism that were merged within the body. The new

concept seeks to complete each individual outside the link with the ultimate whole - the whole that has lost the old image and has not yet found the new one. The notion of time has also been transformed (1984:53).

While Bakhtin's summation of grotesque realism and carnival as a socio-political dynamic is suspect, considering the crushing power of Stalinism, their value as literary devices cannot be ignored. Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, the many distinct "voices" inherent in a narrative text, substantiate the value of the text as a means of questioning prevailing hegemonies. In many of the magic realist texts that will be discussed later, civil wars and political strife are common themes. In both the novels under discussion Mda has focused on the struggles of ordinary people against political oppression.

According to Bakhtin grotesque realism focused on the grotesque images of the body, which evoked laughter. In Rabelais, Bakhtin finds a writer who glorifies the body which eats, drinks, copulates and defecates in an exaggerated and grotesque way. The central principle at work in Rabelais, according to Bakhtin, is the use of carnivalesque laughter as a revolt against existing values and prevailing realities. This would imply that the carnival of the grotesque functions as a counter-discourse against authority, a purpose it shares with magic realism. As Cooper points out "magical realism and its associated styles and devices is alternatively characterized as a transgressive mechanism that parodies Authority, the Establishment and the Law, and also the opposite of all of these, as a domain of play, desire and fantasy for the Rich and Powerful" (1998:29). In *Ways of*

*Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), Mda has used elements of carnival that are common in most, if not all, magic realist novels. It could be said, therefore, that carnival is an essential structuring principle of magic realist texts.

Commenting on the connection between the grotesque body and carnival, and the novel and the world, Michael Holquist makes the point that ‘‘Dialogism figures a close relation between bodies and novels because they both militate against monadism, the illusion of closed-off bodies or isolated psyches in bourgeois individualism, and the concept of a pristine, closed-off, static and truth wherever it may be found (1990:90).

The observations made by Holquist (1990) on the parallels between the novel and the grotesque body of the world are significant to our consideration of *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b). The carnivalesque as we shall see later is an important trope in both the novels by Mda, mentioned above. Indeed, Mda echoes Bakhtin and Nietzsche when he states, ‘‘...the greatest death is laughter’’ (1995:153). The use of carnival in Mda’s novels and his growth from a Black Consciousness-influenced writer to the postcolonial author who uses magic realism is discussed in the chapters on the novels.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **BIOGRAPHY**

Zanemvula Kizito Gatyeni (Zakes) Mda is a prolific writer whose literary publications include plays, novels, poems, and articles for academic journals and newspapers. His creative work also includes paintings, exhibited internationally on a regular basis, and theatre and film productions. He has a permanent exhibition of his paintings in Stockholm (Mac Liam 1995:3), and has held solo exhibitions in Bristol, England, Edmonton, Canada, and in Athens and Ohio, in the United States (Mbele 1989:63). Local and international film producers consult Mda regularly for his expertise, particularly on documentaries relating to social development programmes. Indeed, an important aspect of Mda the literary artist is his commitment to depicting the conditions of economically and socially disadvantaged individuals and communities. In this regard Mda has stated: "...the role I hope to play as an artist, and the role I hope my work plays is that of social commentator and social commentary. I am against art for art's sake - in African aesthetics that is a strange concept. However, I do not want my work to act as social comment only ... I want to rally people to action" (Holloway 1988:83).

Commenting elsewhere on his role as a writer, Mda has pointed out that he is "in the God business". Experimenting with elements of magic realism enables Mda to play "God" and to construct reality as he perceives it:

I make things happen the way I want things to happen, however much that might contradict what you might call objective reality. Basically I felt that these were my creations. The world that I was writing about was the world that I created. I am in the God business. I am the God of that world, so I can make things happen the way I want them to happen. Whether in the so-called objective reality things happen in that way, or not, is not the issue for me (Naidoo 1997:250).

The active role of the author in the process of writing, and the engagement with the characters in his plays and novels is a crucial one for Mda. In emphasising this role of the writer Mda alerts us to the fact that for him, perceptions of reality, and penning characters who experience alternative forms of reality are integral aspects of his prose. Mda has pointed out on more than one occasion that he interacts with his characters: "...when I write novels, the process of writing itself is such great fun that when I am finished I find that I miss the characters with whom I have been interacting" (Naidoo 1997:257). Being in the "God business" and "interacting" with his characters demonstrate that Mda's literary projects are intrinsically linked to the possibilities offered by magic realism in freeing the imagination. The point that must be emphasised here is that magic realism in Mda's literary work is not a formulaic convention, but springs rather, from the impulse of an author who firmly believes that magic is an important aspect of his life. In this regard Mda has asserted:

After I discovered magic realism as a literary mode I became quite fascinated by it. As I have said I had been writing in this mode without knowing that it existed as a literary movement, or how it really

worked. When I looked at other works and what other people were saying about it I found that what they were saying was what I was doing as well. I remember writing some notes for myself on magic realism, in order to understand what it was that I was doing and to trace the origins of magic realism itself as a literary concept, as a critical concept rather than a practice. If I may quote from my notes. 'In magic realism, the supernatural is not presented as problematic'. That is what I tried to do in my work. I write about the supernatural, but I don't present it as being problematic, in other words my characters take it for granted. In *She Plays with the Darkness*, for example, the characters are not surprised by the sudden appearance of the mist. Another example: 'An absurd metamorphosis is described as if it did not contradict our laws of reason'. That is what I do, or what I try to do (Naidoo 1997:256).

The "notes" referred to by Mda are quoted from Chanady (1985). In her definition of magic realism as a literary mode she states, "In magic realism, the supernatural is not presented as problematic ... the absurd metamorphosis is described as if it did not contradict our laws of reason." (1985:23-24). Chanady's research on magic realism has evidently supported Mda's application of magic realism in his novels. Mda the writer, however, has been influenced by a number of sources. Among the most important of these are: the influences of his family, the political situation in South Africa during the apartheid years, the environment in which he grew up, and African folk-culture.

Mda was born in Sterkspruit, Herschel District, which is located in the Eastern Cape Province, on 6 October 1948. This is also the year in which the National Party took control of the government in South Africa. He was the eldest

of four children, three boys and a girl, born to Ashby Peter Solomzi, an attorney, and Rose Nompumelelo Mda, a nurse. Soon after his birth his family moved to Johannesburg. Mda's political consciousness was shaped quite early in his life. He spent his early childhood in Orlando East, and later in Dobsonville, Soweto. Visits by family friends such as Walter and Albertina Sisulu and Oliver Tambo, who were in the A.N.C. Youth League with A.P. Mda, gave the young Zakes Mda opportunities to meet political figures who would have an important bearing on South Africa's political future. He also lived with Nelson Mandela for a brief period at the Mandela residence in Orlando, in the early fifties, and cherishes many happy memories of his stay with Mandela.

The politicians mentioned above exerted a strong influence on the political consciousness of the young Zakes Mda. It was from his father, A.P. Mda, however, that Zakes learnt political tolerance and the importance of accepting people of different political orientations. A.P. Mda is remembered by Nelson Mandela in his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994), as someone "whose analytical approach, ability to express himself clearly and simply and tactical experience made him an excellent politician and an outstanding leader of the youth League" (1994:101). Mandela goes on to state that "Mda was a lean fellow with no excess weight, just as he used no excess words. In his broad-minded tolerance of different views, his own thinking was more mature and advanced than that of Lembede. It took Mda's leadership to advance Lembede's cause (1994:101)". Similarly, Ndebele in his article "The Writers Movement in South Africa" (*Rediscovery of the Ordinary* 1991), pays the following tribute to A.P. Mda:

Some forty years ago, in July 1947, Jordan Ngubane, the editor of *Inkundla ya Bantu* placed ‘an idea before the nation’s thinkers’ in the form of a suggestion that an African Academy of Arts be established. Anton Lembede, the first president of the Youth League of the African National Congress, welcomed the idea, adding that ‘we need African Artists to interpret the spirit of Africa’.

But credit for a more detailed expression of support for Jordan Ngubane’s call must go to A.P. Mda, an active and articulate member of the Youth League. Not only did Mda embrace the idea, he also gave substance to it by suggesting its form and functions” (1991:133).

A.P. Mda’s strong sense of commitment to African art, which included sculpture, painting and literary manuscripts, evidently impacted on the young Zakes Mda. Mda acknowledges this when questioned about the influences on his writings:

There are many things that influenced me. The main one being that I come from a family of readers. From an early age I started reading comics and books which I still read to this day. These are the same comic books I used to enjoy as a child. Also of course my father was a teacher and later he became a lawyer. He was reading all the time and he was writing as well. These were political writings. So, growing up in an environment where everyone was reading, one developed that habit of reading. I strongly believe that to be a good writer you need to read. Actually, reading made me a writer, because when you read stories, you are fascinated by these stories, and you want to create your own stories. I didn’t start as a writer as such, obviously, because you need to be literate in order to write. Those were my early influences. I did not start as a writer. I started as a painter, drawing and such, which I still do today (Naidoo 1997:247).

Zakes Mda singles out the culture of reading and writing that A.P. Mda created in his household as the “main” influence on his early development as a writer.

A.P. Mda later left Johannesburg for the Transkei to serve articles under George Matanzima, in order to qualify as an attorney. Zakes Mda stayed with his mother, Rose, who was working as a nurse at a clinic in Dobsonville where they lived. He recalls that during this period he was rebellious and avoided school and joined street gangs. When Mda was not involved in fighting other gangs at Zondi and in Meadowlands, or selling sweets in trains, he would occupy himself painting pictures of such Zulu warriors as Phoshozwayo. In order to ensure that he obtained a good education and to “isolate him from mischief” (Peterson in Mda 1993:viii), Mda’s parents sent him to live with his grandmother in Herschel where he attended St. Teresa Mission High School. Mda was later joined by his father who returned to Sterkspruit to establish a legal practice. Mda’s years at Sterkspruit left an indelible impression on his mind of the “desolate landscape and the stark poverty that characterised most peasant households” (Peterson in Mda 1993:viii). Mda’s work with peasant communities as director of the Marotholi Theatre Company, which sought to promote social empowerment through community engagement and the recovery of folk-culture, is probably his reaction to poverty in Sterkspruit. Aspects of folk media such as dance, songs and story-telling are consistent with the elements of magic realism that are evident in *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b). Sterkspruit is also

responsible for the “three central formative elements in Mda’s perceptual matrix: region, family and religion” (Horn in Mda 1990:viii).

A.P. Mda’s activities in the A.N.C.’s Youth League, and later in the P.A.C., led to confrontation with the security police and a period of imprisonment in 1963. After securing bail he escaped to Lesotho. A.P Mda’s escape resulted in the young Zakes Mda being subjected to constant harassment by the security police. He recalls that they would pick him up from Tapoleng primary School where he was a pupil, load him in the back of a pick-up van, put him in front of an impressive array of uniformed white officers who sat there and bombarded him with questions about his father and people who visited his home. When he hesitated, or said something they did not like, they barked in unison, “Jy sal begin om te lieg! Jy sal begin om te lieg!” According to Mda they said it in a rhythmic manner, that was both beautiful and menacing. Mda admired the way they delivered that line with such dramatic impact. This scene and the desolate landscape of Herschel inspired him to write.

Mda’s career as a writer began with poems that he wrote in Xhosa. His poems were later published in magazines such as *Staffrider*, *The Voice* and *Oduma*. His contributions to anthologies include poems published in *Soho Square* (1992), *Summer Fires* (1983) and *New South African Writing* (1977). In 1986 Mda published *Bits of Debris*, a volume of his poems.

Mda’s prose publications began in 1963, when at the age of fifteen, his short story, “Igqira lase Mvubase”, was published in a youth magazine called *Wamba*. A year later, after completing Form Eight, Mda joined his father in exile

and went to Peka High School in the Leribe district. He continued writing, but turned to English as a medium of expression. This is mainly because he was gradually losing touch with Xhosa and had not gained sufficient proficiency in Sesotho, a language used in Lesotho. His apprenticeship as a playwright also began during this period.

Mda did not find exile in Lesotho to be a bad experience. A.P. Mda was only one of two lawyers in the country at that time, and he enjoyed the support and friendship of the people of southern Lesotho who accepted him warmly as one of their own. He was therefore relieved of the hardships suffered by other young people who were fleeing South Africa to Lesotho, from the Poqo movement in the Eastern Cape and in later years the 1976 Soweto youth rebellion. When he was seventeen, Zakes Mda became a political activist and was sworn into the P.A.C. by John Pokela, who later became President of the P.A.C. By that time Mda had already gained a reputation for his poetry, and more especially for his paintings.

Mda turned his attention to writing more seriously when he was completing his Junior Certificate. That year he saw a play called "Sikalo" by Gibson Kente that was being performed in Maseru. Although he was impressed by the music and dances, Mda found the play to be structurally deficient and the story line to be rather shallow. He recalls that while he watched "Sikalo" he, "vaguely remembered watching a performance of the very first play by Kente called "Manana the Jazz Prophet", a few years earlier, and it did not have any impact on me. When I saw "Sikalo", I was still at high school, and I was quite fascinated by the fact that it was quite a terrible play ... I thought it was a truly awful play. I felt I could write

something better" (Naidoo 1997:248). Mda then decided to write his own plays and acquainted himself with the farces of Joe Orton, the early comedies of Wole Soyinka, and the work of Harold Pinter and Tennessee Williams. In his first play "Zhaigos", written while in grade eight, Mda attempted to capture the Kenteesque elements of melodrama, song and dance, but with a much stronger story-line. As he points out:

When I started writing plays in the mid-sixties there existed in the various townships a form of theatre that seemed to be based on a set formula. The plays, and these always incorporated a lot of song and dance, were characterised by a policeman who was normally very slow-thinking and insensitive, a wily priest, a comical school teacher, the street-wise and fast-talking tsotsi, a diviner who was sometimes but not always a fake, a shebeen-queen, and a township gossip. The plot would involve a church service, usually of the 'Zionist' denomination. A jail scene, a wedding, and a funeral. There would be plenty of weeping, exaggerated gestures and forceful speech. The different storylines were almost always based on this formula (Mda in Daymond *et al* 1984:295).

After "Zhaigos", Mda wrote "A Hectic Weekend", which he set in a park. In this play he shed the Kenteesque influences prevalent in his first play. Mda attributes the influence in "A Hectic Weekend" not only to African playwrights such as Soyinka, but also to Shaw and Fugard. After his introduction to the plays of Athol Fugard, Mda chose to write plays without melodrama, song and dance. He

acknowledges the influences of certain aspects of Fugard, especially in his early plays:

Only recently someone who saw my play *The Dying Screams of the Moon*, commented that there was a lot of Athol Fugard in it as far as the structure is concerned, and so on, and I won't say no to that. In fact I think I owe a lot of my style to Athol Fugard, by either reading or seeing his work. I created a different type of theatre from Fugard, it was completely different, but still there was a lot of him too in the style that I used then (Naidoo 1997:249).

On completing high school Mda taught at a rural school, then later joined Barclays Bank as a clerk. Two years later he resigned and established his own sales promotions and marketing agency in Leribe. During this time he was also studying to be a lawyer, and eventually joined a law firm in Maseru, the capital of Lesotho, as an articled clerk. The character of the later Radisene in Mda's novel, *She Plays With the Darkness* (1995b), is in fact based on Mda's own life during his years as an articled clerk. Also, the character A.C. Malibu, who appears in both *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) and Mda's play "The Nun's Romantic Story" (*Four Plays* 1996b), is based on the person that Mda worked for during this period. It did not take Mda long to realise that unlike his father, law was not for him. He subsequently gave up his legal studies and turned his attention to painting and writing.

In 1976 Mda obtained a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the International Academy of Arts and Letters in Zurich, Switzerland, for which he had studied through correspondence. Thereafter he taught at 'Mabathoana High

School in Maseru. He taught at other high schools as well, and also worked as a Cultural Affairs Specialist at the American Cultural Center. It was during this period, in 1978, that Mda's play "We Shall Sing for the Fatherland", (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), written in 1973, won the Amstel Merit Award in the first Amstel Playwright of the Year competition. The following year Mda's play "The Hill" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), written in 1978, became an outright winner and received the Amstel Playwright of the Year Award. The publication of *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland and Other Plays* in 1980 enabled Mda to gain admission to Ohio University for a three-year Master's degree in Theatre. On completion of this degree Mda studied for a Master of Arts degree in Mass Communication, specialising in Radio and Television, at the same university.

In the Eighties Mda became actively involved in anti-apartheid and disinvestment campaigns. His play "The Road" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), written in 1982, interrogates the nature of racism, political oppression and economic exploitation in South Africa. This play won the Christina Crawford Award of the American Theatre Association in 1984. By this time Mda's reputation as an international playwright of note was firmly established, having had his plays performed in a number of countries like South Africa, USSR, USA, Malawi, Lesotho, Scotland and Zimbabwe. He explains the creative impetus that motivated his writings, clearly identifying with the philosophies of Black Consciousness, as follows:

As with most artists of my generation, the historical developments in South Africa, including the June '76 resistance, have had a great impact on my work. Although writing thousands of miles from the country the characters and situations I depict in my drama continue to be motivated by social, political, economic and historical factors in South Africa. I have dismally failed to respond to the strange aesthetic concepts so cherished in the western world that profess that artistic creation is an end in itself, independent of politics and social requirements. I draw from the traditional African aesthetics where art could not be separated from life (Mda in Daymond *et al* 1984:296).

Mda returned from the United States in 1984 to work in Lesotho. He worked for the Ministry of Information and broadcasting as a Controller of programmes on Radio Lesotho, and as a consultant for television projects. The following year he joined the national University of Lesotho as a lecturer in the Department of English. Within a period of seven years he became a Senior Lecturer and then full Professor. It was during this stage that Mda enrolled at the University of Cape Town for a PhD thesis titled, "The Utilisation of Theatre as a Medium for Development Communication: An Examination of the Lesotho Experience". This thesis was later published as *When People Play People* (1993a). The degree was awarded to him in 1989, and by his own admission gave him the confidence to write his novels:

For the past twenty years or so I have always wanted to write a novel. But I never thought that I would be able to do it. I did not think that it was

possible for me to write sustained prose because I am really a dialogue person, more suited I thought, to the writing of plays. I thought that I needed particularly special skills to write a novel. After I wrote my PhD thesis of more than four hundred pages, a process which I found difficult and painful, I realised that I could write sustained prose. I had gained the confidence that I needed to write a novel, but shelved the idea of writing a novel thereafter (Naidoo 1997:251).

During his tenure at the University of Lesotho, Mda continued to write plays, having them performed internationally. He points out that most of these plays, and his other creative writing, were on the South African situation, served to reinforce the efforts of the anti-apartheid movement. Mda has also worked with the peasants in the mountains of Lesotho, using theatre as a means of social mobilisation. The setting of the rural village in *She Plays With the Darkness* (1995b) in fact resembles a village where Mda conducted one of his “Theatre for Development” projects. Mda informs us that, “What you see in the novel is actually the way people live in Lesotho. The caves mentioned in the novel are actually there in the mountains in Lesotho. Those are the bushmen caves with the paintings, and unfortunately they are fading away now because people have written all over them. The village that I have mentioned in *She Plays with the Darkness* is actually based on a village that is high up in the mountains in Lesotho, and it can only be reached by plane” (Naidoo 1997:254).

In 1991 Mda worked as Writer-in-Residence at St Chad’s College of the University of Durham, England. It was here that Mda wrote his play “The Nun’s

Romantic Story" (*Four Plays* 1996b). Mda informs us that "the play was influenced by events in Lesotho when the state of emergency was declared in 1970. It is a loose composite of real-life events that happened there during that period, and people who actually lived then. Many readers have commented that these events are very similar to events that happened in a number of Latin American countries. Hence the play was translated into Catalan ... and into Castilian. The hope was that the Castilian version would also be performed in Latin America" (1996b:xxiii). In pointing to the similarities between Lesotho and Latin America, Mda's comment is instructive in that it establishes links between magic realism in his novels and that of the Latin American writers. A year after his stint at St. Chad's, Mda returned to the United States as research Fellow at Yale University. His unpublished play "The Dying Screams of the Moon", and his first novel, *Ways of Dying* (1995b), were written during this period.

In 1993 Mda took up the position of Visiting professor at the University of Vermont and in 1994 he returned to South Africa, and was appointed Visiting Professor at the University of Witwatersrand, a post that he held until 1995. At present he is a fulltime writer, painter, theatre practitioner and filmmaker, based in Johannesburg.

The thrust of Mda's work is evidently his strong commitment to social development through art. He has served as UNICEF consultant on social mobilisation since 1988. Mda's plays, poems, art works and his novels all have in common his concern with the social development and education of the underprivileged. As director of the Marotholi Travelling Theatre Company, he has

enjoyed considerable success in producing self-help plays in which peasant communities participated. The Maratholi Travelling Theatre was funded by the German Small Projects Fund, and Mda became its first director in 1985. He played a crucial role in this project in that he created opportunities for disadvantaged communities to find solutions to their problems and thereby empower themselves. Mda reintroduced to these communities the African concept of participatory theatre, based on oral performance art, which he has called “Theatre for Conscientisation” (1994a:206). In explaining the purpose of the Maratholi Travelling Theatre, Mda has pointed out: “The initial stage of any development activity is communication, and throughout the life of the activity communication continues. Without the essential social interaction through messages between ‘development agents’ and the people, the so-called beneficiaries of development actions, we cannot in any meaningful way talk of development” (1994a:203).

In his publication *When People Play People* (1993a), Mda has affirmed his commitment to rural communities because he believes that “they form the vast majority in the Third World, and are the most disadvantaged and oppressed” (1993a:ix). Mda points out in his preface to *When People Play People* (1993a) that he has noted wide discrepancies in the distribution of wealth between urban and rural areas and “between the centre and the periphery in both urban and rural areas” (1993a:ix). In his use of descriptive categories such as “centre” and “periphery”, Mda demonstrates his affiliation to writers of the postcolonial world who articulate their concerns about the fact that in countries of the “Third World” urban centres have often become monuments of empire and as such they serve as

the antithesis of rural areas. In this respect Mda's work is consonant with the more prominent writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, Ben Okri, Salman Rushdie, Allende and Chandra who have also used magic realism to depict aspects of life in rural areas in the postcolonial world. It is interesting to note that all these writers have drawn their inspiration from the folk-culture of peasant communities.

Mda's purpose as writer, however, is didactic and sharply focused on the usage of language and folk-culture as tools for conscientisation and social development. In this regard he has asserted: "The basis of the work of adult educators such as Paulo Freire, Augusto Boal, Ross Kidd and Michael Etherton lies in participatory research, conscientisation, and development" (1993a:10). It is not surprising therefore that the issues in both *Ways of Dying* (1995) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995) relate to social development. It is interesting to note that non-fiction, in particular Mda's PhD thesis, later published as *When People Play People* (1993a), provided him with the confidence to write fiction.

### **Shifting Paradigms: Black Consciousness Resistance to Postcolonial Eclecticism**

Writing during a period that can be equated with what Gramsci has termed the "interregnum" (1985:276), South African black writers such as Mtutuzeli Matshoba, Njabulo Ndebele, Lewis Nkosi and Mbulelo Mzamane attempted to function as the voices of the black disenfranchised. They used literature to forge a collective black identity and to address the political issues of the day. In this

regard black writers were responding to the call by Black Consciousness to “realise the awakening of the sleeping masses” (Biko 1988:46).

Black Consciousness, as propounded by SASO (South African Student Organisation) leaders such as Steve Biko, Nyameko Barney Pityana and Abram Onkgopotse Tiro, grew out of an international climate with the rise of Black Power in America, the achievement of independence of several African countries, and the “Paris Revolution” of French students in 1968. In this context the writings of people such as Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Franz Fanon and Aimé Césaire were influential in providing the impetus for a Black Consciousness identity “which emphasised group rather than individual freedom, and the 1970’s in South Africa would see Black Consciousness function as a powerful tool for shaping the literary-political sensibilities of most local black writers” (Naidoo 1992:3-4). The inspiration for a collective black identity is clearly seen in the following words by Stokely Carmichael:

So ... whether or not we are individually suppressed is nonsensical and is a downright lie. We are oppressed as a group because we are black ... not because we are apathetic, not because we're stupid, not because we smell, not because we eat watermelon and have good rhythm. We are oppressed because we are black, and in order to get out of that oppression, one must feel the group power that one has (1972:1305).

There is a similar assertiveness in Steve Biko’s call for resistance against the institutions of apartheid:

The System concedes nothing without demand, for it formulates its very method of operation on the basis that the ignorant will learn to know, the child will grow into an adult and therefore demands will begin to be made. It gears itself to resist demands in whatever way it sees fit. When you refuse to make these demands and choose to come to a round table to beg for your deliverance, you are in fact calling for the contempt for those who have power over you. This is why we must reject the beggar tactics that are being forced down our throats by those who wish to appease our cruel masters. This is where the SASO message and cry becomes very relevant - 'BLACK MAN, YOU ARE ON YOUR OWN!' (1991:28).

In its South African manifestation, the ideology of black solidarity "sought to fill the vacuum created by the silence of the Sixties, a silence which was the result of harsh censorship laws imposed by the state, the detention of political activists such as Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Govan Mbeki" (Naidoo 1992:4). It was also during this period, in 1963, that Mda and his family had to leave South Africa and live in exile in Lesotho. This was because his father, A.P. Mda, a Pan African Congress activist, was subjected to intense pressure by the Nationalist government. In this regard Peterson has stated that, "In order to understand the thematic preoccupations of Mda one has to appreciate the special influences that were brought to bear on his thinking by his life in exile (In Mda 1993:ix). The banning of works by Es'kia Mphahlele, Todd Matshikiza, Bloke Modisane and Dennis Brutus, among others, in terms of the Suppression of Communism Act was a feature of the time.

The rise of Black Consciousness, especially after 1969, led to the articulation of a black voice in the Seventies, a decade in which Black Consciousness would attempt to free the black man from the negative sense of self imposed on him by white authority and to forge a collective will of the black people. Significantly Zakes Mda emerged as a writer during this period and in 1978, two years after the Soweto uprising on 16 June 1976, Mda won the Merit Award of the South African Playwrights Society, the first of many awards. Mda, then, has been deliberately involved in the Black Consciousness philosophy of using literature to raise black consciousness and to assert black solidarity. In attempting to foster dialogue within the oppressed black community and create a forum for the constructive self-criticism, writers of the Black Consciousness era, including Mda, sought to use English to cut across ethnic divisions and to express black unity and resistance against apartheid. Commenting on the aesthetics of his writing during this period Mda asserts:

To blacks folk art has always been functional. Our art was not for its own sake, it serves a function in society. Our theatre dealt with the issues of the day. As theatre practitioners we get our material from society. We had a lot of good theatre that dealt with issues in a tough manner. It was not a theatre of protest at all, but a theatre of resistance. It mobilised people to fight against the system (Rapola 1996:56).

Political upheavals in the eighties, the mass mobilisation of the people, intensified military activity by the A.N.C. and increased international pressure on South Africa saw the gradual decline in the role of Black Consciousness. Further problems arose

when issues such as class, gender, ethnicity, and language problematised the notion of a collective black self. The eighties also saw a change in black literature from overt protest to resistance. Commenting on this phenomenon, with regard to theatre, Mda states:

Some theatre practitioners in South Africa went beyond protest, a position which began with the advent of the Black Consciousness movement in the 1970s. The case against protest theatre was that by its nature it attempted to reveal the blacks to the whites, and placed the onus on the blacks to prove their humanity. The theatre practitioner was no longer interested in creating a theatre of complaint. This position gained momentum in the early 1980s. It is during this period that the Theatre of Resistance gained a mass following, and became the main genre with practitioners from all the ideological leanings in the South African liberation politics spectrum (1996b:xvi).

The post-apartheid period of the late Nineties and the “trauma” of apartheid mentioned earlier by Van Wyk has necessitated a literature that focuses on human struggles that are common in developing nations throughout the world. By using tropes associated with magic realism, the carnivalesque and the apocalyptic, Mda engages with the re-constitution of the black self through the appropriation of literary devices that expand the range of his narratives to record issues that are common to developing countries throughout the world. The adoption of such a textual strategy suggests Mda’s affinities with postcolonial writers whose projects

have included the use of language in reclaiming the self submerged by the colonial experience and its concomitant cultural baggage.

Oral narrative techniques and elements of African cosmology are important constituents of *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b). Mda's project as a novelist evidently involves the equivocation of the intricate juxtaposition of life and death, and in reflecting tensions between the carnivalesque and apocalyptic, in ways that are almost self-parodying. The novels frame a "world" recovering from the self-negating effects of apartheid, by a process of resurgence and assertion of individual and collective energies. Négritude and Black Consciousness which advocated a solely collective black self, based on communal needs, are replaced by the reality of individual demands which in turn combine to facilitate group identity and group consciousness. These centrifugal and centripetal forces, simultaneously fragment and solidify the black self in its search for an ontological status that is reconstituted in the present.

Mda's attempt at using magic realism to rewrite time and space, and the consequent laws of cause and effect, is a substantial step in the construction of novels by black South Africans that affirm the self. The magic realist novel attempts to ensure that these "boundaries [are] to be erased, transgressed, blurred, brought together, or otherwise fundamentally refashioned" (Zamora and Faris 1995:6). In doing this Mda supports and yet refutes claims by post-colonial theorists such as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin that:

...it has been the project of post-colonial writing to interrogate European discourse and discursive strategies from its position within and between two worlds; to investigate the means by which Europe imposed and maintained its codes in its colonial domination of so much of the rest of the world. Thus the reading and rewriting of the European historical and fictional record is a vital and inescapable task at the heart of the post-colonial enterprise. These subversive manoeuvres rather than the construction of *essentially* national or regional alternatives, are the characteristic features of the post-colonial text. Post-colonial literatures/cultures are constituted in counter-discursive rather than homologous practices (1989:196).

Mda's strategies in his novels evidently operates on various textual planes. One could say, borrowing from Calvino (1987), that his narratives demonstrate different levels of reality. As a black intellectual he is painfully aware of his role as teacher and social critic, a role that he has taken seriously even before he published his novels. His recent play "You Fool, How Can the Sky Fall" (unpublished) , for example, "is a cutting political satire on the antics of a post-revolutionary government that is intentionally close to home" (Bauer 1995:20). In this regard Teresa Devant has observed that:

Mda's works, particularly those produced within the last fifteen years, form a theatre of resistance which aims to conscientise and mobilise the oppressed. In them we find a scrutiny of the society in which Mda's criticism brings out the contradictions, the aspirations and the frustrations of the oppressed. Motivation for the struggle for liberation; traditional versus modern social values, corruption, exploitation and gender issues become central to the analysis (In Mda 1993: xxviii).

It is evident that Mda does not equate post-apartheid with “post-struggle”. The establishment of a black government has not meant for Mda the automatic end of the people’s struggles. Nor has it meant the end to the writer’s role as voice of the people. In this respect Mda still retains elements of the Black Consciousness impulse that writing should encourage solidarities among the people. Even though it could be argued that the notion of the “people” is a mythical construct, it is still an important aspect of Mda’s writings. As Bhekizizwe Peterson points out in his introduction to *The Girls in their Sunday Dresses and other Plays* (1993b), Mda has “retained a keen interest in the nationalist politics of the liberation movements and followed with fascination the cultural efficacy of the B.C. Movement in the seventies and eighties” (In Mda 1993:xi).

In the late Nineties, the role of the South African black writer is rather complex and at times complicated. Mda, however, is emerging as a writer and social commentator who engages with both local and international issues, thereby extending his writing into the international postcolonial space. Although he has been described as being “publicity shy in the extreme” (MacLiam 1995:3), he has not hesitated to be critical of the present government in his plays and his newspaper articles. Consider, for example, his statements in the article entitled “Government news agency would do nobody any good, least of all the government,” that appeared in the *Sunday Independent* on 2 June 1996. The article is quoted at length, as it provides an incisive view of Mda the writer articulating his concerns about the ownership of information.

The government-owned and operated national news agency proposed by Solly Kotane, the head of the South African Communication Service is the mother of all hare-brained schemes. It is informed by outdated notions that began with the debates on the New International Information Order.

The order was perceived by the developing countries as an anti-imperialist effort to achieve decolonisation. It sought to correct the serious inadequacies and imbalances that masked global information flows.

Almost two decades ago the Non-Aligned Movement lamented in its New Delhi declaration: "The means of communicating information are concentrated in a few countries. The great majority of countries are reduced to being passive recipients of information disseminated from a few centres."

The New Delhi declaration further stated that in a situation where the means of information were dominated and monopolised by a few, freedom of information really came to mean the freedom of the few to propagate information in the manner of their choosing, and the virtual denial to the rest of the right to inform and be informed.

These concerns are legitimate, for this situation of cultural imperialism continues even today...

Western news agencies ... are commercially driven and will report only the sensational, the exotic and the apocalyptic. That is what sells. Good news stories of great developments that are happening in many African countries that we never hear about have no commercial value. Hence the countries whose existence we know about are embroiled in some form of civil strife ... The image of Africa that exists throughout the world, and is shaped by the gatekeepers of the Western world. Europeans and Americans decided what Africa should know about itself...

The service must stop functioning like a Soviet-style propagandist and find ways of reversing the present one-way flow of information from the centres of power to the peripheral rural areas and

urban slums. Instead, it must create two-way communication channels where the marginalised will not only be consumers of messages emanating from government, but can communicate their own views.

Most of all, the service must study the communication environment of the marginalised people, the majority of whom are illiterate, and use those modes that will be most effective in the circumstances.

In other words, the service must not cater for the First World section of our population, which in any case is heavily served by a wide range of sophisticated media.

The government needs to communicate, but a government-controlled news agency is neither viable nor desirable in South Africa (1996a:14).

The article quoted above clearly demonstrates the unique position in which a writer such as Mda finds himself. Apartheid South Africa had created for the black writer the situation of writing back to the “centre” constructed by apartheid hegemony, while simultaneously writing back to the metropolitan centre of Empire. This double-bind in which the black South African subject is twice othered has not suddenly disappeared with black political power. This point is also made by Mbulelo Mzamane: “In the final analysis writers, researchers, and scholars are supposed to interrogate the very assumptions by which we live. The political lexicon of most South Africans is replete with such expressions as “the new South Africa” and “post-apartheid” South Africa. These phrases sometimes reflect our critical acceptance of statements from our leaders and shallow analysis from other quarters such as the media” (1996:16).

Mda, however, is a writer who has not failed to interrogate the assumptions that a black controlled government automatically guarantees unilateral

freedom for the masses. In the article quoted above (1996a:14) he points out that South Africa still has a first world component which is in fact the “centre” of white economic power. The silencing of black people through censorship and imprisonment is now continued through economic constraints. What Mda is eluding to here, is the difficulties faced by the majority of South Africans who are rendered voiceless because of their lack of access to means of mass communication. Also there is the danger of the present government in repeating the control measures practised by the apartheid regime. In this regard Mda’s argument against state control of the news media has affinities with other postcolonial writers who have highlighted the “crucial function of language as a medium of power” (Ashcroft *et al* 1989:38). In November this year (1998) Mda won the prestigious Thomas Pringle Award by the English Academy of South Africa for his incisive television reviews in which he is often critical of the state controlled South African Broadcasting Corporation.

The Foucauldian concerns over the power of language expressed by postcolonial critics is central to Mda’s project as a writer. His commitment to ensuring a voice for the “people” is clearly visible in his poems, plays, literary essays, and more recently in his novels.<sup>1</sup> Writing at a time of transition and transformation, has meant that language is important in reflecting the tensions that exist when individual and group consciousness cohere and fragment. In Mda’s novels the textual tensions between the carnivalesque and apocalyptic reflect a South Africa experiencing the pain and joys of a new order. While the carnivalesque would suggest laughter, joy, death and re-growth, so too does the

apocalypse in signaling the death of the old and the birth of the new. The writer who exists in such a milieu cannot escape the influences of these forces. The following comments by Zamora could easily apply to Mda, the writer:

Apocalypse asks us, and the novelists who employ it, to consider profoundly important questions about human history and destiny, about the relation of the individual to the human community, about suffering and the transcendence of suffering, about the end of life and after. Apocalyptic modes of apprehending reality appeal to us in our secular times because they rest on the desire that history possesses structure and meaning, if only the structure and meaning we attribute to it in our literary forms and fictions. It is by dealing seriously with this fundamental human desire that novelists create fictions of enduring relevance (1993:24).

In view of our discussion thus far it would be possible to state that Mda's use of magic realism, the carnivalesque, the apocalyptic, African folk-culture and the absurd positions him as the eclectic writer who has been influenced by a multiplicity of sources, or rather realities.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ELEMENTS OF MAGIC REALISM IN MDA'S PLAYS

This chapter will focus on Mda the playwright and a discussion of a selection of his plays will reveal whether there are elements that point to magic realism in these works, and whether these elements are also prevalent in his novels.

Reviewers of Mda's plays, performed and written have not always recognised Mda's use of devices such as absurdism and surrealism and the fantastic, pointing to his predisposition towards magic realism very early in his career as a writer. David Galgut's review of Mda's plays in the collection titled *And the Girls in Their Sunday Dresses* (1993), for example, points to Mda's use of contradictory devices such as absurdism and realism. In his review of "Joys of War" (*And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses* 1993) Galgut refers to Soldier One's meeting with Nana and Mamma and Nana's role as a soldier as being "a major cop-out" (1993:82) on Mda's part. He believes such events in the play are predictable and implausible. He goes on to state that:

Why this is particularly disappointing is that Mda is a much better writer than he allows himself to be. Time and again he demonstrates his capacity to write with insight and truth about people. But he seems to want it all ways: to be both Absurdist and Realist, representational and presentational, true to life and politically correct. In trying to embrace opposites, his writing is sometimes eclectic, sometimes just confused. All too often the work is undermined by its own contradictions (1993:82).

Galgut has obviously not identified Mda's use of a dramatic device that enables him to portray a world where absurdity and reality intermingle. Galgut is also short sighted in his review of the play "And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses" (*And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses* 1993). In his analysis of the incidents in the play, he states that he is left with a "feeling of vague confusion" (1993:79). He points out that:

There is much ... that can only be believed in terms of the dream-logic of Absurdism. This is clearly not reality we're dealing with. Yet, very suddenly, the laws of this stage-world change and we hear dialogue from another genre altogether...

And at the end of the play, when the Woman finally reaches the depot, the Lady sheds her character and becomes an office girl serving her. This is perfectly acceptable theatrical convention, but only if it's employed consistently and not simply once or twice when the moment requires it (1993: 79).

Here again Galgut fails to take cognisance of Mda's attempt to fuse reality and the absurd in the play, although he recognises that it "is clearly not reality that we are dealing with" (1993:79). In the play the ability of the Lady and the Girl to change characters and become more attractive or authoritative is the catalyst that transforms their lives from the dreariness and absurd conditions of their lives.

In his review of *The Plays of Zakes Mda* (1990), Ian Steadman generally pays tribute to Mda's skills as a dramatist: "His focus is longer, sometimes projecting a vision of the future, as in the post-liberation world of *We Shall Sing*

*for the Fatherland*, sometimes looking at the effects of apartheid's real world to construct parabolic visions, as in *The Road*" (1991:202). Steadman makes the following general statement on Mda's dramatic technique:

The collection is an important one because it shows a playwright dealing with characters deformed by politics, but in ways which explore dramatic technique. Mda is exploring the dramatic-literary features of his craft while confronting political realities in perhaps a more dramaturgically interesting way than we have seen since the era of protest theatre reached its height and then began to repeat its own formulae in the mid-1980's (1991:202).

Martin Orkin, in his book *Drama and the South African State* (1991), which surveys the attempts made by playwrights and performers to use drama as a weapon against apartheid, identifies Mbongeni Ngema and Percy Mtwa as "perhaps the most successful practitioners in recent decades with township as well as city audiences" (1991:221). Orkin, however gives Mda only a brief mention and does not recognise Mda's use of innovative dramatic device in portraying the absurdity of South African politics during Nationalist Party rule. Furthermore Orkin does not give Mda the same prominence as other South African playwrights such as Herbert Dhlomo, Athol Fugard, Lewis Nkosi, Gibson Kente, Matsemela Manaka, Maishe Maponya, and Mbongeni Ngema. Orkin merely mentions the dates and venues where "We Shall Sing for the Fatherland" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990) and "Dark Voices Ring" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990) were

performed. The few lines on Mda conclude with Orkin's reference to the banning and subsequent uplifting of the ban on "Dark Voices Ring" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990):

Zakes Mda is the author of a number of plays including *We shall sing for the fatherland* and *Dead end*, both of which were produced by Benjy Francis for the Federation of Black Artists in 1979 at the Diepkloof Hall in Soweto. They then ran at the Market and later, in the year, *We shall sing for the fatherland*, was produced with another of his plays, *Dark voices ring* at The Space. When Ravan Press published a collection of his works the volume was at first banned by the Publications Board because of the inclusion of *Dark voices ring*, which is concerned in part with blacks who co-operate with the apartheid system and which implicitly suggests to the young that they leave to join resistance movements abroad. However, a subsequent appeal against the banning was upheld by a committee who, it has been argued, failed to read the play accurately (1991:214).

The trend by literary critics to gloss over Mda's use of the devices that are important in locating Mda as a playwright who sought new modes of literary expression, such as magic realism, is also evident in articles by Anne Fuchs and Myles Holloway. In her article "The new South African Theatre: Beyond Fugard" (1992), Fuchs states that Mda's "concerns in his plays range from those of the migrant workers in the townships and homelands to life in an independent African state. Didactic in form, his plays have been compared with those of Western European authors such as Brecht, Beckett and Pinter as well as with African traditional story telling" (1992:169).

Fuchs touches on an important aspect of Mda's project as a playwright, the value of his plays as vehicles for social development, and observes the influences of African traditional story-telling and Western playwrights, but like Galgut, Steadman and Orkin she does not interrogate the nature of reality in his plays. Myles Holloway, in his article on Mda's play "The Hill" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), which deals with the plight of migrant workers from Lesotho who sell their blood in order to survive, makes the following remarks about the opening sequence of the play:

The surrealistic opening sequence involving the Nun and the Man evokes an atmosphere simultaneously of mystery and sadness. No reason is proffered for the Man's cry of blessing and absolution, nor for the nun's lack of response and admission of sin. But the allusion to the "graveyard" carries ominous connotations of death and sterility, which are reinforced by the obviously artificial "plastic rose" carried by the nun (1989:36).

Holloway comments on the actions of the Nun and the Man in the extract demonstrates a lack of insight into Mda's use of dramatic devices that point to the absurd existence of the characters.

Reviewers of performances of Mda's plays have also omitted to mention Mda's attempt at representing the juxtaposition of conflicting realities faced by the characters in his plays. Press reviewers, however, have generally been generous in their praise for Mda as a playwright. Bauer of the *Sunday Times*, for example, has referred to him as "a legend" (1995:20), while Khumalo of *Weekly Mail and*

*Guardian* has commented on Mda's "genius", (1995:37). Similarly Geralt MacLiam of *The Pretoria News* has called Mda "one of South Africa's most prolific playwrights" (1995:8) and Raeford Daniel of *The Citizen* sees Mda as "the Christopher Hampton of African Theatre" (1995:23).

Mda has asserted that he had experimented with elements that would come to characterise magic realism early in his career. As he points out, "When I started with my first novel *Ways of Dying* I was conscious of a movement called magic realism, and that I was writing a magic realist novel. But basically I was doing what I had done much earlier" (Naidoo 1997:6). To support his argument that he had experimented with magic realism early in his career as a playwright Mda makes reference to his play "The Road" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990):

After I discovered magic realism as a literary mode I became quite fascinated by it. As I have said I had been writing in this mode without knowing that it existed as a literary movement, or how it actually worked. When I looked at other works and what other people were saying about it, I found that what they were saying was what I was doing as well ... Things that seem to contradict the laws of reason, happen in my novels, even in my plays for that matter. They are put there as a matter of fact, as though they do not contradict empirical reality. I see that in a play like *The Road* for instance. The Farmer who is a white Afrikaner, meets the black Labourer during the day, and they share the shade of a tree, because it is very hot. The Farmer is not wearing sunglasses and he looks directly at the Labourer while they talk, but he does not see that the Labourer is black. In a real life situation this would contradict the 'laws of reason'. In the world I create this actually happens and it is taken for granted

without anyone being surprised at such an occurrence (Naidoo 1997:256)

Mda's claim that his plays contain elements that would come to characterise magic realism, will be tested by reference to plays selected from different periods of his career as a playwright.

Mda has stated that although his first play, "Zaigos" was written after watching Kente's "Manana the Jazz Prophet" (Unpublished), he believed that his "storyline was much stronger" (Naidoo 1997:248). According to Mda "A Hectic Weekend" which he wrote after "Zaigos" was influenced mainly by the playwrights that he was reading at the time. Among these he has mentioned Bernard Shaw, Sam Shepard, Tennessee Williams, Joe Orton, Athol Fugard, Wole Soyinka and a number of other West African playwrights (Holloway 1988, Naidoo 1997). In view of the influences of these playwrights on Mda, one can locate him a long theatrical tradition. The movement away from writing a play such as "Zaigos", which Mda has referred to as "Kentesque Township Musical Theatre" was an important one for him. It signaled an early break from the type of theatre that Mda considered to be "too formulaic, too predictable and too dull" (Holloway 1988:83). Mda deviated significantly from Kente in that he chose not to write plays based on the formulae used in Township Musical Theatre. As he puts it, he found that :

Township Musical Theatre was very formulaic, and like the European and American melodrama of the

19<sup>th</sup> century it had its stock characters. In every play the audience would expect to see a dimwitted policeman, often brutal, a priest, a comical school teacher, a shebeen queen, a township gossip who is also a comic relief character, a diviner, a streetwise fast talking hoodlum, and a beautiful ‘sexy’ girl. The plot would involve a church service usually of the African independent churches known as Zionist, a wedding, a jail scene, and a funeral. There would be plenty of slapstick humour, and of weeping. The story would not be overtly political...Township Musical Theatre dealt with the sensational side of life: prostitution, adultery, rape, and divorce. These themes were examined in a simplistic manner, which disregarded causality, and served on the whole to endorse and promote official values (1996b:xiii-xiv).

In crafting his plays Mda chose instead to portray the realities of life, rather than to offer the audience easy entertainment and escapism as was common with Township Musical Theatre. The elements of surrealism, absurdism, the fantastic and the magical prevalent in Mda’s plays has enabled him to “defamiliarise” reality and thereby offer his audiences glimpses of life in oppressed communities. As a playwright Mda has functioned as a social commentator, increasing peoples’ awareness of socio-political injustices. As he himself has stated:

...the characters and situations that I depict in my drama continue to be motivated by social, political, economic and historical factors in South Africa. I have dismally failed to respond to the strange aesthetic concepts so cherished in the western world that profess that artistic creation is an end in itself, independent of politics and social requirements. I draw from the traditional African aesthetics where art could not be separated from life. In our various

African societies the artist was a social commentator  
(In Daymond *et al* 1984:296).

Given Mda's strong views on what he calls "the traditional African aesthetic" it is easy to understand the influences of aspects of African notions of magic in his plays. Our discussions on Mda's plays will reveal, however, a number of influences that have given his plays a strong hybrid quality. Quite often the tensions between the African and Western influences on Mda's plays are manifest in the plot and the actions of his predominantly African characters who question the effects of absurd social values, and conditions on their lives. Tseli and Charley in "Dead End" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), Janabari and Sergeant in "We Shall Sing for the Fatherland" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), Man and Woman in "Dark Voices Ring" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), Man and Young Man in "The Hill" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990) and Labourer in "The Road" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990) are all examples of characters who struggle against the erosion of their humanity. These characters inhabit a world that threatens to rob them of their identity and sense of purpose in life. Quite often characters in Mda's plays attempt to survive the reality that confronts them by seeking refuge in a world that they create in which they have individual power and control. This is consistent with the actions of characters in magic realist texts who find solace in their own worlds. In Mda's *Ways of Dying* (1995a), and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), for example, the respective protagonists Toloki and Dikosha are able to escape to their imaginary worlds whenever the need arises. In "Dead

End" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), written very early in Mda's career as a playwright, he demonstrates the magic realist elements that would come to characterise most of his plays, and later become even more pronounced in his novels.

"Dead End" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), was written in 1966, while Mda was still at school (Holloway 1998:81-82). The play was first performed professionally in Soweto in 1979 and reveals many of the dramatic devices that would characterise the later plays by Mda. Among these are the portrayal of characters who struggle against the harsh realities of their social conditions, the absurd situations in which the characters find themselves, elements of the carnivalesque and the apocalyptic, the dream motif, the merging of the boundaries between fantasy and reality, the quest motif, and the ability of the characters to transcend space and time.

In his introduction to *The Plays of Zakes Mda* (1990), Andrew Horn points out that, "Dead End is very much incunabulum. The dialogue has not yet developed the economy, wit and pace evident in later plays, and is often unconvincing, declining at moments into cliché ... Even the device of the Voice does not really succeed because it is not as fully exploited as it might be, failing effectively to challenge some of the more obvious paradoxes in Charley's attitudes and motives" (In Mda 1990:xi). While Horn is justified in pointing out some of the weaknesses in "Dead End" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), he fails to acknowledge the importance of the "Voice" as a dramatic device that suggests commonalities with the Theatre of the Absurd, popularised by Samuel Beckett,

Arthur Adamov, Eugéne Ionesco and Jean Genet. Mda has stated that he was unaware of Beckett or Ionesco when he wrote his early plays (Holloway 1988, Naidoo 1997), but has acknowledged that his “style was influenced a lot by European theatre” (Holloway 1988:83). In spite of Mda’s claim that he has not been influenced by the leading playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd, a common thread in all his plays is the absurdity of the situation in which his characters find themselves. Many of the characters in Mda’s plays attempt to escape their individual prisons by constructing their own imaginary worlds within the imaginary world of the play. In utilising such devices in his plays Mda is apparently problematising the question put by Keir Elam: “What kind of world is it that, within the conventional bounds of the representation, is constructed in the course of the performance” (1980:99), by asking, “What kind of world is it that, *beyond* the conventional bounds of the representation, *can be* constructed in the course of the performance”.

Our discussion on a selection of Mda’s plays will reveal that the merging of boundaries between reality and the imaginary is consonant with magic realist texts where “magic” is essentially a part of reality. In this Mda has proved that he has been able to transcend the narrow view of protest theatre, and Black Consciousness theatre which affirmed “a mythology of blackness” (Steadman in Trump 1990:319). While the plays of protest theatre and Black Consciousness focused only on the atrocities of apartheid. Mda, in his plays, attempts to explore the human condition, irrespective of colour, creed or location.

In “Dead End” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990) Charley and Tseli struggle against the harsh realities of their lives in order to survive the physical and spiritual decay created by their social conditions. As the title of the play suggests Charley and Tseli have to come to terms with the “dead end” of their lives. Carolyn Duggan makes the interesting point that “when one considers the pronunciation of Tseli one realises that there is some ambivalence in them. The first two letters in Tseli are pronounced in a similar way to the English ‘ch’ and so their names are almost identical thus blurring their identities as individuals” (1997:31-32).

While Charlie and Tseli are the focus of the plot of the play, Mda has introduced in this play the “Voice” that speaks to Charlie. Charlie sees the “Voice” as the voice of God. Charlie converses with the Voice in a way characteristic of narratives where the boundaries between the secular and the divine become indistinct. In Marquéz’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1978) for example, Remeidos the Beauty ascends into heaven, in Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* (1989) Salamacha becomes an angel and in Chandra’s *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1996) the monkey narrator, Sanjay, is in constant communication with the Gods. Mda’s use of this element of magic realism in “Dead End” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), is both innovative and instructive in that it points to his use of this literary mode very early in his career as a writer.

In the following extract Charley’s internal dialogue with God as alterego is portrayed physically through his interaction with the Voice. He perceives his conversation with God as being real:

**VOICE:** Charley!

**CHARLEY:** Please, god, don't let her die.

**VOICE:** I know.

**CHARLEY:** And she loves me.

**VOICE:** Mh.

**CHARLEY:** When I met her she had never known a man before. (*Pause*) Do you hear that? Never known a man before.

**VOICE:** I know, Charley.

**CHARLEY:** (*As if to himself*) She was innocent.

**VOICE:** I Know, Charley. But did you love her?

**CHARLEY:** How can I tell? I cannot say I know my feelings - what they were ... what they are now. What I know for sure is that she gave herself to me. I dare not desert her now. I don't know what you would call that - love, pity or guilt.

**VOICE:** What you did ... why, Charley, why did you do it?

**CHARLEY:** I don't know. Fear. It must have been. We discussed it for a long time, Tseli and I . At first she had been against it. She could not bring herself to do it. But I convinced her. It was for her own good...For a long time...

(*The lights fade in the course of CHARLEY'S speech until dark.*) (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990:5).

In the opening scene above, Charley a pimp, expresses his concern about the physical condition of his girlfriend Tseli. Charley has forced her to drink the concoction of a Dr Zuma in order to abort the baby that she is carrying. Tseli drinks Dr Zuma's "medicine" against her will and she becomes violently ill. Charley attempts to find help for Tseli and runs into Frikkie du Toit, a white man who uses Charley's services to procure black prostitutes. Frikkie, who never completed primary school, employs Charley a matriculant, to supply him with "nice black girls with big boobs and flabby bottoms" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990:16).

The absurdity of the situation of these two men is compounded when Frikkie demands to procure Tseli for a client. He does not accept Charley's plea that Tseli is his girlfriend. Frikkie assaults Charley and Tseli, and with the law advantaging whites, Charley is sent to jail. Tseli, who was given a hard blow on her stomach, is taken away to hospital. Charlie's conversation with God in the opening scene, quoted above, takes place while he is in his prison cell. The scenes in the play alternate between Charley's conversation with God, and flashbacks that reveal his troubled relationship with Tseli. In the apocalyptic ending of the play Charley pleads with God for Tseli's life to be spared.

In "Dead End" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990) Mda presents Charley's dialogue with God, not only as the expression of a guilt-stricken conscience, but also a dramatic device that suggests the absurdity of Charley's situation. This, and the flashbacks that signify an interruption of linear time, is congruent with the magic realist narratives of the writers mentioned earlier, and also of modernism in general. The use of devices associated with magic realism gives religious beliefs and superstitions new currency. Furthermore it points to the absurdity, dehumanisation and "tragedy" of political systems throughout the world, and the universality of man's cruelty to man. Modern technology intensifies this but it also gives power to otherwise insignificant people. The illegitimate and rejected grandson in *The House of the Spirits* (1993), Frikkie in "Dead End" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), Nefolovhodwe in *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and Trooper Motsohi in *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) are some examples of this. Furthermore the transience of fate is also highlighted suggesting that at one moment history

gives power and at another moment it takes it away. In a world of constantly collapsing boundaries even man's relationship with God becomes absurd, and "magic" the only way of preserving one's sense of self. This is evident in the extract below:

**CHARLEY:** I tried. God knows I tried. 'It's not me, sir. It's Frikkie. Frikkie du Toit. You know, Frikkie with the hairy ass. He did that to the girl too.' They did not listen. 'Save it for the judge,' growled the sergeant. Then the moron of a constable: 'he looks a rough one, eh Serge? Fights people all over the streets, eh. Nearly killed the girl too.' And there is Frikkie arms akimbo with a big grin hollering to the police '*Vang 'om*. What are you waiting for? I will report you to the big *baas* at the station.' You see, he was in the right.

**VOICE:** In the right?

**CHARLEY:** In the right. He is white. Say, what is your colour?

**VOICE:** Eh?

**CHARLEY:** Now, now don't get embarrassed.

**VOICE:** What colour?

**CHARLEY:** Don't pretend you don't know. I mean the colour of your skin. Are you black like me, or white like Father Joseph - and Frikkie - or yellowish like Mr Lai down at the laundry?

**VOICE:** I have no colour.

**CHARLEY:** How come you have no colour? Everybody seems to have colour these days.

**VOICE:** Perhaps I am old-fashioned.

*Pause (The Plays of Zakes Mda 1990:19-20).*

The conversation between Charley and God demonstrates the ironies of life in abnormal societies, and even more so the absurdity of people who make sense of

their world through classification. In “Dead End” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990) a state and a world obsessed with skin colour has accepted the notion that everyone, including God, has to have a colour. Frikkie humanises God by according God a value system, thereby making a plea for the universal colourlessness of human beings. The contradictions in this are also apparent. Frikkie uses the colour obsession of the state when it suits him. Mda, however, has anchored the conflict of the play in Frikkie’s desire for Charley’s black girlfriend, rather than in the question of colour. It is these complexities in the play, written early in Mda’s career, which elevate him above the ordinary Black Consciousness playwrights who focused only on issues of skin colour.

The satire in the above scene is obvious, but even more so, Mda skillfully weaves a scene in which elements of tragedy and comedy combine to present the reality of Charley’s life. While the reality of Charley’s conversation with God, might appear to be absurd in the sense of Beckett, so too Mda is saying, is a society structured entirely on the colour of one’s skin. Charley’s dialogue with God has affinities with those texts in which absurd situations invite fresh perspectives on social realities. The conversation between Charley and God is not only absurd because an omnipotent God is powerless to correct injustices, but it also serves to highlight the apparent futility of Charley’s life. The hopelessness of a life denied freedom, attempts to construct a sense of self by even interrogating the colour of God. The evasive answer given by God carries with it the sub-text of humour that results from an absurd situation. Mda uses elements of magic realism in “Dead End” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990) to highlight the fate of individuals,

black and white, caught up in an absurd political situation. The text is apparently pointing to the fact that for the characters in “Dead End” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990) there is no God. Therefore there is no basis for morality, or good and evil. For Charley and Tseli, like many of the protagonists in Mda’s plays and novels, inhabit the margins of society. Their only reality appears to be the meaninglessness of their lives and their futile attempts at striving for meaning in an absurd world.

“We Shall Sing for the Fatherland” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), is perhaps Mda’s best known play. Here he turns his attention to what could be read as the situation in postcolonial Africa. The focus is on the tragedy of the ordinary people who are victims of absurd political situations. Their attempts to seek meaning in their lives ultimately ends in tragedy when they realise that for them life has no meaning. The tragedy is even more pronounced in a situation where colonialism is replaced by a burgeoning black capitalism that ignores the plight of disadvantaged black people.

Janabari and Sergeant are idealistic black soldiers who were once freedom fighters. They find themselves destitute in a post-independence African country. They live in the local park and pay ‘rent’ (bribes) to the local police. To add insult to injury they are treated shabbily by local black businessmen like Mr Mafutha “and other fat ones in the Chamber of Commerce and the Stock Exchange” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990:44). Janabari and Sergeant are asked to leave the park, so that the city could look clean when dignitaries arrive for a trade fair. The fire that they have lit to remain warm is extinguished by a policeman, and they refuse the help given to them by an old woman. They also refuse to leave the park as Sergeant

proclaims, “that trampled fire made me realise that it’s high time we asserted ourselves, and fought for what is by rights ours. We have been pushed around and shitted upon too much. That is why I am holding my ground in this park, and I am not moving away from it today or any other day. And I am not paying any more rent for it” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990:43).

In a last act of defiance they attempt to sing for their fatherland, the land that they had “liberated with [their] sweat and blood” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990:44). Their attempts to sing the freedom songs that inspired their fight against oppression prove to be both futile and absurd. They find that they have lost their voices and are unable to sing, a symbolic demonstration of the loss of voice in articulating their destitute condition. The loss of voice is a common theme in the Theatre of the Absurd, where language, instead of being the medium of meaning, becomes incomprehensible, meaningless and absurd. This also becomes an omen of their death as they are unable to brave the bitterly cold weather.

Janabari and Sergeant, however, return from the dead and watch their own funerals. In what is illustrative of magic realist narratives, the dead take their place among the living and are able to comment on the “realities” of both the living and the dead. In the extract below, which is also the conclusion of the play, Janabari and Sergeant ruefully comment on the ironies of their “lives”:

**JANABARI:** Yes. We look quite messy. They have wrapped us in sacks.

**SERGEANT:** That is our funeral.

**JANABARI:** You mean no church, no priest, no procession, no speeches about our heroic days, nothing?

**SERGEANT:** They are just going to dump us there.

**JANABARI:** I can't bear to look.

**SERGEANT:** You don't have to.

**JANABARI:** Let's hide. Those prisoners will see us. And ah, there is Ofisiri. How miserable he looks.

**SERGEANT:** They can't see us. Mortals can't see us now that we are dead. We can even move among them and inspect if they are doing a proper job digging our graves.

**JANBARI:** That does sound interesting, Serge. (*He laughs*) Ha! ha! ha! (*SERGE joins him and they both laugh for a long time.*) I really wish we had the last laugh.

**SERGEANT:** We have the last laugh, Janabari. By all standards we have.

**JANBARI:** Let's go and inspect the work of the prisoners.

**SERGEANT:** Aw, leave the poor wretches alone.

**JANABARI:** You know Serge, they stole the money from my corpse.

**SERGEANT:** See, you still had money on you.

**JANABARI:** No recriminations, Serge.

**SERGEANT:** No recriminations, Janabari.

**JANABARI:** But whose funeral is that? I mean with music and all the trimmings?

**SERGEANT:** One of the big brass in town. The priests have already decided that he was wealthy enough to go to heaven.

**JANABARI:** It might be Mr Mafutha. Maybe gastric ulcers finally caught up with him. And he goes to heaven in style.

**SERGEANT:** What about us, Janabari. Where are we going?

**JANABARI:** How the hell do I know. Let's go.

*They both go out. The prisoners go on with their digging and OFISIRI continues watching them.*

*Lights fade until dark (The Plays of Zakes Mda 1990:46-47).*

The extract quoted above clearly demonstrates the absurd social conditions that prevail when a new regime perpetuates the misery of disadvantaged people. The new order, as reflected in this extract, discards its heroes and attempts to secure the privileges of its elite even after death. Sergeant and Janbari are “wrapped in sacks” and are dumped in their graves with “no church, no priest, no procession, no speeches about our heroic days”. Mafutha, however, is given a funeral “with music and all the trimmings”. Sergeant also observes that the “priests have already decided that [Mafutha] was wealthy enough to go to heaven” pointing to the absurd arrogance of the privileged in announcing power over the afterlife. The fact that the dead Sergeant and Janbari laugh a long time at the absurd behaviour of the living recalls Nietzsche’s comments on the universality of death and laughter in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1909). Laughter can be seen as the basis of both tragedy and the absurd and is directed at those who are obsessed with meaning in life, whether it is in wealth or political systems.

In “We Shall Sing for the Fatherland” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), Mda uses strategies such as the merging of the worlds of the living and the dead, the absurd social conditions of the protagonists, the intervention of the supernatural, to express his continuing concerns with the plight of ordinary people who are victims of capitalism and false hope. The “Fatherland” becomes in a sense a mass graveyard that claims the lives of those who sacrificed themselves for it. Van Wyk makes the telling point that “The word ‘fatherland’ exemplifies the individual’s childlike position in relation to the nation as a family with the land being identified with the father as origin. This infantile helplessness of the

individual in fascism forms the basis of nationalist identification processes" (1995:5). Under such conditions the self that was subordinated by a repressive political order can find no means of affirmation except in death. Even in death the two main characters are uncertain about their future, emphasising the absurdity of life and death, and the lack of guarantees of justice even in the afterlife. Commenting on "Dead End" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990) and "We Shall Sing for the Fatherland" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), Chapman has pointed out that "Both plays owe as much to Beckett as to African storytelling, but where the African element finally asserts itself is in the specificities of the subject matter" (1996:360).

Like the tramps in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1990), Sergeant and Janbari have spent their lives waiting to attain their elusive dream of a better tomorrow. It is this waiting that is an important theme of *Waiting for Godot* (1990), and Mda's play such as, "Dead End" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), "We Shall Sing for the Fatherland" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), "Dark Voices Ring" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), "The Hill" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), "The Road" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), "And The Girls in their Sunday Dresses" (*And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses* 1993b), "Joys of War" (*And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses* 1993b) and "The Nuns Romantic Story" (*Four Plays* 1996b). In these plays the characters come to terms with the absurdity of their lives because of their individual experiences with time. In "Dead End" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990) Charley faces the reality of his life while he is imprisoned in a cell. Sergeant and Janbari in "We Shall Sing for the Fatherland"

(*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990) await a better life while they live in a park. The two women in “And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses” (*And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses* 1993b) spend weeks on end in a food queue. Nana and her grandmother travel hundreds of kilometres, waiting for the time when they would meet Nana’s father. In “The Nuns Romantic Story” (*Four Plays* 1996b) Anna-Maria waits in her prison cell until she is freed by supernatural forces. Commenting on the effects of time on the protagonists in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1990) Martin Esslin has asserted:

Waiting is to experience the action of time, which is constant change. And yet, as nothing real ever happens, that change is in itself an illusion. The ceaseless activity of time is self defeating, purposeless, and therefore null and void. The more things change, the more they are the same. That is the terrible stability of the world ... One day is like another, and when we die, we might never have existed (1977:51).

While Pozzo and Lucky, the tramps in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1990), cannot escape the futility of their existence, the characters in Mda’s play are offered salvation mainly through their interrogation of reality and their acceptance of fantasy.

In Mda’s plays, absurd situations also articulate the ambivalence of existence in Africa, where the conflicts between modern materialism, and political manipulation, determines the day to day lives of ordinary people. Both satire and

irony combine with the absurd and the magical to present the pathos of subjects who remain marginalised even after the end of colonial rule in Africa.

“Dark Voices Ring” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990) written in 1976, a decade after “Dead End” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), further demonstrates Mda’s innovative use of dramatic devices in his writings. While “Dead End” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990) and “We Shall Sing for the Fatherland” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990) reflect devices such as the “Voice” and characters speaking after death, in “Dark Voices Ring” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), Mda’s focus is on the collapsing of boundaries between reality and fantasy, and the past and present. The “dark voices” of the title refer to the voices from the Woman’s past. It also alludes to the voices of the present and future that the Man must obey if he wishes to liberate himself from oppression. The Woman lives in the prison house of the past when her husband was still a source of power and authority as “baas-boy on Jan van Wyk’s farm” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990:55). It is easier for the woman to delude herself that she can still sustain herself by feeding on the memories of the past when her husband was the “Kaptein” in charge of the other labourers. She refuses to acknowledge his present condition, a castrated deaf mute, who was severely beaten up by a gang of prisoners, whom he tried to push too far in the service of his white boss. The theme of the transience of fate, seen in “Dead End” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990) is also apparent here. In both “Dead End” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990) and “Dark Voices Ring” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), history empowers and then disempowers, without any reason or logic. As the Woman recalls:

**WOMAN:** ...We had our own vegetable patch, our own hut, and our own milk cow. Besides, all the other farm labourers were under the old man's command. Kaptein, they called him. When he called them they all used to answer: yebo nkosi ... ewe nkosi ... morena. The master of the farm called him 'my faithful induna' (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990:55).

The old woman creates her own world of fantasy, in which the past becomes the present. She does this so that she can survive the harsh reality of the death of a daughter burnt by the prisoners on the day that her husband was assaulted. He was castrated and "his manhood ... buried together with the manure that makes the potatoes big and rich" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990:54). The physical loss of the Old Man's "manhood" serves as a powerful image of the impotence of the Man and his generation, who were powerless in fighting against the atrocities of apartheid. The image of castration is reminiscent of "Theatre of Cruelty", where violent physical images are used to shock the audience into a process of identification with the action of the play.

The opening lines of "Dark Voices Ring" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990) are a clear indication of fortitude required by the Man to convince the Woman that she is living in the past and that the daughter promised to the Man in marriage is no longer alive:

**MAN** (*calling out in a piercing but friendly voice*):  
Ho-oo! Ho-oo-ooo! Ho-o!

**WOMAN** starts, but **OLD MAN** does not move. He continues to gaze into empty space.

**WOMAN** (*standing up*): Why do you do that?

**MAN:** Do what?

**WOMAN:** Ag, forget it (*There is an awkward pause*) Where did you leave Nontobeko?

*MAN pretends not to hear.*

I tell you everyday that when you come to visit me you should not leave my child at home. Times are dangerous. You never know what maniac might attack her ... left alone in that house of yours. And her father (*pointing at OLD MAN*) wants to see her too.

**MAN:** the old man says he wants to see Nontobeko?

**WOMAN:** Yes. It's been a long, long time since he saw her?

**MAN:** You mean he spoke to you and said he wants to see her?

**WOMAN:** He is my husband. He speaks with me, and I know that he wants to see his daughter as much as I want to see her.

**MAN:** I haven't heard him speak since he came from the potato farms.

**WOMAN:** You are not his wife.

**MAN:** Come off it, mamma. You know that the old man doesn't know how to speak. Speaks no evil, sees no evil, hears no evil.

**WOMAN:** If you can't hear him I can. Not the words. His words are lost. They got lost many years ago in the farms where his manhood was also buried together with the manure that makes the potatoes big and rich. No. Not his words. There are so many things he could say - the pain and the anguish of a lost home ... lost hope - but he can't say them with words. The old man speaks to me. Even now I can hear his cry like the cry of a baby wrapped in newspapers and abandoned in a lavatory pit.

**MAN** (*incredulously*): I don't want to say you are lying ma, but I don't believe you can hear his cries. Imagine them ... yes. Dream of them perhaps. But hear them ... impossible.

**WOMAN:** I don't live on dreams, child. If I did I would have gone beserk with worry long ago. (*confidentially*) With neighbours like ours one

cannot be too careful with dreams (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990:53-54).

The Woman states quite emphatically that she is not dreaming when she hears the voice of the Old Man. She chooses to live a life of fantasy in the past when her husband exercised power over the other workers, and her daughter was still alive. The Woman rejects the reality of her life. In the fantasy world that she has created even dreams become real and she can no longer distinguish between reality and dreams. On discovering that the world to which she has been accustomed has been destroyed, she imagines its continuity, so that she and the Old Man can maintain their dignity. By exercising her imagination in this way she communicates with the Old Man and brings her daughter back to life. The fantasy world that she has created is threatened when it conflicts with the Man's ideals of a life of freedom. Through a slow and torturous process the Man takes the Woman back to the time when her husband was assaulted and castrated and her daughter burnt in their hut. The Woman abandons the "reality" that she created and instead accepts the Man's reality. The Man is filled with the enthusiasm and magical possibilities of winning the war for political freedom:

**MAN:** (*suddenly*): I must go, ma. I must go to the north.

**WOMAN:** Do you know what you are saying ? Do you know what you are up against?

**MAN:** A war of freedom is never lost. It is a just war and when people fight for a cause of justice their will to continue is indestructible.

**WOMAN:** You have set your heart to go; go then, child.

**MAN:** Yes, ma. Thank you for your blessing. I am going there to fight for you, ma, and for the old man, and for Nontobeko, and for Silas, and for Duiker, and for Janfek. That is why I am going , ma. *For the first time the eyes of the OLD MAN brighten up, and his face is full of life. He smiles broadly. They both look at him in amazement. He turns his face and looks at them.*

**WOMAN** (*greatly moved*): Go, child. Quick! The war is waiting!

**MAN:** Remain well, ma. Remain well, old man. (*He goes out*) (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990: 64-65).

The play ends with the Man leaving to join the war of liberation from political oppression and the Old Man smiles in what can be read as a significant gesture of approval.

The tensions created by conflicting ideologies of young and old and their particular perspectives of reality that is present in “Dark Voices Ring” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990) is also evident in “The Hill” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990). These tensions, however, do not create divisions between the characters but rather affirms their common humanity, a trope that is common in Mda’s plays and fiction, and other magic realist texts by writers such as Rushdie, Allende, Okri and Márquez and Morrison. Set in Lesotho “The Hill” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990) examines the struggle for survival of migrant workers such as Man, Young Man, and The Veteran. All three men are desperately in search of jobs and are willing to be exploited by the South African mines. Their stories unfold as they attempt to eke out an existence in the shelter of a barren hill. The Young Man is naive and idealistic and looks to the mines as opportunity to increase his wealth, thereby making himself an easy victim of capitalism. The Man has had years of experience

in the mines and had attempted to save his meager earning and support his family by farming. He is forced to return to Maseru to seek employment in the mines when his crops fail because of the barren land. In spite of his experience in the mines he is willing to be exploited yet again. The Veteran joins the Man and Old man after he has been robbed of his four year savings and clothes by predatory prostitutes who prey on men returning from the mines. These men struggle against exploitation from various sources. In what represents a scathing indictment on the inability of the church to protect the men from the interests of capitalism, the Nun in the play is deaf to the pleas of the men. She does not even acknowledge their existence.

In “The Hill” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), the barren landscape surrounding the hill where the men seek refuge serves as a powerful metaphor for their empty lives. The play opens with a scene that questions the characters’ perceptions of reality in what is a characteristic feature of magic realist texts:

*A silhouette of a Nun in full habit. She is sitting on a rock and seems to be in meditation. The general atmosphere of the place is that of a graveyard and the rock she is sitting on gives one the idea of a headstone. There are rocks all around her and these enhance the romantic feeling of a graveyard. Even in the dimness one can see that there is a rosary dangling from her clasped hands and she is also holding a big flower - most likely a plastic rose.*

NUN: (*reciting in monotone*): Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.

*Unearthly voices, also in monotone, slowly repeat every syllable after her.*

Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.

Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.

*A MAN enters. He has a blanket over his shoulders. He is panting heavily because he has been running. He perches himself on a rock not far from the NUN, giving her his back. NUN continues with her 'mea culpa' but now in a lower monotone.*

**MAN:** Mother, cleanse me! Wash my sins.

*NUN ignores him. This seems to worry the MAN because he turns his head and looks closely at her for a long time, as if to make sure she is real. She stands up and walks to another rock, oblivious of him. He follows her pleadingly (The Plays of Zakes Mda 1990:71).*

The hill symbolically resembles a graveyard in the dim light, pointing very early in the play to problems of survival in a harsh world. Under such conditions the boundaries between reality and fantasy are often blurred leading to the characters confusion as to what is real. The Nun proves to be elusive throughout the play, a comment on the inability of religion to ease the suffering of the poor, and the characters' disenchantment with religion in general. The plastic rose that the Nun carries is a telling metaphor for the commodification of religion. Mda returns to this theme in his novel *Ways of Dying* (1995a), where avaricious religious figures, such as the Archbishop are satirised.

The battle for survival that the men engage in daily is also a struggle to find meaning in an absurd world where even their faeces is a symbol of self affirmation. In the opening scene the Young Man proudly proclaims the size of his faeces in a scene that recalls Bakhtin's comments on scatalogical imagery, and the "grotesque body" in his discussion of carnival in *Rabelais and his World* (1984):

**Young Man:** This surpasses everything that you have done this week

**Man:** How Much?

**Young Man:** A heap. A heap as big as you would find in the kraal, child of my mother.

**Man:** The bragging of youth, as usual.

**Young Man:** No bragging. I tell you. We can go and see if you like.

**Man:** I'll take you at your word. Let us go and see. I shall only believe it when I see it with my eyes.

**Young Man:** Let me rest first.

**Man:** No. Let us go and see it now. I know your tricks. Last time you said a dog must have eaten more than half of it. And all the time I could see that it was intact.

**Young Man:** Let us leave it then. I am sure my shit deserves some privacy. I am not going to have everybody inspecting the size of my shit.

**Man:** What did I tell you? (facing the audience). The bragging of youth. (Laughs). What self-respecting dog would eat his shit? I tell you he is a braggart. A heap. As big as you would find in a kraal. Ha! I say look at him. Is he the type who can shit a heap as big as you would find in a kraal? (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990:72).

Mda's use of carnival in the scene above serves to intensify the harsh reality of the poverty of the men. The irony of their situation is evident when both men reveal that they have had virtually nothing to eat for two weeks. Once a fortnight, however, they sell their blood to "Trans-Africa Biologicals" who pay them "good money and for the whole weekend [they] can eat and drink like kings" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990:85). The "grotesque bodily images" (Bakhtin 1984) of faeces and blood forces the audience watching the play to become aware of the realities

faced by the men, even if the men themselves mask the futility of their situation. In spite of many months of waiting the Man and Young Man cling to the hope of a better life in the mines. The Young Man in particular loses himself in a world of dreams and fantasy in which he drives a Valiant, and possesses large sums of money. He finds refuge in his dreams and even becomes violent when he is prevented from daydreaming. In the following extract he has an imaginary conversation with his girlfriend when he is rudely interrupted by the Man:

**YOUNG MAN:** ...I still have my manhood, Palesa, and I can prove it. Come and sleep with me and you will know whether you have been sleeping with a man or with a woman. Come, my love. I have been longing for you for a long time. Not in the dongas as we used to do it, but in the back seat of my Valiant. Please come...

**MAN:** That is what you are going to be. A woman of the compounds! A male prostitute!

**YOUNG MAN (startled):** Now you spoilt the effect! (*Going towards Man menacingly*) I shall kill you for this.

**MAN (calmly):** Palesa is waiting to go into the back seat of your car.

**YOUNG MAN (sitting down in desperation) :** You have destroyed me. You always try to destroy me (*The plays of Zakes Mda 1990:81*).

The Young Man's actions in the above demonstrates the free use of his imagination in constructing his fantasy world, thereby emphasising the absurdity of his life. In Mda's plays this often results in the strategy of plays within the play in what could be read as mirrors reflecting different realities. It is also interesting to

note that Mda is willing to deal with the subject of homosexuality in his texts. This is quite rare in African literature.

In “The Road” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), written in 1982, two men, one a semi-skilled Labourer and the other an Afrikaner Farmer, meet on a lonely Orange Free State road. The Labourer, and the Farmer are on their way to Lesotho. For the Labourer it is a trip home after working in South Africa, for the farmer it is a trip to meet his black mistress. The absurd situation of the characters in the play becomes apparent when the Farmer, whose car has broken down, “shares” the shade of a tree with the Labourer who is tired after covering a long distance on foot. The Farmer who articulates the policies of apartheid does not see the blackness of the Labourer and treats him as an equal. He even confides in the Labourer and tells him about his wife’s affair with his foreman. It is only later in the play that the Farmer realises that the Labourer is black and he immediately changes his attitude towards him, as evidenced in the following scene:

**LABOURER:** I have one regular black wife.

**FARMER** (*taken aback*): Black wife! You are taking the joke too far, I am sure.

**LABOURER:** Well, your laws wouldn’t let me have her in any other colour.

**FARMER:** Black wife!

**LABOURER:** Black like me.

**FARMER:** Black like you? Do you mean you are black?

**LABOURER:** As black as black can be.

*The FARMER looks at him closely and discovers to his utmost shock and disgust that the LABOURER is indeed black.*

**FARMER:** You are black!

**LABOURER** (*amused*): Yes.

**FARMER:** (*as if to himself*): You are black. (*Then yelling*) Why didn't you tell me you were black, you bastard? (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990:131).

The Farmer refuses to share the tree with him and immediately begins the process of degrading and subjugating the Labourer by treating him as a servant. This position changes slightly, however, when he learns that the Labourer is from Lesotho and is therefore entitled to limited privileges as a "foreign black". The tensions between black and white contesting the shade of a tree, reaches a climax at the end of the play when the farmer is shot by the Labourer. The Labourer discovers that the farmer has been having an affair with his wife. The elements of magic in the play are evident at the very beginning of the text in the following words of the stage direction which introduces the play, "*A road that runs through farms of corn, and leads to the horizon. Nothing else but a tree at the roadside. A very tired farm labourer, carrying a small bundle of his worldly possessions, enters*" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990:121). The description of the land in the stage direction also suggests links with the Theatre of the Absurd. The tree that the Farmer and Labourer fight for, a symbol of apartheid South Africa, assumes a character of its own, dominating the actions of the two men. The Farmer's emotional attachment to the tree is clear, "I am going to defend you. Nobody is going to take you away from me. I'll die fighting for you, my beloved tree" (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990:142). The ideological struggle on both sides of the colour line for a tree parodies the struggle for a country where the land is valued

above human life. The tree also points to the allegorical nature of modern theatre, in particular the Theatre of the Absurd.

The Labourer's discovery of James Chapman's *Travel in the Interior of South Africa 1849-1863*, a famous travel book published in 1868, highlights the myth of the great white hunter. In what is strongly suggestive of allegory and fantasy the book initiates the imaginary journey of the Farmer and his "servant" Labourer into the jungles of Africa. This imaginary and somewhat magical journey reflects on history's disempowering of blacks in colonised Africa:

**LABOURER:** Let us continue with our exploration, *bwana*. (*Reading*) 'Against such attacks the natives could offer little resistance; but they retaliated, whenever opportunity offered, by waylaying and murdering small parties of the Boers, and more frequently by lifting their cattle...'

**FARMER:** Terrorism!

**LABOURER:** In another language that is called guerrilla warfare.

**FARMER** (*panting*): Jim, I am tired. Let us rest.

**LABOURER:** No. We still have a long way to go. Keep on walking.

**FARMER:** I want to sit down and rest.

**LABOURER:** If you sit down you might not be able to stand up again, and don't count on me to help you.

**FARMER** (*desperately*): Are we not partners in this exploration?

**LABOURER:** Sit if you like. The land is teeming with wild animals. Surely you don't want to be devoured by some hungry lion.

**FARMER** (*doubtful*): Ever heard of an explorer who is scared of the wild?

**LABOURER:** You'll be down. We won't be able to lift up your gun to defend yourself.

*They keep on walking, but the FARMER is obviously very tired, and cannot keep up with*

*the pace of the LABOURER. LABOURER  
continues his reading.*

‘The root of the evil now lay in the assumption...’

**FARMER:** Water! Water! I need water!

**LABOURER:** You are not supposed to say that.  
You are not supposed to ~~need~~ water. We are in the jungle and streams abound.

**FARMER:** I feel dizzy, Jim. I think I am going to fall. This African sun! (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990:145).

The movement through the African jungle becomes a “real” experience for both the Farmer and the Labourer. The distinction between the “reality” of the nineteenth century book and the “contemporary reality” of the characters disappears in a way that is also common in magic realist texts. The inability of the farmer to survive without the assistance of the Labourer signifies the colonialist’s sense of alienation in a foreign place. “The Road” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990) demonstrates Mda’s use of devices such as allegory, fantasy, absurdism, satire and magic to highlight an unjust political system. It is apparent in this play that Mda is moving towards utilising magic realist devices that would become more pronounced in his novels. In *Ways of Dying* (1995a), for example, Mda explores the theme of the fusion between the imaginary world of the text and the world of his characters when Toloki and Noria “journey” through the pages of the kitch magazine *Home and Garden*.

“The Road” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), also draws attention to the magic of place, a trope that is also common in Haggard’s African romances, where quite often descriptions of landscape are feminised in an attempt to justify the colonial aims of legitimising penetration into Africa. Stott (1989), for example,

states: "Africa invites the white male explorer, it challenges him and it tempts him. The white man must explore and penetrate this foreign territory..." (1987:77). A similar desire is expressed by the Farmer, corresponding with his need for sexual gratification with black women in Swaziland, and his relationship with the Labourer's wife. Ironically the open road in which the two men meet is a powerful metaphor for the contesting ideologies and the stagnant lives of both men. The Farmer is labouring under the emotional burden of an adulterous wife and the delusions of having the power to conquer and tame "wild" Africa. For the Labourer there are physical hardships of survival and the realisation that his wife is a whore. In order to give his life a sense of meaning and to be able to travel the road ahead , the Labourer realises that he has to kill the Farmer.

In "Joys of War" (*And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses* 1993b), written in 1983, time and space interweave and intersect to present the stories of mainly four characters: Mama, Nana, Soldier One and Soldier Two. Their lives are played out against the killing and violence characteristic of guerrilla warfare in Africa. Mama and her granddaughter, Nana are in search of Nana's father who is Soldier One in the play. The search is a long and arduous one. Soldier One had left his home and family after constant harassment from the security police, and subsequently joined the liberation forces.

The journey made by Nana and Mama to find Soldier One has its parallel in the journey of self-discovery made by him and Soldier Two. Death is the invisible character in the play and makes its presence known by Nana's constant reference to the death of her doll, the numerous funeral marches, and the climatic death of

Soldier Two. Death is an important trope in Mda's plays and in both his novels *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b). The preoccupation by characters with death and the ability of characters to journey between the world of the living and the dead is indeed a significant feature of magic realism. Another device in the play that reveals Mda's inclination towards the use of magic realism, is the ability of Soldier One and Soldier Two to simultaneously experience different episodes in their lives, and thereby transcend linear time.

The eventual meeting of Mama and Nana with Soldier One in a remote place far away from home is intended to be magical. Nana's metamorphosis from a twelve year old who carried a doll to Soldier One's comrade in arms represents the hope that the youth will eventually achieve the freedom of their country, even if such a hope requires the belief in magic. This is clearly demonstrated by Nana in the concluding lines of the play:

**NANA:** I am not going back home alone. I am the one who's going to stay. Papa can teach me what to do when the sign comes and I'll do it. I am a soldier too, and I am going to stay here with him.

**SOLDIER ONE:** She has made her case, Mama. Let her stay.

**NANA:** Take my doll with you. I'll get it when I come back home. I hope it won't die while I am away.

**SOLDIER ONE:** Mama, you better go away right now. We don't know when the sign will come.

**MAMA:** I find it difficult to leave.

**SOLDIER ONE:** Mama, your stubbornness will not only put our lives in danger, but the lives of hundreds of cadres.

[*MAMA reluctantly takes her small parcels and walks to the second level.*]

Tell them to keep the home fires burning. We are coming.

*NANA takes the gun, and sits next to SOLDIER ONE. Lighting gradually changes and the two soldiers become silhouettes of statues in some war memorial. When MAMA gets to the second level, she is joined by the mourners, now holding candles. A plaintive voice leads them in a song while they hum in the background. They slowly lead MAMA to the lowest level and all go out. Lighting fades to black (And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses 1993b:144-145).*

In his most recently published play, “The Nuns Romantic Story” (*Four Plays* 1996b), for which he received the Olive Schreiner Prize for Drama in 1996, Mda returns to the theme of civil war. This is a common theme in magic realist texts, especially with regard to civil institutions not being adequately structured in postcolonial societies. Political life in such societies is very fluid and fate therefore plays a more active role than in Western societies where a certain stability of reality has been reached.

The guitar-playing Nun in the play, Anna-Maria, is jailed for killing a General who was responsible for killing all the members of her family twenty years ago, and the play revolves around her trial. Anna-Maria confesses to her crime and she refuses to be defended by A.C. Malibu who has been appointed by the state to defend her. During her trial she becomes a witness for the state and insists that she is guilty. When she informs her colleague and close friend, Pampiri, that she speaks with “the Blessed Virgin”, for guidance, she is not taken seriously. Following in

the tradition of “magical” occurrences in Mda’s plays, Anna-Maria disappears from her cell:

**S.C.: A.C.**, we have always worked on the basis of evidence. What evidence do you have that she was whisked away by the Blessed Virgin?

**VILLA:** God’s ways are not the ways of evidence.

**MALIBU:** The clothes! She left all her clothes in the cell. That means something. You need evidence, that’s your evidence.

**S.C.: Did she fly out of the barred windows naked?**

**PAMPIRI (laughs):** Just like a witch. In our folklore witches fly naked, riding on a broom.

**VILLA:** That’s blasphemy. But what else can one expect from you?

**MALIBU:** All her clothes are left behind. But her guitar is gone. The soldiers would never have thought of such a trick. They are not brilliant enough. That’s all the evidence you need.

**VILLA:** She truly was a saint.

*The guitar can be heard in the background, as if from a distance. Father Villa and A.C. Malibu kneel and pray (Four Plays 1996b:122-123).*

Mda concludes the ‘Nun’s Romantic Tale’ (*Four Plays* 1996b) with the magical disappearance of the nun, Anna-Maria, reminiscent of the ascension of Remedios the Beauty to heaven in Marquéz’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1978).

In each of the plays selected for discussion above Mda’s use of absurdism, fantasy, allegory are consistent with the magical, are indicative of his predisposition towards magic realism. Mda proves to be a playwright concerned with everyday realities that face the ordinary person who attempts to find meaning in an absurd world where even language becomes meaningless While the elements

of magic realism are not clearly developed in his plays, as Mda himself admits that he was not aware that such a mode of writing existed when he wrote most of his plays, the plays do reveal the attenuated links between the “real” and the “magical”. With this in mind one can argue that Mda’s plays are crucial to our understanding of his use of magic realism in his novels *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b).

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **MAGIC REALISM in *Ways of Dying* (1995a)**

In Chapter Three we saw how Mda has used magic realism in his plays to portray the particular situations of his characters within the context of the time and space described. Mda, however, has recently affirmed a preference for the writing of novels to plays. He has stated that novels are far more effective than plays in describing the “magic” of life: “I had great fun writing my novels. More fun than I ever had when I was writing my plays” (Naidoo 1997:254). Mda has also pointed out that when writing *Ways of Dying* (1995a), he was mindful of the fact that he was writing a magic realist novel:

When I wrote the novels I was at the stage where I was familiar with the movement called magic realism. When I wrote the novels I had read people like Márquez. I had read *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. I had read that and I fell in love with that mode of writing, precisely because I felt that the Latin American writers were doing what I had always been doing myself. When I started with my first novel *Ways of Dying* I was conscious of a movement called magic realism, and that I was writing a magic realist novel. But basically I was doing what I had done much earlier (Naidoo 1997:6).

In this chapter I will explore Mda's use of magic realist devices in his first novel, *Ways of Dying* (1995a). In Mda's statements, quoted above, he indicates that his particular utilisation of magic realism is consistent with that of more recognised practitioners of the mode such as Márquez, Rushdie and Allende. In previous chapter I had pointed out that Mda's plays demonstrate strong influences of Beckett. Mda, however, has not blindly applied the inspiration derived from Beckett to his plays. What one finds in Mda's plays is an adaptation and transposition of the absurd to the African context. It is this combination of the absurd and African situation that provide the elements of magic realism in Mda's plays. In the novels, however, new elements come into play, and this makes for a more explicit mode of magic realism. I shall therefore explore the extent to which elements of magic realism in *Ways of Dying* (1995a) are consonant with those in magic realist novels that have been acclaimed internationally. Novels such as Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1978), Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Okri's *The Famished Road* (1992), Allende's *The House of the Spirits* (1993) and Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1996) all share certain common elements that classify them as being magic realist. One obvious feature that the aforementioned novels have in common with *Ways of Dying* (1995a) is characters who are situated within the context of political uncertainties. Political instability is the dominant trope that informs these and other magic realist texts that would be referred to in this chapter. History intervenes in the lives of these characters and likewise they attempt to influence the course of history. *Ways of Dying* (1995a), contains other elements common to magic realist texts as identified

by Zamora (1995:175-184), quoted earlier in Chapter One. Some of these elements are repetition, the use of mirror images to create the magic of shifting references, the fight against bureaucracy, the use of myth and folklore, and the presence of images of carnival and the apocalyptic. This chapter will focus on those features of magic realism that I have found in *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and the other magic realist texts. Differences between *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and these texts will also be explored. The purpose of such a comparative study will hopefully reveal whether *Ways of Dying* (1995a) has elements characteristic of magic realism.

*Ways of Dying* (1995a) portrays life in South Africa, during the “interregnum” (Gramsci 1985:98). The strength of the novel lies in the depiction of the conflicting forces at a time of political instability, while celebrating aspects of “spectacle” (Ndebele 1991) through the use of carnivalesque language. Indeed the communal narrator who acts as spectator enforces the notion of “spectacle”. Like the characters in the magic realist texts mentioned above, Mda’s characters in *Ways of Dying* (1995a) are depicted as being able to constantly reinvent themselves in order to survive. In this regard the novel maps the journey of various characters as they come to terms with the “many ways of dying” (1995a:3). Death in the novel becomes a sign of the abundance of life or what Nietzsche called “the fantastic exuberance of life” (1909:34). The death of the physical body, the death of apartheid, the death of “law and order”, the death of African customs and traditions and the resurgence of these aspects in different ways, are explored in the novel. The novel, however, does not only reflect on death. It also celebrates the

capacity for birth and life as demonstrated by the actions of individuals and their communities, and the notion of life as a “way of dying”. There is the birth of a new post-apartheid social order and the hope of a better life, the birth of new loves as in the case of Toloki and Noria, the birth of new careers and the birth of a new year with the promises that such an event brings with it. This dualism of life and death, is appropriately reflected in the carnivalesque and apocalyptic images, and laughter and tragedy in the text. These images in the text reinforce the notion of the fertility of life, rather than despair.

*Ways of Dying* (1995a), written while Mda was teaching in the United States, explores the lives of Toloki and Noira and the people who have come to accept death as a way of living. The novel traces the lives of these protagonists from their childhood in their village, through their years at school during the Soweto youth rebellions of 1976, and to the violent years leading to South Africa’s first democratic elections in 1994. Toloki’s strained relationship with his father, Jwara the blacksmith, and their love for Noria, is also an integral aspect of the plot of the novel.

Mda actually commenced writing the novel on Christmas Day in 1991, and the story covers the events that occur between that day and New Years Day. It is interesting to note that *Ways of Dying* (1995a) stemmed from Mda’s decision to put a computer that he had bought to good use, and the fact that he was alone at home on Christmas Day. As he recalls:

In 1991 when I was a visiting professor at Yale I decided to buy a computer. All my writing, even *When People Play People* had been done by longhand. I decided that it was time to get modern. After I bought the computer I asked myself what next? What do I do with it? So I said, well I might as well write a novel. Then I started writing *Ways of Dying*. If I had not bought that computer I would not have written *Ways of Dying*. On Christmas Day I wrote the first line 'There are many ways of Dying...' and I continued writing the first few pages. That explains why the incidents on the very first pages of the novel take place on Christmas Day. Even the bells that are mentioned early in the novel were actually ringing while I was writing it on that Christmas Day (Naidoo 1997:251).

### **Reality and Magic Realism**

In explaining his reason for writing *Ways of Dying* (1995a) Mda has pointed out that the deaths mentioned in the novel are based on newspaper reports of actual deaths. These deaths resulted from the township violence prevalent in the years leading to South Africa's first democratic elections:

Every one of those deaths happened, those were deaths reported in the newspapers. These were deaths that I had read about in the *Sunday Times*, and *City Press*. Those were the two newspapers which were the source of my information on the deaths ... The very first death mentioned in the novel, however, didn't come from a newspaper, but is actually based on fact. It happened to a cousin of mine, and I have reported it exactly as it happened. So, all those deaths actually happened, and all I did

was to take these deaths and put them in an imaginary story with a professional mourner (Naidoo 1997:253).

The “realism” aspect of magic realist texts is informed by historical events that shape the lives of the characters in these novels. Therefore it is not uncommon for magic realist texts to feature historical events or personalities who interact with the fictional ones in the stories. In Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), for example, the narrator and chief character, Saleem Sinai, is intent on preventing Indira Gandhi from destroying the “Midnight’s Children”. Kundera, in his *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1983) mentions the birth of Communist Czechoslovakia when Klement Gottwald, with his comrade Clementis besides him, addressed the Czech nation from a balcony of a “Baroque palace in Prague” (1983:3). Thousands of copies of a photograph featuring Gottwald and Clementis and their comrades, were sent throughout the nation. Four years later, however, Clementis was charged with treason and hanged. The narrator states that, “The propaganda section immediately airbrushed him out of history and, obviously, out of all the photographs as well. Ever since, Gottwald has stood on that balcony alone. Where Clementis once stood, there is only a bare palace wall” (1983:3). The fictional characters in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1983) such as Mirek and Tamina live their lives under constant threat of Communist oppression by leaders such as Gottwald. In telling the fictional story of Tamina and Mirek, the narrator of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1983), often interrupts the narrative to reflect on actual occurrences in history. Rushdie, in his novel, *Shame* (1984), uses

the same technique and the narrative is punctuated by references to incidents in the personal histories of real people. The narrator actually quotes Kundera: “A name means continuity with the past and people without a past are people without a name” (1984:88). Rushdie’s narrator of *Shame* (1984) is obviously pointing to the fact that the lives of ordinary people are inevitably shaped by the forces of history. In telling their stories the narrators of texts mentioned above combine myth, fiction and reality to present their particular account of history. In D.M. Thomas’ *The White Hotel* (1988), the fictional Lisa Erdman meets Sigmund Freud at different times in the narrative to discuss her unique problem, which is actually hysteria resulting from her displacement from history during the Second World War. In his “Author’s Note” Thomas states: “The role played by Freud in this narrative is entirely fictional. My imagined Freud does, however, abide by the generally known facts of the real Freud’s life, and I have sometimes quoted from his works and letters, *passim*” (1988:6). Another magic realist novel dealing with the Second World War is Gunter Grass’ *The Tin Drum* (1987). The chief protagonist and narrator, Oskar, gives an account of the German invasion of Poland during the Second World War. This, however, is also an account of his own history as influenced by the events of the War. Historical figures who played a role in the War, such as Carl Jacob Burckhardt, Albert Forster, Cardinal Joseph Frings, Jan Wellem and Hermann Rauschning are all mentioned in Oskar’s story.

Okri’s *The Famished Road* (1992) and its sequel *Songs of Enchantment* (1994), Allende’s *The House of the Spirits* (1993), Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1978), Morrison’s *Sula* (1991), *Beloved* (1988) and *Song of Solomon*

(1989), and Fuentes' *Christopher Unborn* (1990) are other examples of magic realist texts whose writers have intertwined factual historical events with the stories of fictional characters.

The *Furnished Road* (Okri 1992) and *Songs of Enchantment* (Okri 1994) are set against the backdrop of military activity in Nigeria on the eve of independence. The civil wars in Chile are an integral aspect of plot in *The House of the Spirits* (Allende 1993), while the Colombian civil wars is the subject of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Márquez 1978). The racial problems experienced by African Americans, and the history of slavery is the subject of Toni Morrison's magic realist texts. Morrison's *Sula* (1991), in particular, demonstrates the effects of history on the lives of the protagonists. The chapter headings of the novel begin with "1919" and end with "1965", thereby framing the lives of the characters within a specific historical context. *Christopher Unborn* (Fuentes 1990) is the story of both the history of the unborn Christopher and the arrival of Christopher Columbus to the New World.

In both *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), Mda has used recognisable historical events. In doing so Mda echoes Rushdie's narrator of *Shame* (1984) who states: "I build imaginary countries and try to impose them on the ones that exist. I, too, face the problem of history: what to retain, what to dump, how to hold on to what memory insists on relinquishing, how to deal with change" (1984:87-88).

The characters in Mda's novels are imbued with a sense of power, or rather magic, that enables them to transcend the forces of history by narrating *their*

*stories*. These stories are often presented as a challenge to the “realism” of recorded history. Toloki and Noria, for example, are caught up in the historical moments of the violence preceding the first democratic elections in South Africa. Mda depicts both characters as having the magical abilities to assert their right to a life in spite of the disadvantages they face. As he himself has stated “Those grand historical events had a great effect at a personal level on those little people who had no part in them. But it is crucial to emphasise that the characters themselves are also creators of history and they struggle to create their own histories” (Naidoo 1997:258). The need for characters to be “creators of history” in order to avoid oblivion is also a recurring theme in Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1983). Kundera quotes Hubl who asserts, “The first step in liquidating a people … is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was. The world around it will forget even faster” (1983:159).

In portraying characters caught in the throes of historical change, the texts mentioned above are reflecting an essential aspect of magic realism: the realism of history that provides the context for the magical episodes in the lives of the characters. As Cooper points out, “magic realists inscribe the chaos of history not by way of unity, but by means of plots that syncretize uneven and contradictory forces” (1998:36).

## Narrative Voice

Mda's technique of using a communal narrator in *Ways of Dying* (1995a) has enabled him to delve freely into the collective consciousness of a society caught in the throes of civil strife. This is clearly evident at the very beginning of the story when the communal narrator responds to the Nurse's speech, quoted earlier, by saying: "We mumble. It is not for the nurse to make such statements. His duty is to tell how the child saw his death, not to give ammunition to the enemy. Is he perhaps trying to push his own political agenda?" (1995a:3). The doubt expressed by the narrator is a comment on the changing social order, and the erosion of black solidarity that formed one of the underlying principles of Black Consciousness. These changes take place in a climate of unrestrained violence and regression to a state where characters are depicted as being unable to determine what is real. The narrative begins with a pointed reference to death:

"There are many ways of dying!" the Nurse shouts at us. Pain is etched in his voice, and rage has mapped his face. We listen in silence. "This our brother's way is a way that has left us without words in our mouths. This little brother was our own child, and his death is more painful because it is our own creation. It is not the first time that we bury little children. We bury them everyday. But they are killed by the enemy ... those we are fighting against. This our little brother was killed by those who are fighting to free us!" (1995a:3)

The introductory paragraph, quoted above, expressively echoes the political violence that became a feature of South African life in many of the black townships, in the years between the Soweto uprising in June 1976, and the time preceding the country's first democratic elections, and more especially between 1990 and 1994, when violence seemed "absurd" in view of the negotiations of the political parties.

The difficulties experienced by such a society in coming to terms with the new realities results in confusion and dislocation. This creates the conditions common in magic realist texts where characters are often depicted as being unable to differentiate between reality and fantasy. The omniscient narrator, who is a collective "we" is characteristic of magic realist texts where the narrator is omniscient, yet a participant in the story. In *One Hundred Days of Solitude* (Márquez 1978), for example, the narrator Melquíades plays an important role in introducing scientific discoveries to the village of Macondo. The village of Macondo exists as a timeless society that is isolated from the rest of the world until the advent of Melquíades. The scientific wonders that Melquíades introduces to Macondo are also "magical". Melquíades' omniscience is another aspect of the "magic" in the text when one considers that he narrates the events that will occur long after his death. As the first person to die and to be buried in Macondo, he also initiates the beginning of time, and history actually begins in Macondo when he becomes the first person to be buried there. In *Midnight's Children* (Rushdie 1981) the narrator, Saleem, relates various incidents that precede his birth with a sense of omniscience. Likewise the narrators of *The Tin Drum* (Grass 1987),

*Christopher Unborn* (Fuentes 1990), *The House of the Spirits* (1993), and *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (Chandra 1996) narrate the histories of their families long before they are born.

In *Ways of Dying* (1995a) the narrator moves through different periods in time and follows the characters as they experience their respective destinies. The narrator functions mimetically as chorus, and as the authoritative voice of the text (Rimmon-Kenan 1987:106-110). The narrator also shares in the collective experiences of the people:

It is not different, really here in the city. Just like back in the village, we live our lives together as one. We know everything about everyone. We even know things that happen when we are not there; things that happen behind people's closed doors deep in the middle of the night. We are the all-seeing eye of the village gossip. When in our orature the storyteller begins the story, "They say it once happened...", we are the "they". No individual owns any story. The community is the owner of the story, and it can tell it the way it deems fit. We would not be needing to justify the communal voice that tells this story if you had not wondered how we became so omniscient in the affairs of Toloki and Noria (1995a:8).

The communal voice narrating the story represents the combined forces of life and death, the past and present, and is an integral part of the people yet separate from them at the same time. The discrete episodes and time frames in the novel are held together by the communal "we" which freely enters the consciousness and dreams of the characters. It also joins the characters as a part of the multiple focalisers of

the novel and is often subjective in its comments. It willingly participates in the violence in the community and in the persecution of Toloki: “we always remarked, sometimes in his presence, that he was an ugly child” (1995a:26).

The novel actually begins in *media res* setting the stage for the non-linear flood of events that pose various challenges to the characters. The funeral scene with which the novel opens is that of Noira’s son, Vutha. The collective narrator then provides a series of stories in which past and present simultaneously intersect and disperse, in a manner that has affinities with the Epic Theatre of Döblin and Brecht:

In epic works, the action advances bit by bit, by agglutination. Such is epic apposition. This contrasts with the development of drama, which is an unfolding outward from a single point of departure ... In good epic work, isolated characters or individual episodes taken out of context remain life-like, whereas the ordinary novel may dash along with the greatest intensity, but it leaves no trace in the reader’s memory (Todorov:1988:31).

The technique that Mda uses here obviously stems from his experiences as a playwright and the influences of orature where a story develops by a process of accretion of other stories, allowing the reader to become part of the story. The collective narrator in *Ways of Dying* (1995a) addresses the reader at times in a confidential manner, revealing the innermost secrets of the community. It is also present during intimate moments in the text. Mda has acknowledged that before writing *Ways of Dying* (1995a), he had already read Márquez’s *One Hundred*

*Years of Solitude* (1978). Thus if, as Mda claims, he was unaware of magic realism as a literary mode when he wrote his plays, he was certainly aware of the scope that it offered when he commenced writing *Ways of Dying* (1995a). The combination of Epic Theatre with other elements, such as African myth and orature, has been used to good effect by Mda. In discussing his use of magic realism in his novels Mda has stated:

After I discovered magic realism as a literary mode I became fascinated by it. As I have said I had been writing in this mode without knowing that it existed as a literary movement, or how it actually worked. When I looked at other works and what other people were saying about it I found that what they were saying was what I was doing as well ... The unreal happens as part of reality. It is not a matter of conjecture or discussion. It happens and is accepted by the other characters as a normal event. This is what I try to do, and this is in contrast to fantasy, or the fantastic type of writing, where the supernatural or the magical is disconcerting. In science fiction as well there has to be a scientific explanation when something strange happens. The phenomena that I portray are certainly not problematic as it would be in the case of fantasy (Naidoo 1995:256).

In the excerpt above Mda points out that in his novels the “unreal” or magical are not viewed as being abnormal by the characters. This makes magic realism as a literary mode particularly suitable for interrogating the contesting realities of history and the individual stories of people in a changing society. The text highlights the effects of greed for political and economic power on ordinary people, and the threat of anarchy. There are, however, cohesive forces that hold

the community together. This occurs through the culture of *Ubuntu*, the traditional African communal life, and the residual influences of Black Consciousness, that advocate mutual respect and a sharing of resources, no matter how meagre these might be. In this regard the text makes numerous references to the commitment of people in the community who assist those in need. Characters who stand out in this regard are Noria, Shadrack and the old woman, Madimbhaza. Noria and Madimbhaza dedicate themselves to the caring for unwanted and orphaned children while Shadrack uses his taxi to assist those in need. The novel, however, as I have already stated, provides the site where past, present and future intersect. It does this in a manner typical of magic realist texts, therefore suggesting an impulse that also reinforces the tenets of Black Consciousness. The black on black violence and the divisions within the community point to an ethos of self survival and social disintegration. Yet there are forces that still hold people together despite the forces of disintegration. This is demonstrated very early in the novel when the funeral procession for Noria's son comes up against a wedding procession. "We are a procession of beautiful people, and many posh cars and buses, while yours is an old skorokoro of a van, and hundreds of ragged souls on foot" (1995a:6), a wedding guest proudly proclaims. Greed and self-interest are evident in the comments by those in the wedding procession. The wedding procession reflects the trappings of urban wealth, and the funeral procession, representative of the poor. The two processions are presented as forces dialectically opposed to each other. This is indicative of the divisions in black unity during the violence that swept South Africa in the period described in the novel. Toloki's attempt at

preventing a serious clash between the wedding and funeral processions, brings him to the attention of Noria, the mother of the dead boy. This re-establishes a friendship that they enjoyed as children.

Toloki's meeting with Noria and their relationship forms the backdrop for the events of the story. However, each of the characters in the novel has a story to tell, and eventually their individual stories merge with each other and the stories of the community to form a collective story that has affinities with the Black Consciousness notion of a collective black self. It is by a process of deliberately inscribing their stories, that the characters establish their identities. The act of telling stories, is an important feature of the novel as it marks the conscious act of redeeming the self and allowing it the space in which it can develop. This is particularly true in the case of Toloki and Noria. Toloki is a professional mourner, and with the profusion of deaths in the townships he ekes out a living by mourning at funerals. His costume, a black tail coat and top hat give him the distinction of being a figure that represents both carnival and apocalypse, as he journeys from one funeral to the next, mourning for the dead. Toloki's role as a professional mourner is a telling statement of the rampant killings during the transition to a legitimate democracy in South Africa. In creating the concept of a professional mourner Mda has stated that "the idea of a professional mourner is a ridiculous thing" (Naidoo 1997:253). There is a suggestion in Mda's comment that the professional mourner is an allegorical device in the text's attempt to mourn all those who have died during the period depicted in the story.

Toloki is also a comic figure who has a pungent body odour and his favourite food is “a delicacy of Swiss cake relished with green onions” (1995a:10). The ambivalence of Toloki’s existence, and that of the other characters, is suggested by the conflicting tropes of life and death, stagnation and transition, and the individual’s attempt to resist the collective will of the community. As the collective voice points out: “Indeed, even in his capacity as a professional mourner, Toloki avoided funerals that involved homeboys and homegirls … Toloki has never wanted to have anything to do with any of the people of his village who have settled in the city” (1995a:8). The isolation that Toloki has imposed upon himself militates against the communal spirit of Black Consciousness ideology. His reason, however, is not merely an anti-social one. In what might be a contradiction of terms, Toloki, to borrow from Jung, is also representative of the archetypal figure of the individual consciousness that constantly shifts between the singular and the collective. As Zamora points out, “This shifting relation of individual to archetype often attends the psychology of magic realist characters...” (1995:502). Toloki views his peculiar lifestyle as one that is consonant with that of monks from the east and through magical means he becomes one of them:

Sometimes he transports himself through the pages of a pamphlet that he got from a pink-robed devotee who disembarked from a boat from the east two summers ago, and walks the same ground that these holy men walk. He has a singularly searing fascination with the lives of these oriental monks. It is the thirst of a man for a concoction that he has never tasted, that he has only heard wise men describe. He sees himself in the dazzling light of the

aghori sadhu, held in the same awesome veneration that the devout Hindus show the votaries (1995a:10-11).

Toloki's quest for a consciousness that transcends the mundane reality of his life is made possible by his ability to experience the realities of other worlds through "magical" means. In this way he gives his life a special sense of purpose and he is able to continue his search for his multiple selves. Dressed in his mourner's outfit, he is a tragi-comic figure, representing the dualistic nature of life: birth and death, pain and pleasure, beauty and ugliness, and war and peace, to name but a few aspects. These forces are not binary opposites in conflict with each other, but exist as simultaneous codes, as is characteristic in magic realist texts. Toloki would have continued with his mundane existence, earning a pittance as a professional mourner, eating his delicacy of Swiss roll and onions on special occasions, sleeping on a bench on the beach and relieving the monotony of his life by "magical" journeys into the pages of *Home and Garden* had it not been for the meeting with Noria. He is affected immediately by her presence and "in his dreams he sees the sad eyes of Noria, looking appealingly at the bickering crowd" (1995a:19).

Toloki is presented to us through the "all seeing eyes" of the communal narrative voice, which does not spare any details in demeaning him. Reference is constantly made to the stench that emanates from him and his ugliness. This presentation of the "hero" by the communal voice is similar to the characters of magic realist texts who are distinguished by their ugliness. Oskar, the narrator and chief character of *The Tin Drum* (Grass 1987), is a midget who is painfully aware

of his ugliness. Similarly Saleem Sinai, Omar Khayyam, and Moraes Zogoiby, narrators and protagonists of *Midnight's Children* (Rushdie 1981), *Shame* (Rushdie 1984) and *The Moor's Last Sigh* (Rushdie 1995), respectively, are all described as being ugly and physically weak.

The narrative voice in *Ways of Dying* (1995a) is omniscient and is essentially concerned with telling its story. There are numerous references to its function as story-teller such as: "We told the story over and over again" (1995a:34), "The story spread to our village as well" (1995a:34), "We got the whole story of what happened in the city from the Nurse" (1995a:37). Similarly, the narrative voice in Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1983), states that, "The entire book is a novel in the form of variations. The individual parts follow each other like individual stretches of a journey leading toward a theme, a thought, a single situation, the sense of which fades into the distance ... it is a novel about Tamina, and whenever Tamina is absent, it is a novel for Tamina. She is its main character and main audience, and all the other stories are variations on her story and come together in her life as in a mirror" (1983:165). The point that Kundera is making here is that magic realist texts are self-reflexive in that they are very much concerned with what constitutes the narrative textures of the novel. In this regard the structure of the novel itself is magical in the sense that the words in the text cohere to create the illusion of reality. Magic realist texts therefore invite discussion on the use of language in creating narratives that give form and substance to the imagination.

## Odyssseys

The trope of the “odyssey” (1995a:51), is one of the structuring elements of *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995a), and is also present in ~~magic~~ realist novels such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Márquez 1978), *The Tin Drum* (Grass 1987), *The Famished Road* (Okri 1992), *The House of the Spirits* (Allende 1993), *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (Kundera 1983) and *Midnight’s Children* (Rushdie 1981). While it can be argued that this trope is common in many literary works in these magic realist texts the protagonists are imbued with magical powers that assist them in their search for the meaning of their existence. In many of these texts the characters’ almost obsessive search for meaning is linked with decoding the meaning of the text itself. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Márquez 1978) the text of the novel is actually the manuscript written by the gypsy, Melquíades. Jose Arcadio Buendia begins the odyssey that leads him and his followers to the founding of Macondo. Once the village has been established, Jose Arcadio Buendía begins the quest for a route to the sea. When this is not successful he embarks on a series of scientific excursions until he is eventually driven mad by his obsessive quests. The restlessness that characterised Jose Arcadio Buendía also infects his sons and their descendants as well. The Buendía line finally comes to an end when his descendant Aureliano decodes Melquíades’ manuscript, which is the text of the novel. Similarly, the story of Toloki, the main character in *Ways of Dying* (1995a), unfolds as he begins his journey from the village to the city, in his quest for a better life. Toloki’s ability to transcend the “reality” of his world through magical

experiences, imbues him with a sense of dignity seldom found in the depiction of black men in South African literature. Early in the novel the narrative voice points out that Toloki has the ability to transport himself “through the pages of a pamphlet that he got from a pink-robed devotee who disembarked from a boat from the east two summers ago, and walks the same ground that these holy men walk” (1995a:10). Toloki’s poverty elevates him to the status of a “holy man” and this becomes the force that sustains him throughout the course of the novel.

Toloki’s journeys, and those of the other characters such as Noria and Nefolovhodwe, whether physical or metaphysical, are consistent with the journeys undertaken by characters in magic realist texts. In many cases these journeys result in the death of the protagonists. The journey motif in magic realist texts point to an intertextual world in which stories share certain similarities. In Rushdie’s magical realist novels, *Grimus* (1996), *Midnight’s Children* (1981), *Shame* (1984) *The Moor’s Last Sigh* and *Satanic Verses* (1989), the protagonists all leave the place of their birth and undertake extensive journeys. Ironically these journeys result in their deaths. Flapping Eagle the Ameridian hero of *Grimus* undertakes a seven hundred year journey which eventually takes him to Calf Mountain, a place that was created by Grimus. Flapping Eagle’s journey turns out to be a quest for Grimus, his alter ego, and eventually results in his death. Sunil Sunnai, Omar Khayyam, Mores and Gibreel, the protagonists of *Midnight’s Children* (1981), *Shame* (1984), *Satanic Verses* (1989) and *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995) respectively, all face death after their journeys of self-discovery. Sunil’s body disintegrates, Omar Khayyam dies in an explosion, Mores body ages twice as fast

as everyone else's and Gibreel shoots himself. The end of their lives also corresponds with the ending of the narratives of these novels.

The quest motif also features in Allende's *The House of the Spirits* (1993), Okri's *The Famished Road* (1992), Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1996) and Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1983). The protagonists of these texts are forced to undertake journeys which determine their survival.

In Okri's *The Famished Road* (1992), Azaro's journeys take him to the depths of the forests that surround his village and to the spirit worlds where he battles with evil spirits that threaten him and his family. The title *The Famished Road* (1992) is indicative of a road "that was always hungry" (1992:3), demanding the attention of travellers.

Tamina, one of the main characters in Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1983), journeys across the sea to a strange island ruled by children. Here she comes to terms with aspects of her self that she had never encountered before, such as the ability to enjoy sex "in the absence of her soul" (1983:177). When she finally discovers her ability to enjoy the pleasure that her body gives her, she is overcome by the desire for life, but drowns when she attempts to escape from the island.

For Alba, who is one of the narrators of *The House of the Spirits* (Allende 1993), her journey of self discovery takes her to prison where she survives brutal torture, rape, hunger, and near death. She lives to tell the story of her experiences and of those who inhabited *The House of the Spirits* (Allende 1993).

Sanjay, one of the narrators of *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (Chandra 1996), journeys through different periods in history to narrate his story. In a story that covers over a hundred years and many countries in Europe and Asia, Sanjay tells the story of his miraculous conception and his present state as a monkey. At the close of the story Sanjay journeys from India to England by foot to battle against the evil Doctor Swarthey. On his return to Bombay, Sanjay converses with the Yama, the God of Death and requests that he be born again as an animal.

All the protagonists of these magic realist texts have in common the experience of journeys that take them to the brink of death. Death itself then becomes another journey, thus signifying the cyclical nature of magic realist texts where life and death are presented as endless journeys. The apocalyptic ending of many of the magic realist texts mentioned above corresponds with the closure of the novel, with the death of the protagonists also signifying the ending of the novel. This would imply that the protagonists are also representative of the “body” of the novel.

Toloki’s journey from the village where he lived to the city where he becomes a funeral mourner during a time of mass death, casts him in the role of an assistant to death. In his hallowe’en costume Toloki recalls Charon who ferries the dying across the Stygian river to the land of death. As he states: “Death becomes me, it is a part of me” (1995a:106).

Indeed it is not uncommon for characters in magic realist texts to return from their journeys to “the land of the dead”. Melquíades, the narrator of *One*

*Hundred Years of Solitude* (Marquez 1978) returns from the dead, not as a ghost but as flesh and blood.

In the magic realist texts mentioned above the characters are portrayed as individuals whose destinies are shaped by the journeys that they undertake because of the circumstances of their lives. Magic occurrences and fate often combine to provide the reasons for their existence. Toloki and Noria are able to escape the depressing reality of their crude shack by “journeying” through the pages of *Home and Garden*, and actually experience the beauty and splendour, depicted by glossy pictures of this magazine.

### **Ghosts, Spirits and the Supernatural**

A common element in magic realist texts is the appearance of ghosts, spirits and supernatural occurrences that are regarded as common everyday occurrences. In *Ways of Dying* (1995a) the unusual period of Vutha’s stay in his mother’s womb, his return from the dead and his immaculate conception are accepted as being “normal” by his mother, Noria. She does not question these events but sees them as part of the reality of her life.

Jwara is also a subject of magical occurrences in the novel. Inspired by Noria’s singing, he discovers the talent to create his artistic figurines. Later when Noria leaves the village, Jwara remains in a trance without eating or sleeping for years, until he wastes away and dies. Jwara, who was apparently illiterate, leaves a hand-written testament in which he bequeaths his figurines to Toloki, after his

death (1995a:102). The ghost of Jwara “invaded Nefolovhodwe’s dreams and ordered him to fetch the figurines from the village and deliver them to Toloki” (1995a:95). Initially Nefolovhodwe refuses to heed Jwara’s instructions because he believed that it was beneath his dignity to “obey a mere blacksmith” (1995a:193). Nefolovhodwe is forced to comply with Jwara’s wishes when some of the prized performers of his flea circus begin to die. When Nefolovhodwe eventually makes the trip with his workers to collect the figurines he is shocked to discover that there were far more of the figurines than he had bargained for. He “wonders how Jwara had managed to create all these works, and where he had got the iron and sometimes brass to make so many figurines. Or did they perhaps multiply on their own, giving birth to more metal monsters?” (1995a:195). Jwara’s figurines that apparently multiply on their own, are also “narratives” that tell the tragic story of his life, and the way he dies and relives through them.

Like *Ways of Dying* (1995a), magic realist texts such as *One Hundred Days of Solitude* (Marquez 1978), *Midnight’s Children* (Rushdie 1981), *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (Rushdie 1995), *The House of the Spirits* (Allende 1993), *The Famished Road* (Okri 1992), and *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (Chandra 1996), all have in common the appearance of ghosts or spirits, and the occurrence of the supernatural. Jose Arcadio Buendía, the head of the Buendía clan, establishes the village of Macondo after he is tormented by the ghost of Prudencio Aguilar, the man that he had killed in a duel. The ghost of Aguilar is seen by Buendía’s wife Ursula, as well, and visits Buendía at various times and listens to the stories told by him. Later in the story when Buendía dies his ghost also visits his family. In

*Midnight's Children* (1981) the ghost of Joseph reappears at strategic times in the narrative to haunt his lover Mary. On one such appearance Mary confesses to her crime of having switched Suneel with another baby at birth. Suneel then learns the tragic truth that he was not the real offspring of the Sinai's, thereby changing the story of his life. As the title of Allende's *The House of the Spirits* (1993) suggest, the appearance of ghosts and spirits from other worlds is regarded as being "normal". The ghost of Férrula is seen by Esteban Trueba and the rest of his family, on the night of her death, while they were having supper. It is then that Clara realises that Férrula is dead. At a crucial point in the story the ghost of Clara appears to her granddaughter Alba, who is on the point of death, and instructs her to write: "You have a lot to do, so stop feeling sorry for yourself, drink some water, and start writing" (1993:470). In narrating her story and that of the other women prisoners, Alba gradually reconstructs her life and lives to tell her tale. Her story becomes her life, and her life, her story.

Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1992) and its sequel, *Songs of Enchantment* (1994), are populated by ghosts and spirits that influence the lives of Azaro and his family. Azaro ends his narrative in *Songs of Enchantment* (1994) with a reference to these spirits:

I looked, and saw them again. I saw them in the revelation of the moonlight. I saw their hidden and glorious radiance. I stared in trembling wonder at the mighty procession of wise spirits from all the ages, from eras past and eras to come. I watched the glorious stream of hierophants and invisible masters with their caravans of eternal delights, their floating pyramids of wisdom, their palaces of joy, their

windows of infinity, their mirrors of lovely visions, their dragons of justice, their lions of the divine ... and their shining thyrsi of magic ecstasy. I gazed at the royal and serene spirits from higher realms that restore balances (1994:295).

Implicit in Azaro's references to the spirits is the magic associated with them, and the stories they create by being the subject of myths.

Beloved, the young woman in Morrison's novel of that name, who was once the ghost of Sethe's two-year old daughter, has an insatiable appetite for stories. She almost exists on storytelling:

"Tell me," said Beloved, smiling a wide happy smile.  
"Tell me your diamonds." It became a way to feed her ... Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling" (1988:58).

Another magic realist novel by Morrison that features a ghost is *Song of Solomon* (1989). The ghost of Pilate's father, Jake, visits her on numerous occasions to tell her the story of his death.

The connection between stories and ghosts in these magic realist texts points to the use of peasant beliefs on the narratives of magic realist texts. Spirits and ghosts are often depicted as an essential element of the plot of magic realist stories. The presence of ghosts and spirits in these stories are also reminders that within the text there are "the ghosts" of stories that are still to be articulated, and that these stories remain beneath the surface of the actual story, to reappear during strategic times.

Kundera, in his *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1983), draws attention to the lightness of a free human spirit as opposed to the “heaviness” of political power. He describes Madame Raphael and her two students, Michelle and Gabrielle, who float into the air. Their actions can be read as their desire to find freedom from the oppressive institutions of Communism: “Her next step did not touch the ground. She pulled her two friends up after her, and before long all three of them were circling above the floor and moving slowly upward in a spiral. No sooner did their hair touch the ceiling than it yielded to them, and up they went through the opening” (1983:74).

In magic realist texts such as those discussed above, ghosts and spirits tease the imagination of the readers. Mda, himself, has made reference to the exercising of the imagination of both reader and writer as being important to the construction of narratives. He has pointed out that *Ways of Dying* (1995a) is very much the product of his imagination: “When I taught a course on Pan-African literature in America, one of the books I prescribed was a book by André Brink called *Dry White Season*. When I started reading the novel I realised that it was actually a newspaper report of things that were happening here. Nadine Gordimer did the same thing as well in her novels. I did not have that advantage. I had to imagine things and had to create from my imagination” (Naidoo 1997:252). Mda’s claims here contradict his statements, quoted earlier, (pages 154-155) that all the deaths mentioned in *Ways of Dying* (1995a) were based on newspaper reports. If, as he asserts, Brink and Gordimer were dependent on newspaper reports for their stories, he has evidently done likewise. Mda’s comments on creating from his

imagination, however, are worth noting. In his projects with peasant communities in Lesotho, documented in his book *When People Play People* (1993a), Mda has advocated the use of imagination as being an important tool in enabling ~~economically and~~ socially disadvantaged people to narrate the stories of their lives. Mda obviously sees the imagination as a creative force that enables individuals to give expression to their ideas and thereby empower themselves. The writers free expression of the imagination is one of the salient elements in constructing magic realist texts. As he points out:

In my book, *When People Play People* I discuss a methodology of theatre that encourages the victims to tell their story, to share perceptions (even emotions), and work out their own solutions, from their own perspective, rather than respond to solutions from outsiders (1994c:22).

### **Incest and Oedipal Conflicts**

The narrative voice suggests that Toloki's love for Noria, the girl whose songs inspired his father's artistic creation of iron figurines, has undertones of incest. Noria is also referred to as "this powerful woman who killed his father" (1995a:101), indicating his own Oedipal desire for the death of his father. The power that Noria exerted over Jwara is evident in the fact that he wastes away and dies after she stops singing for him. The link between Noria and Jwara induces Toloki and his mother to refer to Noria as "the stuck-up bitch" (1995a:26). Toloki

evidently experiences Noria as a “transposed mother of his Oedipal and sexual desires” (Van Wyk 1997:85). The narrative voice informs us that after Toloki’s meeting with Noria he is overcome by his desire for her, and she constantly occupies his thoughts and his dreams.

Toloki’s ability to consummate his love for Noria, who was once a prostitute, only after his father dies, recalls Beckett’s “First Love” (1974). In this narrative Beckett relates the story of a young man who can only love a woman after his father has died. The person he chooses to love is a prostitute. In her discussion on Becketts “First Love” (1974), Kristeva points out that

if death gives meaning to the sublime story of this first love, it is only because it has come to conceal barred incest, to take up all the space where otherwise we would imagine an unspoken woman: the (father’s) wife, the (son’s) mother? It is because he deduces this absence that the banished son, by analyzing his banishment, might not remain forever a bachelor - neither monk nor narcissistic lover of peers, but father in flight (1980:151).

Kristeva’s comment could apply to Toloki as well. The conflicts with his father motivates him to leave the rural village where he lived and to seek a new life in the city. In this act of self-banishment Toloki repeats the actions of Beckett’s hero in “First Love” (1974), who banishes himself and can only make love to a woman after his father dies. The woman in the story is the prostitute Lulu, who entices the young man to her humble dwelling, recalls Noria’s attempts at initiating sexual intercourse with Toloki, in her shack.

Incest plays a significant role in influencing the lives of the characters in many of the magic realist texts mentioned in this chapter. The plot of Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1978) is structured mainly on the threat that incest will destroy the Buendía family. José Arcadio marries his cousin Ursula who wears a chastity belt, and refuses to sleep with him, because she is afraid of giving birth to a child with the tail of a pig. Her refusal to consummate her marriage leads to her husband's manhood being questioned by Prudencio Aguilar. In a moment of rage Buendá kills Aguilar and forces his wife to honour her conjugal obligations. In order to escape the memory of killing Aguilar and being haunted by his ghost, the Buendías and their friends travel for two years until they discover the land where they build Macondo. Ursula is relieved when none of her children are born with the tail of a pig. After four generations, during which time incest is practised by certain members of the family, Aureliano and his aunt Amaranta Ursula produce a child born with the tail of a pig. The threat that the Buendías had been trying to avoid is finally realised. Amaranta Ursula bleeds to death after the birth of the child and the child is eaten by ants. Macondo, the city of mirrors envisaged by José Arcadio Buendía, is destroyed, obliterating the Buendía clan. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1978) incest causes the disruption of time, which comes to a stop after the birth of the child with a pig's tail. In reflecting on the imminent end of the Buendías, Pilar Terera reflects on their history as "a machine with unavoidable repetitions, a turning wheel that would have gone on spinning into eternity were it not for the progressive and irremediable wearing of the axle"

(1978:320). The use of time in magic realist texts is very similar to naturalism which also focused on the experiences of many generations.

The notion of incest as a disruption of the natural time of the family is also visible in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Allende's *The House of the Spirits* (1993) and Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1989). In *Midnight's Children* (1981) Saleem fantasises about sexual intercourse with his sister Jamila Singer and he is unable to make love to another woman, thereby preventing his line from continuing. His failure to father a child results in the end of his family history. When he kisses his wife Parvati-the-witch, he sees "her face changing, becoming the face of a forbidden love; the ghostly features of Jamila Singer replaced those of the witch-girl ... so now the rancid flowers of incest blossomed on my sister's phantasmal features, and I couldn't do it, couldn't kiss, touch, look upon that intolerable spectral face..."(1981:396). Although Saleem does not have a physical relationship with Jamila Singer, and she is not his biological sister, the thought of incest is deeply rooted in his mind, affecting the course of his life.

Alba, one of the narrators of *The House of the Spirits* (1993), becomes the victim of incest when she is raped by her half-cousin, Colonel Esteban García. In reflecting on this, Alba philosophically accepts what happens to her as part of "a chain of events" (1993:489), as an unfolding of unnatural time:

I am beginning to suspect that nothing happens is fortuitous, that it all corresponds to a fate laid down before my birth, and that Esteban García is part of the design. He is a crude, twisted line, but no brushstroke is in vain. The day my grandfather

tumbled his grandmother, Pancha García among the rushes of the riverbank, he added another link to the chain of events that had to complete itself (1993:489).

In *Song of Solomon* (Morrison 1989), Milkman who is the main focaliser of the story, is so named because he is caught at his mother's breast by Freddy the janitor:

In the late afternoon, before her husband closed his office and came home, she called her son to her. When he came into the little room she unbuttoned her blouse and smiled. **H**e was too young to be dazzled by her nipples, but he was old enough to be bored by the flat taste of mother's milk, so he came reluctantly, as to a chore, and lay as he had at least once each day of his life in his mother's arms, and tried to pull the thin, faintly sweet milk from her flesh without hurting her with his teeth.

She felt him. His restraint, his courtesy, his indifference, all of which pushed her into fantasy ... So when Freddie the janitor ... brought his rent to the doctor's house one day ... Ruth jumped up as quickly as she could and covered her breast, dropping her son on the floor and confirming for him what he had begun to suspect - that these afternoons were strange and wrong (1989:13-14).

As the story progresses, we are informed that Ruth also had an incestuous relationship with her father. Ruth's incestuous relationships with her father and her son, causes a severe strain on her marriage to Macon Dead. The uneasiness in her house impacts on all the members of her family, and for them family time is spent under the pressures of Ruth's guilt.

In both *Ways of Dying* (1995a), and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), Mda used the theme of unconscious incest as the catalyst that causes a disruption in the lives of the protagonists. Toloki's relationship with Noria has already been discussed above. In *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), the relationship between the twins Radisene and Dikosha hints of an incestuous longing that they experience for each other:

Dikosha stood in the centre of the room and Radisene sat on a bench near the pile of bedding. She wanted to change into the red dress, but her brother was refusing to go out of the room. 'What have you got that I haven't seen before?' he asks, with a naughty grin on his face. 'Ha, you think I am afraid of you,' said Dikosha, stripping her ragged dress off. She wore no petticoat, and stood naked as a snake in front of him. Only a strip of beaded thehana covered her femaleness. She giggled and shook her waist in a subtle tease, her small breasts firmly pointed out, and quickly put on the red dress (1995b:10).

Another occurrence of incest in the novel is Trooper Motsohi's raping of his mother-in-law. This results in the disruption of the tranquil lives of the villagers of Ha Samane because some of the women of the village retaliated by assaulting him. The women are subsequently jailed.

### **Madonnas and Whores**

Noria is presented in *Ways of Dying* (1995a) as both madonna and whore. Noria's son, Vutha, is born twice, and each pregnancy takes fifteen months. The unusual

length of the pregnancy and the fact that Vutha is born twice, suggests that Noria is imbued with certain supernatural powers like the biblical Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus. Her power to communicate with the ancestors is suggested by the creative inspiration that Jwara experiences whenever she used to sing for him. Noria's failed marriage to Napu induces her to turn to a life of prostitution in order to ensure the survival of her son and herself. Noria's madonna-like status is implied further by the immaculate conception of Vutha the Second. Noria informs Toloki that Vutha was conceived by "strangers that visited her in her dreams" (1995a:140).

Vutha's unusual conception also recalls the birth of other characters in folk-tales and magic realist texts. The *Uhlakanyana* trickster figure in Zulu folk tales talks before he is born, and decides when he should be born. The "twins", Sanjay and Sikander, in Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1996) are conceived miraculously after their respective mothers consume Indian sweetmeats. In Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1953) the narrator's son is born from his wife's thumb. Azaro in Okri's *The Famished Road* (1992) and *Songs of Enchantment* (1994), Sunil in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Christopher in *Christopher Unborn* (1990) by Fuentes are all characters who narrate the stories of their lives long before they are born. The unusual pregnancies in magic realist narratives is suggestive of the texts attempt at interrogating conventional attitudes to reality and points to the construction of personal histories through individual perceptions of reality.

Towards the end of the story Noria assumes the role of madonna by assisting the old woman, Madimbhaz, to take care of the children in the squatter camp. Many of these children have been orphaned as a result of violence in the townships and some are physically handicapped. Noria is transformed from the girl who had "learnt the art of entertaining white men who came from across the seas ... and paid her a lot of money" (1995a:80) to the madonna who inspires her community. Noria spends her time between Madimbhaz's shack, called "the dumping ground" because of the children who are left there, and her own chores. She exists mainly from the hand-outs she receives from her neighbours. In spite of her poverty she refuses a life of luxury offered by Shadrack on condition that she became his mistress. Her transformation is so profound that it

dawns on Toloki for the first time that Noria is still very young at thirty-five. She is handicapped neither physically nor mentally. She is strong, and does not drink. She does not abuse drugs in any form whatsoever. Surely she could have taken a job as a domestic worker. Or as an office cleaner - a job she had experience in, having done it in the small town back home. She could even sell fat cakes and fruit on the streets. But she had chosen to spend her days working at the dumping ground.

It is Noria who knows how to live (1995a:158).

Noria's simultaneous status of whore and madonna is also suggested by the violent death of Vutha the second, thereby pointing to the links with Christ's violent death and her role as the keeper of Jwara's figurines. Her poverty and her rejection of the world imbues Noria with a sense of mysticism and this appeals to

the ascetic in Toloki. When Toloki decides to get rid of the figurines, she influences him to retain them, so that they could be sources of entertainment for the children. As the source of inspiration for the creation of the figurines, Noria represents the madonna who brings joy to the children of the squatter camp, and she also finds meaning in community work. She points out to Toloki that the figurines should, “stay here with us, and bring happiness and laughter to the children” (1995a:198). Jwara’s figures are reminders of the power of magic and therefore hope.

Noria’s representation of whore and madonna is consistent with the depiction of whores and madonnas in other magic realist texts discussed below. The motif of the prostitute who also embodies the qualities of the madonna is evident in a number of magic realist texts. In Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1978), the prostitute, Pilar Ternera, is the progenitor of three generations of Buendías. Pilar is over a hundred and forty-five years when she dies in her brothel. Before she dies, however, she comforts Aureliano, the last of the Buendía clan: “he was ready to unburden himself with words so that someone could break the knots that bound his chest, but he only managed to let out a fluid, warm and restorative weeping in Pilar Ternera’s lap” (1978:320). This image of Aureliano lying in Pilar’s lap recalls Giovanni Bellini’s paintings of the Madonna and the infant Christ on her lap. Pilar dies a whore, and the destruction of Macondo follows soon after her death.

In Okri’s *Songs of Enchantment* (1994), Azaro’s mother decides to become a prostitute in Madame Koto’s bar. After years of suffering from the

effects of poverty she joins the other prostitutes who work for Madame Koto. When Azaro sees her in Madame Koto's bar he has difficulty in recognising her: "I passed the back door and saw a woman who looked just like mum wearing a gold-tricked wrapper and a green blouse. She was dancing with a man who had a bullet-shaped head, a thick neck and a lion-capped walking stick ... She flashed smiles in all directions, red lipstick burning her face, her arms loaded with bangles" (1994:37). Azaro's mother eventually returns to her family after his father negotiates a deal with Madame Koto.

The motif of whore and madonna is also present in Rushdie's *Grimus* (1996), *Midnight's Children* (1981), *Shame* (1984) and *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995). In *Grimus* (1996), the madonna-like Elfrida Gribb eventually has to work in the brothel, "The House of the Rising Sun". In her moment of self-realisation she proclaims: "Whore. Elfrida the whore. Yes, why not. Yes, why not. If my love thinks me a whore, I must live up to his idea of me. Yes, why not. I shall be a whore and earn my keep. Yes, why not, why not" (1996:194). In *Midnight's Children* (1981), Saleem Sinai's foster mother, Amina, and his biological mother Vanita are madonnas who become whores. Other women in the story who are madonna-whore figures are Saleem's aunt, Pia, Saleem's neighbour, Lila, and his wife, Parvati-the-witch. Aurora Da Gama, the mother of Moraes, narrator of *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), is portrayed as a beautiful woman who does not conceal her extra-marital relationships. In the eyes of her son, however, she is revered as a madonna who can do no wrong. In *Shame* (1984), the three Shakil sisters, Chunni, Munnee and Bunny, who are the "mothers" of the narrator, Omar Khayyam,

openly declare their intention of being madonnas and whores. On his deathbed their father, remarks, “Whores … don’t count on it” (1984:14), when they make reference to his wealth. A telling image of the status of women as whores and madonnas in the text is the statue of the founder of Mir Village, Sir Mir Harappa, who “gazes with equal hauteur upon village hospital and brothel” (1984:95). The brothel which serves the men of the village, is given the same status as the hospital where women give birth to babies.

Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1988) is the story of Beloved, a ghost of the two year old child that was killed by its mother, Sethe. Beloved, takes on a human form of fully grown woman, and re-enters her mother’s life, to destroy her. This happens after Sethe takes a lover, Paul D. The conflict between Sethe and Beloved is also the conflict that Sethe experiences between her desires as a woman and her role as a mother.

Perhaps the best representative of the madonna-whore motif in *Ways of Dying* (1995a), is That Mountain Woman, who has sex with a “doctor” while she was eight months pregnant with Noria. That Mountain Woman flaunts the ancient traditions of her people, and is unrepentant when she is caught by the elders of her village. Although the villagers exclaim, “That Mountain Woman has no shame” (1995a:34), they admit to “a smack of envy in our voices when we said that” (1995a:34). What is apparent in the representation of women who choose to be whores rather than madonnas, is the freedom from the discourse of the patriarch who dictates the roles of women.

*Ways of Dying* (1995a) shares with the magic realist texts, mentioned above, the portrayal of women as madonnas and whores, pointing to the paradoxical nature of these texts.

### **Images of the Carnivalesque**

The image of the open grave which introduces *Ways of Dying* (1995a) quoted earlier, is a recurrent motif in the novel. The grave becomes the hungry grotesque monster that swallows the living. However, as Bakthin (1984) has pointed out in his reference to Rabelais , it is also the image of regeneration as death is actually “inseminating mother earth making her bear fruit once” (1984:327). In such a case the carnivalesque becomes the antithesis of death as it celebrates the “relative historic immortality of the people” (1968:327). In *Ways of Dying* (1995a), images of the apocalypse and carnival combine to portray the eternal dualism of life and death.

The carnivalesque celebration of death also draws attention to the erotic imagery of the grave and death in *Ways of Dying* (1995a). There is the suggestion that death “brings nothing to an end, for it does not concern the ancestral body, which is renewed in the next generation … One body offers its death. The other its birth, but they are merged in a two-bodied image (Bakthin 1984:322).

In *Ways of Dying* (1995a) the transitional period after the death of apartheid is followed by the birth of violence, bloodshed and widespread killing.

This evokes images of both the apocalypse and carnival as the narrative voice explains:

... there are funerals everyday, because if the bereaved were to wait until the weekend to bury their dead, then mortuaries would overflow, and cemeteries would be overcrowded with those attending funerals. As a matter of fact, even with funerals taking place daily the mortuaries are bursting at the seams, and the cemeteries are always jam-packed. Often there are up to ten funeral services taking place at the same time, and hymns flow into one another in unplanned but pleasant segues (1995a:136).

Implicit in the description of funerals above is the view that carnival celebrates the “birth of the new world...” (Bakthin 1984:41). Evident here is the paradoxical use of language: “jampacked”, “bursting at the seams”, “pleasant segues”, which contradict the seriousness of the funerals. The extract below is another example of multiple burials and the carnival spirit which is present at funerals:

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. You would laugh and eventually stop. But after a few minutes you would think of the joke

again, and you would burst out laughing all over again. Laughter kept coming in spurts, with some people even rolling on the ground. When the four processions finally marched off in various directions, some people were still laughing. Others had stomach cramps from laughing too much (1995a:152-153).

The carnivalesque atmosphere at the funerals, evoked by laughter prompts Toloki, who echoes Nietzsche, to state that, “In death we laugh as well” (1995a:152) and “In our language there is a proverb which says the greatest death is laughter” (1995a:153). Toloki’s reference to death and laughter recalls an incident earlier in the story when Noria’s friend tells her, “There is nothing we can do about it, Noria. When one is called no one can prevent it. I am going to die laughing” (1995a:38), while they were at a funeral service. She actually dies laughing when she is shot in the chest by an unknown gunman. The carnivalising of death in *Ways of Dying* (1995a) recalls similar incidents in Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1983) and Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1998). In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1983) Papa Clevis’s hat is blown by the wind into the open grave at the funeral of Victor Passer: “At that moment the entire assembly of mourners was racked by a silent wave of laughter. They all knew that the orator, poised with the shovel of dirt over the grave, was staring at the coffin lying at the bottom of the pit and the hat lying in the coffin … They all had to join the terrible battle with laughter” (1983:221). In *The God of Small Things* (1998) the narrative voice informs us: “During the funeral service, Rahel watched a small black bat climb up on Baby Kochamma’s expensive funeral sari with gently clinging claws.

When it reached the place between her sari and her blouse, her roll of sadness, her bare midriff, Baby Kochamma screamed and hit the air with her hymnbook ... The bat flew up into the sky and turned into a jet plane without a crisscrossed trail. Only Rahel noticed Sophie Mol's secret cartwheel in her coffin (1998:6)

If death is carnivalised in *Ways of Dying* (1995a), so too is conception and pregnancy. When Noria's mother That Mountain Woman is eight months pregnant she meets a health assistant, who convinces her that he is a "doctor". The "doctor" is another of the trickster figures in the novel. By arrangement they agree to meet that night "to seal their newfound love with a bit of adult merriment" (1995a:31). The "doctor" enlists the help of the police who drive him in their Land Rover to "an emergency in the village over the hills" (1995a:32). The villagers become curious when That Mountain Woman and the "doctor" are locked in her hut for over an hour. That Mountain Woman's father, however, becomes suspicious, and followed by some of the villagers, storms into the hut. The narrative voice informs us that: "Inside the hut they were greeted by a scene that left them sweating with anger and disgust. Those who were outside the hut were amazed to hear screams. Then the doctor was flung through the door like a piece of rag. His pants flew after him, and fell in the midst of giggling schoolgirls. Men used their sticks on him, and he screamed, 'You don't understand, good people! I was using a new method of curing the pains on her!'" (1995a:33). The naked "doctor" is severely beaten and the village compete with the policemen to beat him up. The carnivalesque humour of the incident is not lost on the villagers who remark: "We told the story over and over again, we laughed, and we said, 'That Mountain

Woman Has no shame”” (1995a:34). Noria is born a month after this incident and the villagers believed strongly that the “doctor” contributed to Noria’s facial features, even though her mother was eight months pregnant at the time of her ~~merriment~~ with him. Noria’s mother represents the carnivalesque spirit which celebrates the function of the body, and more especially the womb, as a source of procreation and pleasure. In this respect she shares with the open grave the function of being a space for insemination, fertility and renewed growth.

The church also becomes an object of laughter in the spirit of the carnivalesque. Toloki is involved in a “skirmish” with the Archbishop of the Apostolic Blessed Church of Holly Zion on the Mountain Top. The spelling of the word “holy” and the name of the church invites questions as to the authenticity of the “Archbishop” who is a self proclaimed “B.A., M.Div., D.Theol. (U.S.A.), Prophet Extraordinaire” (1995a:97). In their description of the “Archbishop” the collective voice is pointing to the role of “clergymen” who are in fact tricksters who prey on the gullible. The “Archbishop’s role as a trickster who fleeced the poor in the name of God is clearly evidenced in the following extract:

The Archbishop earned his living during the week by selling tripe and other innards of animals in a trunk fastened to the carrier of his bicycle. He rode from one homestead to another through the village, shouting, “Malamogodu! Amathumbo!” in his godly baritone. This simply meant that he was touting his offal, encouraging the people to buy. Some children, whose mothers had not taught them any manners, sometimes shouted at the holy man, “Thutha mabhakethe! Tshotsha mapakethe!” What they were saying was that the Archbishop was a carrier of

buckets. This emanated from the days when the holy man used to work as a nightsoil remover in town, before the Holy Spirit caught up with him, and called him to serve the Lord ... The Holy Spirit had great timing, for the Archbishop was about to lose his job in any case, since the town was phasing out the bucket system (1995a:96).

The scatological images used in the above extract to describe the Archbishop and his church is also evidenced in the description of the ritualistic Easter cleansing. Members of the Archbishop's congregation were given "quantities of water mixed with holy herbs to induce vomiting. After the water and an enema, the worshippers would dot the hillside in a colourful display of blue, green and white, as they squatted there and threw up and emptied their bowels" (1995a:98).

Elements of the carnivalesque are also apparent in the commercialisation of death. The collective voice informs us that Toloki initially decides to "profit from death like his homeboy Nefolovhodwe. But after two or three funerals, his whole outlook changed. To mourn for the dead became a spiritual vocation" (1995a:125). In his tattered and torn costume that is held together by pins and wire Toloki is also a carnivalesque figure who becomes a caricature of death. Even though he views himself "in the light of monks from the orient" (1995a:125), Toloki is perceived by those around him as a grotesque comic figure who is the object of laughter and ridicule and he is believed to be "a madman or a joker" (1995a:125). This view does not alter much over time. When the narrative voice introduces us to Toloki at the beginning of the story we are told that

people willingly move away from him. Why do people give way? he wonders. Is it perhaps out of respect for his black costume and top hat, which he wears at every funeral as a hallmark of his profession? But then why do they cover their noses and mouths with their hands as they retreat in blind panic, pushing those behind them? Maybe it is the beans he ate for breakfast ... or maybe it is the fact that he has not bathed for a whole week, and the December sun has not been gentle (1995a:3- 4).

This view of him does not alter much later in the story:

The fact that he has become some kind of a spectacle does not bother him. It is his venerable costume, he knows, and is rather proud. Dirty children follow him. They dance in their tattered clothes and spontaneously compose a song about him, which they sing with derisive gusto. Mangy mongrels follow him, run alongside, sniff at him, and lead the way, while barking all the time. He ignores them all, and walks through a quagmire of dirty water and human ordure that runs through the streets of this informal settlement, as the place is politely called, looking for Noria (1995a:42).

Toloki's mourning costume, the narrative voice informs us, is "all in black, comprising a tall shiny top hat, lustrous tight-fitting pants, almost like the tights that the young women wear today, and a knee-length velvety black cape buckled with a hand-sized gold-brooch with tassels of yellow, red and green" (1995a:21). The costume is a carnivalesque version of that used by magicians, and the legendary vampire Count Dracula.

When Toloki initially sees the costume sold by the shop which trades in the hire of theatrical costumes, he is unable to afford it. He also finds that the shop has “strange and fantastic costumes that people rented for fancy dress balls, or for New Year carnivals, or to make people laugh” (1995a:21). The shopkeeper informs Toloki that the costume he desires was used once before, “by some Americans who wanted it for a Halloween” (1995a:21). Toloki stands in front of the shop everyday looking at the costume in the window with “izincwe, the gob of desire” (1995a:22), leaking from his mouth. Eventually the costume is bought for him by the owner of a restaurant, next to the shop selling the costume, who complain that “he is frightening our customers away … Who would want to eat our food while looking at the slimy saliva hanging out of his mouth?” (1995a:22).

Dressed in his costume Toloki moves from one funeral to the next, hoping to be given the job of mourning for the dead. Thus Toloki becomes the character who represents both death and carnival as he preys on the dead, but he does so by evoking laughter rather than instilling fear in the minds of the people.

Unlike Toloki who fails to profit from death, Nefolovhodwe, who used to live in Toloki’s village, and was Jwara’s close friend, succeeds in creating a commercial empire based on the sales of coffins. Toloki recalls that Nefolovhodwe was once “the butt of the jokes of village children because of his poverty” (1995a:118). Encouraged by Jwara, Nefolovhodwe takes his skill as a maker of coffins to the city where people “die like flies” (1995a:116). Nefolovhodwe moves to the city and initially lives in a squatter camp. The increasing sales of his coffins enables him to buy a house in the township, after bribing certain officials. Later he

purchases a house in “a very up-market suburb” (1995a:117). Nefolovhodwe’s phenomenal wealth derives from his invention of the Nefolovhodwe Collapsible Coffin which could be easily transported and assembled. The Nefolovhodwe De Luxe Special, created only for the very wealthy, was also another source of his riches.

Nefolovhodwe’s De Luxe Special adds to the elements of the carnivalesque when it is discovered that “at night, unscrupulous undertakers went to the cemetery and dug the de luxe coffin up. They wrapped the corpses in sacks, put them back in their graves, and took the coffins to sell again to other bereaved millionaires. An undertaker could sell the same coffin many times over, and no one would be the wiser” (1995a:118). Nefolovhodwe joins the long list of trickster figures in the novel, functioning as an inter-textual link with the trickster figures made famous in African folktales. In these stories tricksters survive through the use of wit and cunning in a world without ultimate meaning or justice.

When Toloki meets Nefolovhodwe for the first time in the city he learns that when he is not involved in administering his business, Nefolovhodwe, “who had ballooned to ten times the size he used to be back in the village”, ran “a flea circus for relaxation. He took it very seriously, and his fleas were good at all sorts of tricks. He believed that they would one day be skilled enough to enter an international competition” (1995a:120). Nefolovhodwe’s immense physique and his attachment to his flea circus recalls Bakhtin’s notion of grotesque realism.

Nefolovhodwe’s role as the inventor of new types of coffins to cater for the dramatic increases in deaths, and his obsession with his flea circus also cast him as

the incongruous carnivalesque figure who is both ringmaster and carrier of the dead. Jwara's invasion of Nefolovhodwe's dreams and his threat to kill all of his fleas reinforced the idea of Nefolovhodwe being the unwitting carnivalesque figure who is in danger of becoming a parody of himself. Toloki makes such a deduction when he muses :

Whoever heard of a grown man rearing fleas, and playing with them? He had had lice back in the docklands, but they were not there because he was cultivating them. They had just been one of his misfortunes in life. He will admit, however, that he had found it quite entertaining to crush them with his thumbnails. Perhaps there is something in our deriving joy and entertainment from creatures that feed on our blood after all. Maybe he should not judge Nefolovhodwe too harshly on this score, since he had also found joy in his lice. But still the differences cannot be ignored. His joy was in the dying of his lice, whereas Nefolovhodwe's is in the living of his fleas (1995a:194).

Ironically Nefolovhodwe's hobby as ringmaster of his flea circus is only made possible by the numerous deaths that create a demand for his coffins. His overblown body and the tiny fleas that he keeps for entertainment invokes images of death carnivalised as it toys with those it allows to live. In this regard his character is consonant with that of Madame Skoroko in Okri's *Famished Road* (1992) whose weight increases as she amasses new fortunes at the cost of her traditional values and morals.

### Images of the Apocalypse

The sociopolitical situation in South Africa especially in the “interregnum” years between 1976 and 1994 (Chapman 1996:viii) saw more deaths from killing than ever recorded before in the history of the country. Mda commenced writing *Ways of Dying* (1995a) on Christmas Day 1991 and completed the novel on 1 April 1992. Written during a period when political violence became more intense, and the brutal killing of the innocent became commonplace in South Africa, it is not surprising that the “ways of dying” recorded in the novel should be based on actual murders reported in local newspapers. The apocalyptic in the novel, however, does not strictly follow the symbolic patterns of the traditional apocalypse: catastrophe, judgement and renewal (May 1972). Instead the apocalypse portrayed is consonant with magic realist texts such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Márquez 1978), *Midnight’s Children* (Rushdie 1981) and *The Famished Road* (Okri 1992) where death is seen as a process that is an intrinsic aspect of laughter and living, and re-birth. Thus these novels, like *Ways of Dying* (1995a), are not overtly apocalyptic in nature but reflect rather, the cathartic effects on societies during times of socio-political transition. The questioning of reality during such times of “the destruction of an entire familiar world or way of life” (Brink 1984:190), leads to individual and a collective “state of mind inconsistent with reality” (Mannheim 1954:173). During such times the individual and communities choose to ignore reality, and not to treat tragic materials

tragically, but rather to subject them to comic, even grotesque distortion with a mocking apocalyptic tone of irony" (O' Neill 1990:25). The ability of humour in curbing the destructive power of the apocalypse is also evident in Bakthin who has pointed out that "certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter" (1984:66).

The deaths described in *Ways of Dying* (1995a) are presented against the background of carnivalesque images and in language that has undertones of dramatic irony. The first death which introduces the novel, that of Noria's five year old son Vutha, is also the last death described in the story. The plot of the novel actually centres on the reasons as to why Vutha The Second died. Noria reveals the tragic circumstances surrounding Vutha's death to Toloki after their friendship develops into love. In what is characteristic of magical realist texts where time is non-linear and disjointed, she points out that she carried him in her womb for thirty months, and that he was born twice. On each occasion he was born after remaining in his mother's womb for fifteen months and he dies a gruesome death. The unusually long period taken by Vutha to be born points to a historical period when time becomes disjointed and "the new cannot be born" (Gramsci:1985:98). On the first occasion he was kidnapped by his father Napu and used by him to beg. The perpetually drunk Napu chains Vutha to a pole and forgets about him while he wanders off to indulge in a drinking spree. When he finally remembers his son, after many days, he finds Vutha's corpse being eaten by scavenging dogs. Napu, overcome by grief and hysteria, dies by running into a sewerage storage dam, and drowning. After the death of her husband and child Noria resolves not to laugh

again or to sleep with men. Vutha's second death is caused by "necklacing", having a tyre placed around him and being torched alive. The perpetrators of his death are the Young Tigers, the youth wing of the political party that rules the squatter settlement where Noria lives. Noria relates the double deaths of Vutha in what becomes a cathartic act for her. Her ability to finally talk about the death of Vutha signals her own sense of renewal and re-birth. This is demonstrated by her willingness to make love to Toloki, after about seventeen years of celibacy, immediately after she tells him about the deaths of Vutha (1995a:179).

The double deaths of Vutha forms a cycle within which the narratives of other deaths are contained. This points to the eternal struggle between life and death, with the carnivalesque and apocalypse as their primary signifiers. With death through violent killing becoming commonplace even funeral services become perfunctory to the point where the wrong bodies are buried by families. The black humour apparent in such practices assumes macabre proportions when seen against the background of detached reality resulting from constant exposure to violent killing. The need by perpetrators to hack, mutilate and desecrate the body is a common theme in the text. Vutha's deaths are caused by the savage eating and burning of his flesh respectively. A woman who eventually locates her brother's corpse after being given the wrong one finds that the "head had been hacked open, and the brain was hanging out. There were bullet wounds on the legs" (1995a:17). The body of a little boy is found "castrated, and the killer had also cut open his stomach, and had mutilated the flesh from his navel right down to his thighs" (1995a:41). Nor is there any consideration or respect for mothers. In what is

clearly a complete reversal of the mythical status of women as the collective image of Mother Africa, a woman who had given birth the previous day is repeatedly raped by a gang and her throat is slit. There is also the barbarous killing of fifty-two people in which 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” (1995a: 170).

In the novel death is not always caused by political violence, but also stems from “games” in which the innocent are killed. These games have their roots in an absurd political situation where cruelty to blacks is regarded as an act of entertainment. In Nkosi’s *Mating Birds* (1987), for example, the text demonstrates the absurdity of apartheid by constant reference to games: “...a kind of game in which the girl and I were harmlessly engaged” (1987:137); “This was certainly a game two could play” (1987:147). In *Ways of Dying* (1995a) Toloki’s friend is killed by a white colleague who is burnt to death in a game because “the big white baas ... likes to play with black labourers” (1995a:57). In a similar game Shadrack’s son who was a matric student, and three other people are picked up at random in the street and taken to a hostel. They are then set free and told to run away. They are shot as they ran because the inmates wanted to “test their guns” (1995a:47). The playing of games to assert power during a time of transition is also evident in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981:95), where Methwold, proclaims to Ahmed Sinai, “Those are my terms. A whim ... you’ll permit a

departing colonial his little game? We don't have much left to do, we British, except to play our games" (1981:95).

Disjunctures in the family which reflect the breakdown of society is clearly evident in the death of an old man who is beaten up by his sons simply because he allowed "the children of a mistress to be shaved before their legitimate children" (1995a:148). The narrative voice informs us that "Squabbles have often arisen when the names of the male relatives have been called in the incorrect order. But it is unheard of for an elder to be killed by his own children for failing to properly observe the custom. We all agree that the two sons, who are now in prison awaiting trial, deserve to be in jail for the rest of their lives, or to be hanged" (1995a:149). The killing of the acknowledged head of the family is again symptomatic of the entropy experienced by societies caught in the grip of bloodshed during phases of transition. As O'Neill points out, "normative, role orientated, authoritative, prescribed standards of conduct and belief are broken down" (1990:143). The Nurse's account of the old man's death, however, is also accompanied by the carnivalesque. When he narrates how his friend died he reveals where he hides his money: "... it was fortunate my brothers and sisters, that I had some money in my shoe where I hide it from my grandchildren. Oops, now they know where I hide my money. But don't worry I'll find another place" (1995a:149). In what might appear to be a perverse emerging of a new collective consciousness, death is actually celebrated: "It is like those political funerals where the Young Tigers dance to a call-and-response chant. Someone who does not understand the meaning in these chants might be amazed or even shocked at how

these youths can be so happy at a funeral" (1995a:159). In commenting on the deaths described in *Ways of Dying* (1995a) Van Wyk states that the

many deaths in the text, point to the fact that in this historical nightmare, dying is a way of life. It points to a society that has regressed; a society in which the institutionalised law is illegitimate or completely absent. The perpetrators of the crimes in this lawless society were allowed not to grow up, and this is evident in the fact that they cannot distinguish between their fantasies (ideologies) and reality. The reality principle is absent. Senseless violence permeates everything and everybody ... (1997:18).

The body loses its value as spirit and flesh made in the image of God and becomes the object of savagery and debasement. The debased, butchered body is a dominant trope in the novel. It metonymically represents a nation that is subjected to overpowering forces of disintegration and is consonant with Homi Bhabha's view that, "The nation fills the void left in the uprooting communities and kin, and turns that loss into the language of metaphor" (1990:291).

The destruction of the body does not only stop with violent killing. The dead are not allowed to rest in peace and graves are desecrated and coffins stolen and resold. When Nefolovhodwe learns that his de luxe special coffins are being dug up and resold he reacts only because it affects his business: "you must admit it's an ingenious profit-making scheme, this digging up of my coffins. I should have thought of it first. If anyone is going to profit from a Nefolovhodwe, it should be Nefolovhodwe himself" (1995a:121). The taxi-driver Shadrack is taken by

right-wingers on a “hell-ride” to a mortuary where the “men grabbed him by the shoulders and ordered him to make love to a corpse of a young woman” (1995a:132) because they believed that “it was a fun thing to do” (1995a:133).

### **Images of the transition**

The text narrating the changes that occur in anticipation of the new order is framed, somewhat symbolically, by the seven days from Christmas Day to New Years Day, suggesting the creation of a new order. The transition from apartheid rule to liberation and a democratic social order occurs against the background of the rites of passage of individuals who make up the social collective. A noticeable feature of the collective narrative voice in the opening page of the novel is the disjunctions in black unity. The facts articulated by the Nurse are seen as ammunition that “the enemy” will use against “us” (1995a:3). The divisions among the people, that are alluded to here, reflect the forces working against black solidarity, a theme that is present throughout the text. It is a theme that has intertextual links with a number of magic realist texts which focus on civil strife and the effects of socio-political transition on the lives of ordinary people. The Columbian wars of independence in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Márquez 1978), the Chilean civil wars in *The House of the Spirits* (Allende 1993), the Nigerian civil wars on the eve of independence in *The Famished Road* (Okri 1992) and *Songs of Enchantment* (Okri 1994), Indira Gandhi’s State of Emergency in *Midnight’s Children* (Rushdie 1981), and the civil wars in Lesotho in Mda’s *She Plays with*

*the Darkness* (1995a), are some examples of texts that focus on aspects of transition during civil strife.

The transition is also characterised by the breakdown of traditional values and belief systems. The unity of black people, and the collective communal self, which was the founding principle of Black Consciousness face threats of erosion and disintegration. Ethnic divisions are encouraged to muster political support. Similarly, the tenets of Black Consciousness which sought ideological solidarity among black people on the basis of skin colour, are effaced in favour of individual aspirations and demands. The shock of such a disintegration takes its toll on the individual and the community. Another contributing factor is the nightmare of the mayhem that determines the new realities that the society must face. Shadrack, for example, is shocked when his son is killed by people who are “of the same ethnic group” (1995a:47). The role of the tribal chief is inverted from leader and protector of his people to a megalomaniac who “merely uses ethnicity as an excuse for his own hunger for power” (1995a:47). He degenerates into “a blood-soaked chief” who has “concocted a non-existent threat to his people, telling them that they are at risk from other ethnic groups in the country” (1995a:47).

The atrocities perpetrated by the tribal chief, as mentioned above, is an obvious reference to the political violence based on ethnicity that intensified during the years preceding discussions on the country’s democracy. The clash of cultures and ethnic identities is forced on groups, and visions of past glories are exploited to create a hypnotic situation in which mob hysteria begins to predominate. The

text also suggests that the new order will see the death of the authority of tribal chiefs and the power that they wield over people:

Some members of his ethnic group, especially those from the rural areas who still believe in the tribal authority of chiefs, follow him ardently, and have taken up arms whenever he has called upon them to do so. They are often fired up at rallies by his lyrical praise, and panegyrics, of their superiority as a group ordained by the gods; a chosen people with a history of greatness in warfare and conquest. They have internalised the version of their own identity that depicts them as having inherent aggression. When they attack the residents of squatter camps and townships, or commuters in the trains, they see themselves in the image of great warriors of the past, of whom they are descendants. Indeed the tribal chief, in his rousing speeches, has charged them with what he calls a historic responsibility to their warrior ancestors (1995a:48).

The will to power described in the extract above is mediated by the texts of past glories which also reflect a process in which black history is recovered, albeit for destructive reasons. The purpose of forging an identity premised on historical antecedents and nurtured by a discourse of ethnic power is consonant with the actions of political leaders characterised in the other magic realist texts mentioned earlier.

The violent ethnic clashes also stem from historical tribal conflicts. Black solidarity is also threatened by the adverse treatment of black people, who are from rural areas, by urban blacks. Rural blacks are called “amagoduka, those

whose roots are in the rural areas and who return there after their contracts in the city are finished" (1995a:49). As Shadrack explains, it "was easy for the tribal chief to use them against us, for they were already bitter about the scorn that we were showing them" (1995a:49).

The transition is characterised by black on black violence and the collapse of law and order. The lawlessness that Durkheim has termed "anomie", is characterised by a state of near anarchy in which the state's law enforcement agencies are also complicit in the killing and bloodshed, that prevails during this period. The police participate in the atrocities as in Shadrack's case when he was made to have sex with a corpse, and those in authority refuse to take action against police offenders:

Shadrack explains that last night, while he was writing the statement, the police officers denied that the vehicle he was describing was a police van. A Lieutenant-General even made some thinly veiled threats, saying that if he proceeded with the matter, it would make a lot of important people angry. When important people were angry, he warned, there was no knowing what cannon they might unleash (1995a:133).

A similar accusation is made by the communal voice when referring to violence perpetrated by hostel dwellers earlier in the narrative: "Sometimes the police and the security forces assist them in their raids of death and destruction, because this helps to divide the people so that they remain weak and ineffective when they fight for their freedom" (1995a:48).

The failure of law enforcement agencies to protect the innocent results in a system of justice in which retribution and punishment is meted out by kangaroo courts at which the “youth” preside. In a blatant display of power these “courts” become judge, jury and executioner. Punishment of “sell-outs” “is intended to apply the law not so much to the real body capable of feeling pain as to a judicial subject, the possessor, among other rights, of the right to exist” (Foucault 1991:13). In *Discipline and Punish* (1991) Foucault draws attention to the institutions of punishment, which serve to force a given society’s notion of discipline on its citizens. Once established these institutions become the machinery that sets in motion a system of discipline and punishment that is often unjust and cruel. Vutha is found guilty at one such disciplinary hearing, and children are invited “to see what happened to sell-outs” (1995a:177). A tyre is placed around his neck and Danisa, a girl of his age, is given the “honour” of carrying out the “execution” (1995a:177). The children are made to watch while he burns to death.

The narrative voice informs us that the tendency to protect criminals is not only endemic to the state’s law enforcement agencies. The political party to which the Young Tigers belong, glosses over the death of Vutha, and fails to act against his killers. Noria is promised by the local street committee, “that the leaders would publicly make a statement at the meeting, apologising for the death of her son, and reprimanding those who were responsible for it” (1995a:166). She is devastated when they “called her privately, and added insult to injury by saying that her child ... was not completely blameless” (1995a:166). The full extent of the anomie

is realised when one considers that the narrative voice which represents the collective consciousness also participates in the destruction of life and property:

... we go for what we call a joll. All it means is that we engage in an orgy of drinking, raping, and stabbing one another with knives and shooting one another with guns. And we call it a joll. We walk around the streets, pissing in our pants, and shouting, "Happie-ee-e!" That's what Christmas is all about. And Boxing Day is the day we go out to bars and shebeens to take off the hangover of yesterday. But by midday, the whole orgy has started all over again (1995a:20).

The extract above clearly points to the fact that violence and the general state of lawlessness has seeped into the collective consciousness of the people and they live out their nightmares in states of suspended reality.

The transition also promises opportunities for black economic empowerment and social advancement. The informal sector of the economy emerges as a result of the relaxation of laws governing trade. For a period Toloki establishes a thriving business as a vendor of food such as grilled meat and rolls:

He applied for a hawker's permit from the city council, and bought himself a trolley for grilling meat and boerewors. It was a four-wheeled trolley with a red-and-white canvas canopy hanging above it. There was a grill on one end, with a gas cylinder underneath it ... He had many customers, some of whom would come all the way from the docklands to buy their lunch from him. He knew how to spice steak in such a way that it was suitable for the taste buds of men who we tortured by the demons of a

hangover. His was the first business of that type and he had no competition (1995a:113).

Toloki is forced to close his business when his trolley is confiscated by city council employees and sent to the dump. It is then that Toloki decides to go to Nefolovhodwe for a job. Toloki is hired by Nefolovhodwe to investigate who is stealing his coffins. When he is beaten up by thieves during this assignment he decides to become a professional mourner. The possibilities for using individual talents during this period are another sign of the individual's declaration of self-affirmation:

Toloki observed that Nefolovhodwe had attained all his wealth through death. Death was therefore profitable. He made up his mind that he was going to benefit from death. But unfortunately, he had no practical skill to market. Unlike Nefolovhodwe, he had no material items that he could make and sell that concerned death. But he had the saddest eyes that we had ever seen. His sad eyes were quite famous, even back in the village. We used to sing about Toloki's sorrowful eyes (1995a:124).

Toloki realises that if he lacks the skills that Nefolovhodwe possesses, he will make use of his physical attributes:

Slowly he reached the decision that he was going to mourn and that people would pay him for his service. Even the fat Nefolovhodwe had told him, "Your face is a constant reminder that we are all going to die one day". He was going to make his face pay. After all, it was the only gift that God had

given him. He was going to profit from the perpetual sadness that inhabited his eyes. The concept of a Professional Mourner was born (1995a:124).

Nefolovhodwe used to be the poorest of Jwara's friends but becomes a millionaire when his coffin manufacturing business booms in the city. His wealth enables him to move into a "White" area which was protected by the Group Areas Act. Nefolovhodwe is able to beat the act by using "a white man, whom he had employed as his marketing manager, to buy the house on his behalf" (1995a:116).

The movement of rich black people to suburbs where they were previously prohibited also has its corresponding movement of poor black people to informal settlements in the urban areas. These "squatter camps" are responsible for changing the character of the urban landscape and signifies the power of the masses in asserting their claim to the land. The "squatter settlements" become a monument to the total defiance of influx control laws and the carrying of the hated "Dompas" which restricted movement of black people to the urban areas. The repeated attempts of the government to destroy the informal settlements prove to be futile: "Bulldozers would move in and flatten the shacks, and then triumphantly drive away. Residents would immediately rebuild, and in no time the shanty town would hum with life again. Like worker bees, the dwellers would go about their business of living" (1995a:136). The portable shack which Boesman and Lena carried through the harsh desolate landscape during the apartheid years finally

makes its way to the urban centre. Here it is the representation of the narratives of black history that inscribes itself on the national consciousness.

The shack becomes an important signifier of the people who have reclaimed their birthright. The urban landscape is changed from a space made hostile to black people by the Group Areas Act, to one in which there are possibilities of new hopes, dreams and visions. Toloki's reconstruction of Noria's shack, for example, is viewed with interest and accepted as an artistic creation:

The sun rises on Noria's shack. All the work has been completed, and the structure is a collage in bright sunny colours. And of bits of iron sheets, some of which shimmer in the morning rays, while others are rust-laden. It would certainly be at home in any museum of modern art. Toloki and Noria stand back, and gaze admiringly at it (1995a:60).

The notion of art for life's sake seems to find its literal meaning in the creation of a shack which attracts attention even though its "message" is lost:

When the neighbours wake up that morning, they all come to witness the wonder that grew in the night. They marvel at the workmanship, and at how the plastic and canvas of different colours have been woven together to form patterns that seem to say something to the viewer. No one can really say what their message is, except to observe that it is a very profound one (1995a:61).

The absurdity of a shack as a work of art in a squalid squatter camp serves to emphasise, somewhat ironically, the efforts of the collective will of the community, as it aspires towards the lifestyle usually associated with white privilege. This is clearly evidenced in the magical occurrence in which Noria's shack is transformed into a mansion like the ones portrayed in pictures from *Home and Garden* magazines.

They walk out of their Mediterranean-style mansion through an arbour that is painted crisp white. This is the lovely entrance that graces their private garden. Four tall pillars hoist an overhead trellis laced with Belle of Portugal roses. A bed of delphiniums, snapdragons, cosmos, and hollyhocks rolls to the foot of the arbour. Noria and Toloki take a brief rest in the wooded gazebo, blanketed by foliage and featuring a swing. Noria likes to sit on the swing, and Toloki enjoys pushing it for her (1995a:104).

The scene described above parodies the images of colonial texts in which romance is shaped by the controlling tropes such as architecture, flowers and the swing. The “walk” through the “mansion” undertaken by Toloki and Noria is the text’s aim at reflecting on white suburban culture. The squatter settlement in a sense becomes the means through which black people encroach and efface the borderline between white privilege and black despair. The contrast between white and black living conditions is a recurrent *topos* in South African fiction, often depicting the borders between coloniser and colonised. In this regard novels such as Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), Gordimer’s *July’s People* (1981)

and Mzamane's *The Children of Soweto* (1982) come readily to mind. This is consonant with Kierkegaard's spatial metaphor which points to the borderline that becomes the common ground for both self and other. In what could be seen as an inversion of the colonial dream, Toloki and Noria gain access through magical means to the landscape of white suburbs:

The whole garden is a potpourri of colour, designed by expert landscape architects. Petals and scents drift above the pathways that twist and wind up the slope. The paving is made from flagstones, fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle, and curving around a bright bank of salvia, azaleas, petunias and nicotiana. There are also varieties of grasses that create a natural palette of textures, rhythm, and soft colours. There are slashing brooks and waterfalls that cascade to a collecting pool. Pools and ponds are a haven for wildlife and water plants. Besides giving the place a rugged semi-wild look, the variety of bushes and shrubs create hiding places for Noria and Toloki when they play hide-and-seek (1995a:104).

The language used above evokes images of an African tropical paradise and parodies the colonial dreams of exotic destinations in which the white coloniser is set free to test his own fertility in a space where there is a profusion of life. Toloki and Noria have entered a fantasy world which is a stark contrast to the "quagmire of dirty water and human ordure that runs through the streets of [the] informal settlement" (1995a:42). The text in the extract quoted above, however, does not only point to the aspirations of the descendants of white colonisers who have created their own visions of the African tropical paradise in their upmarket

suburbs. It can also be read as an ironic revelation of the psyche of the nouveau riche black. The text anticipates the material dreams of this sector of the population who will soon ape the mannerism of the white rulers. The emergence of a black privileged class and their claim to the symbols of white privilege are consistent with what Fanon in *Black Skins White Masks* (1986) has referred to as the black man's imitation of his colonial masters. The text provides numerous examples of this: The chairman of the taxi association lives in a "luxury house" which is "heavily guarded". Similarly Nefolovhodwe's "house was surrounded by a tall security fence, which had a warning that it was electrified attached" (1995a:119). Towards the close of the story he branches out from manufacturing coffins to "the creation and marketing of marble and onyx tombstones, of plastic and silk wreaths, and of funeral haute couture for women, especially the widows of millionaires" (1995a:193). In a scene strongly reminiscent of Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1971) where pig and man resemble each other, one of the leaders of "the political movement" arrives at the informal settlement with his "bejewelled wife" in a "Mercedes Menz" (1995a:161). The transition widens the gap between the black elite, and underprivileged black people who inhabit the rural wastelands and the urban ghettos. The image of the fence marks the beginning of what can be seen as the mutation of the spirit of *Ubuntu*, the principle of communal life and sharing intrinsic to African culture.

The centrifugal forces militating against *Ubuntu* during the transition are, however, also countered by the centripetal forces which impel the community to preserve black unity and the aspirations of Black Consciousness. At the very

beginning of the story Toloki learns that the people protecting Noria are “members of her street committee. They are determined to protect her from all those who want to harass her with questions about the death of her son” (1995a:5). When Toloki reaches the city after walking for three months he almost dies of hunger because he refuses to accept charity. He is saved from death by an old man who feeds him and finds him a job and a place where he could live (1995a:53). The taxi owner Shadrack often transports people and also uses his “old skorokoro van” as a hearse. The old woman, Madimbhaza, lives in a two-roomed shack which is known as “the dumping ground” because “women who have unwanted babies dump them in front of her door at night. She feeds and clothes the children out of her measly monthly pension” (1995a:156). Furthermore she enlists the help of Noria and two other women to take care of these babies and the orphans whose parents were killed by political agitators. Even though Noria is treated badly by the political leaders she continues with her community work and states that she is “not working for them, but for my people” (1995a:167). Madimbhaza in particular evokes the image of Mother Africa, this might be a mythic depiction, but nonetheless is one which signals the hope for the children who would inherit the new order, and the optimism for black solidarity. Noria herself remarks that the community “is our life here at the settlement … We are like two hands that wash each other” (1995a:62).

Notwithstanding the efforts of Madimbhaza and Noria, the extent to which the community is safeguarding the interests and innocence of children during the transition is a theme that the text explores throughout the narrative. There are

early warnings in the story that children have lost their value as the community's hope for the future. At the funeral of Vutha the Second the narrative voice informs us that: "Some of us are heckling the Nurse. Some are heckling the hecklers. So, we do not hear one another ... This is sacrilege that has never been heard of before. And at the funeral of an innocent little boy, on a Christmas Day too" (1995a:4). The image of the Christ child as the hope of mankind is sharply undercut by the mockery of the funeral rites for Vutha the Second. There is a strong suggestion in the text that the community has regressed to a point where children become innocent victims caught in historical circumstances that they are incapable of understanding. Vutha's execution at the hands of children, discussed earlier, corresponds with the theme of social regression to an almost beast-like state when the "fittest", or rather those in power, determine the fate of the weak and innocent. Vutha the Second represents the death of the innocent and the death of innocence as a result of the intervention of politics in the lives of ordinary people. As a five year-old Vutha was already a "veteran of many political demonstrations" (1995a:167), and he "was an expert at dancing the freedom dance, and at chanting the names of the leaders who must be revered, and of the sell-outs who must be destroyed" (1995a:167). The text emphasises the political indoctrination of Vutha the Second and the other children by pointing out:

He could recite the Liberation Code and the Declaration of the People's Rights. Of course, he did not understand a single word, since it was all in English. He mispronounced most of the words, too. He also knew all the songs. Even when he was

playing with mud in the streets, or with wire cars with the other children, he could be heard singing about freedom, and about the heroic deeds of the armed wing of the people's movement. He, of course, was not displaying any particular precociousness in this regard. All the children of the settlement, even those younger than Vutha, were (and still are) well versed in these matters (1995a:167).

Vutha the Second was proud of being a political activist and his affiliation with the "Young Tigers" gave him a sense of authority. He often demonstrated the power this association give him, to his mother: "But mama, I am a cadre. I am a freedom fighter" (1995a:169) and "I am not a coward, mama. I am a Young Tiger too" (1995a:169). The child's belief in a false sense of bravery is evidenced by Vutha the Second's attempts to control Noria: "It established him as a hero among his peers. Sometimes it went to his head, hence his practising his stone-throwing skills at Noria's shack whenever she punished him for being a bad boy" (1995a:169). He was also encouraged by the Young Tigers and praised "for the strength of his throw. They said that if a stone from his hand hit a policeman, or a soldier, or a hostel vigilante on the head, he would surely fall down" (1995a:169). The agitprop spread by the "Young Tigers", some of whom were in "their thirties" (1995a:169), becomes the main source of the children's education and further erodes their sense of what is real. They are manipulated to become "committed freedom fighters" (1995a:170). The fact that "much of the information floated over the heads of the children" (1995a:170) and that this "did not bother the Young Tigers" (1995a:170), is indicative of the inability of the children to distinguish between

good and evil, and the lack of interest of the political movement in correcting them. Danisa a five-year old becomes the executioner of her friend Vutha the Second on instruction from the Young Tigers, and after the deed she innocently proclaims to his mother, "Auntie Noria, I burnt The Second because he is a sell-out" (1995a:177).

The close of the story, however, reflects the hope that the children will return to the time when the spirit of *Ubuntu*, ensured their innocence and their protection. Jwara's figurines "give[s] pleasure to the children" (1995a:198) and Toloki and Noria decide to safeguard the figurines. At the close of the novel the narrator informs us that, "Not even the most habitual thieves among us lift a finger towards the boxes" (1995a:199).

The historical past in which the ancestors safeguarded African traditions and culture, that the figurines also represent, promises to rescue the children. The text suggests that this will only be possible if the community is willing to acknowledge the role of the omniscient ancestral spirits. Their presence indicates that life and death are merely states of being or as Toloki pointed out, "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? (1995a:89).

### **Dreams, and Magic Realism**

The text often has a dream-like quality. Like mirrors reflecting each other the narratives of death reflect other narratives of death. The text functions as both

condensation and metaphor for the history of deaths during an era of senseless killings. Mda's use of factual events as a basis of his story is characteristic of the magic realist novels such as Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1978), Grass' *The Tin Drum* (1987), Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1983), Allende's *The House of the Spirits* (1993) and *The White Hotel* (Thomas 1988). All of these novels are set in countries that have actually experienced the political strife and instability that confronts the characters.

The psychological impact of mass killings on groups results in a spiral of violence in which primal instincts are unleashed. Mda's depiction of group behaviour recalls Freud's comments that: "A group is impulsive, changeable and irritable. It is led almost exclusively by the unconscious. The impulses which a group obeys may according to circumstances be generous or cruel, heroic or cowardly, but they are always so imperious that no personal interest, not even that of self-preservation, can make itself felt" (1985:104).

The collective narrator is an active participant in the events of the narrative. It heckles at funerals, joins in the orgy of violence, and is ruthless in its condemnation of others, "we always remarked, sometimes in his presence that he was an ugly child" (1995a:26). As the all seeing "eye" ( I ) the narrator is the "speaking mirror" (Márquez 1978:336) that reflects on and reflects the personal narratives of the group. Van Wyk (1997) makes the interesting observation that the narrator is an example of the two "dream work" mechanisms identified by Freud, *condensation* and *displacement*. These elements "correspond to the basic

poles of language identified by ... Roman Jakobson, that is, to *metaphor* and *metonymy*, respectively" (Barry 1995:112). The text has evidence of both mechanisms in foregrounding the development of the narratives that shape the lives of the characters. Toloki, for example, ~~metonymically represents~~ the forces of carnival and apocalypse but he is also a metaphor for the struggle of the group as it tries to assert itself during a time of social upheaval. Toloki is a trope of several images in the text. When focalised through him the text records the aspirations, hopes, and disappointments of a community caught in the throes of transition. The text is especially evocative in recalling the a number of literary characters who resemble Toloki. He is reminiscent of Calaban in *The Tempest*, Philip Rhyder in *The Snow Goose* (Gallico 1987), the Hunchback of Notre Damme in the novel of that name, Oskar in *The Tin Drum* (Grass 1987) Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children* (Rushdie 1981) and the tramps in Beckett. All these characters have in common deformities or inadequacies that lead to their withdrawal from society.

Toloki is constantly told that he is ugly, even by the collective voice. He attempts to transcend his physical ugliness by creating beauty through his art. However, he also represses his creativity after being rejected by his father. Noria recognises the beauty in Toloki by telling him that he is "a beautiful person" (1995a:142). Like the ugly Saleem Sinai he becomes the voice that articulates the death of the old order and the voice that signals the birth of a new sociopolitical dispensation. He is also the anthropomorphic 'trickster' figure: the *chakijane* or *mmulanyane* motif found in traditional Southern African folk-tales. Translated, *chakijane* means literally a 'mongoose' the equivalent of the Signifying Monkey

that is a dominant trope in “the shape of the Afro-American literary tradition” (Gates 1988:xx). Dressed in his top hat and tail coat, and given his lack of physical stature, Toloki resembles the trickster figure in African folk-tales, which is said to be, “a semi-human dwarf with a large old man’s head, a tiny wrinkled body, and a tail” (Canonici 1995:32).

The collective narrator is another example of condensation in that it is the alter-ego of Toloki and in its omniscience it embodies the conflicting forces of the group. Noria is also an example of displacement and condensation. She metonymically represents both whore and madonna. The text makes numerous references to her ability to “give pleasure” to men, but focalised through her it also informs us that when Vutha the Second was conceived “she had not slept with any man, except for the strangers that visited her in her dreams, and made love to her” (1995a:140). However, she is also an example of condensation in that she is the image of Mother Africa who suffers the continuous loss of her children. As the mythical Mother Africa she communicates directly with the gods who invade Jwara’s dreams, and enables him to create the statues which are signs of a recovered history. Noria then is the embodiment of African art and its artifacts which root the present and future in the glories of a bygone pre-colonial Africa.

Van Wyk (1997:89) has identified other notable instances of displacement and condensation in the text; such as the harbour city. It is the metonymical representation of the centre where colonial power resides and to what those who have journeyed from the rural peripheries aspire. Metaphorically it reflects the incidents that have occurred in various South African cities in recent history: The

train violence and hostel violence is associated with Gauteng, the carnival with Cape Town, and the tribal chief and his associates with Durban (Van Wyk 1997:84). The harbour city becomes the site for an ironical inversion of the colonial process. The harbour stands out as a metaphor of the point of entry of the coloniser into the land.

### **Sex and Magic**

When questioned about sex in his novels Mda has stated: "Well if it happens, it will happen. But I have changed from the type of writing in the past where I enjoyed writing such naughty bits. I like writing about sex as I have done in *Ways of Dying*, for instance" (Naidoo 1997:260).

In *Ways of Dying* (1995a), Toloki, experiences the conflicting view of himself as a holy man and his love for Noria. On the one hand he sees himself on a mission in what is consonant with the idea of a black "messiah" or saviour, and on the other hand he has to come to terms with his sexual desires for Noria. In spite of Toloki's spiritual association with the "oriental monks" the wet dream that he experiences threatens to undermine his view of himself as a holy man. They also cause the surfacing of repressed sexual energy:

Toloki has nightmares that night. He is visited by strange creatures that look very much like the figurines that his father used to create. But these are made of glass. They make a terrible din, shouting his name and dancing around, all in step. Noria, also

made of crystal clear and sparkling glass, appears among the creatures. She gives one sharp whistle, and the dancing and din stop abruptly. The creatures gather around her, and she feeds them glass hay. Molten glass drips from her fingers, and some of the creatures lap it. Toloki sees himself, made embarrassingly of flesh and blood, looking longingly at the scene. He wants to join Noria and her creatures. He walks towards them. But Noria rides on a glass horse that suddenly grows glass swings. It flies away with her. "Please, Noria!" he screams, "Don't leave me! Wait for me, Noria! Noria!" He wakes up in a sweat (1995a:108).

The dream above indicates Toloki's desire to share in the experiences that Jwara enjoyed with Noria. However, he becomes acutely aware of the fact that he is "made embarrassingly of flesh and blood". Toloki's embarrassment when a drunk observes him dream remarks: "Who is she, ou toppie, the woman you have wet dreams about?" (1995a:108) and later "You get off my case, ou toppie. It's not my fault that you have wet dreams about watchamacallit Noria" (1995a:109). The sexual energy unleashed by the wet dreams even threatens to disrupt Toloki's "holy" activity of mourning:

The dream haunts Toloki as he sits on the mound, listening to the Nurse, ~~and~~ seasoning his oration with goatly laments. It ~~makes~~ something rise in the region of his groin. It is ~~violently~~ kicking inside his pants. Toloki bends forward as if responding to the rhythms of oration and mourning. But what he is really doing is hiding his shame. People must not see that he has disgraced his asceticism by having dirty thoughts running through his mind, and playing havoc with his venerable body (1995a:146).

The resurfacing of repressed sexual fantasies is evidently a common trope in magic realist texts. A number of the characters in these texts experience sexual conflicts because of events that occurred in their childhood. In Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1983), for example, Karel cannot erase the memory of the naked Nora, a memory that haunts him whenever he makes love:

He had an unforgettable secret memory of her. Once when he was about four, he and Mother and Nora had gone to a spa together ... They told him to wait for them in an empty changing room and abandoned him among the piles of women's clothes. He'd been standing around for some time when he walked a tall, magnificent, naked woman - her back to the child - and reached over to the hook on the wall where her bathrobe was hanging. It was Nora.

The image of that taut, naked body seen from behind had never left him. A small boy at the time, he had looked up at her from below. For that kind of distortion, given his present height, he would have to look up at a fifteen-foot statue. He was so near the body and yet so remote. Doubly remote. Remote in space and time. It towered over him far into the heights and was cut off from him by a countless number of years. That double distance had brought on a dizzy spell in the four-year old. He was having another one now, an extremely intense one.

Looking at Eva (who was still standing with her back to him), he saw Nora. The distance between them was five feet and one or two minutes (1983:47).

In D.M Thomas's *The White Hotel* (1988), Anna stumbles upon her mother making love to her uncle. She attempts to erase this memory from her mind, but succeeds only in visiting upon herself the condition that the author refers to as "hysteria". The narrative points out that "the hysterical will tend to describe his pain indefinitely, and will tend to respond to stimulation of the painful part rather with an expression of pleasure than pain" (1988:84). Anna is unable to enjoy a satisfactory sexual relationship with her husband, but her sexual fantasies indicate her need for freedom from sexual repression.

Saleem in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), and Oskar in Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1987), are two characters who resemble Toloki in their ugliness. Saleem and Oskar also share with Toloki their difficulties in coming to terms with their sexuality. Like Oskar who falls in love with his step-mother, Maria, and Saleem who falls in love with his aunt, Pia, Toloki loves the woman his father desired. Toloki's attempt to hide his "shame" is self parodying. On a more profound level, however, the dreams make Toloki more painfully aware of his own sexuality and his inability to enjoy Noria's favours when they lived in the village. The communal voice points out that once Noria had discovered her sexuality she would, "catch the bus to town, where she would give pleasure to bus drivers and conductors. Later, when there were mini-bus taxis that raced between the village and the town, she would ride around in these taxis, dispensing pleasure to the drivers, who would buy her gifts and flatter her" (1995a:65). When she is older, Noria graduates to becoming a prostitute: "At the hotel, Noria learnt the art of entertaining white men who came from across the seas. In return, they bought her

drinks and paid her a lot of money" (1995a:80). Herdboys also obtained pleasure vicariously by watching her when she made love to her boyfriend Napu, behind the aloes. At such times Toloki was unable to watch and he spewed:

The herdboys enjoyed those moments, and would tiptoe to the aloes, and peep through the thick pointed leaves. They would then breathe heavily, and those who had already reached puberty would wet the pieces of cloth that covered their groins. They enjoyed these escapades, and whenever they saw the young man, they would become excited, for they knew that he embodied pleasures that were beyond imagination. Spying on his antics with Noria was certainly a much better experience than molesting goats in the veld. Toloki had once joined them in watching one such performance, but was so disgusted that he vomited. Since then, he was satisfied with only hearing the stories that the herdboys told about the pleasures behind the aloes, without seeing them for himself (1995a:67).

Ironically Toloki's development as a communal being becomes possible only after the awakening of his desire for Noria. Seen in this way, sexual dreams in the text signify a potent force that is both creative or destructive. In Toloki's case it also initiates the surfacing of Oedipal undercurrents.

Noria triggers the painful memories of Toloki's past in the village. These memories overwhelm him in his daydreams:

Noria. The village. His memories have faded from the deep yellow-ochre of the landscape, with black beetles rolling black dung down the slopes, and

colourful birds swooping down to feed on the hapless insects, to a dull canvas of distant and misty grey. Now, however, it is all coming back. Pale herdboys, with mucus hanging from the nostrils, looking after cattle whose ribs you could count, on barren hills with patches of sparse grass and shrubs. Streams that flowed reluctantly in summer and happily died in winter. Homesteads of three or four huts each, decorated outside with geometric patterns of red, yellow, blue and white. Or just white-washed all round. One hovel each for the poorest families. In addition to three huts, his homestead had a four-walled tin-roofed stone building with a big door that never closed properly. This was his father's workshop (1995a:23).

The unfolding of Toloki's memories and dreams also brings with it the surfacing of many individual stories which fuse together to create the story in which a society must come to terms with the ways of dying of its members. Toloki's journey into the past forces him to deconstruct the myth of his own existence as a holy man. In a sense Noria becomes the catalyst that initiates Toloki's re-affirmation of a self negated by the memories of his father's cruel treatment of him. It was quite common for his father to retort: "Noria has more brains in her little finger than you have in your whole body" (1995a:36) and "Noria is not stupid and ugly like Toloki. She is a child of the gods" (1995a:39). Jwara is described as "a towering handsome giant in gumboots" (1995a:23) in contrast to Toloki who

is quite short, in fact. But what he lacks in height he makes up for in breadth. He is quite stockily built, and his shoulders are wide enough to comfortably bear all the woes of bereavement. His yellow face is

broad and almost flat, his pointed nose hovers over and dwarfs his small child-like mouth. His eyes are small, and have a permanently sorrowful look that is most effective when he musters up his famous graveside manner. Above his eyes rest thick eyebrows, like the hairy thithiboya caterpillar (1995a:7).

Jwara and indeed the community contribute to the creation of Noria's mythical power, a power that Toloki still recognises. The text describes her as the "powerful woman who killed his father" (1995a:120). Noria is the source of Jwara's creative energy and the cause of his death. Jwara's ability to produce his metal figurines is depicted in a way typical of magic realism:

Then Noria sang. Jwara found himself overwhelmed by a creative urge. He took an idle piece of iron, and put it in the fire. When it was red hot, he began to shape it into a strange figure. He amazed himself, because in all his life he had never known that he had such great talent (1995a:25).

Jwara's sudden discovery of his "great talent" ironically also marks the beginning of his demise. The images of fire and the "red hot" iron which Jwara shapes into figurines is suggestive of the strong sexual undercurrents that is present in the relationship between Jwara and Noria. This is an essential aspect of the power that she wields over him and other men, in spite of the fact that she is only five years old at the time. Noria's age is indicative of the "power" that she has over Jwara,

rather than a perverted sexuality on his part. Jwara comes to realise that without Noria, and her singing, he is bereft of his ability to create. When she stops singing he finds that the

great talent, and the urge to create, had left his body. He could not even remember what he was trying to do with that piece of iron. Then in the course of her game with Toloki, Noria sang her childish song again. The song had no meaning at all. But it had such great power in Jwara that he found himself creating the figurine again. From that day, whenever Jwara wanted to create his figurines, he would invite Noria over to the workshop, she would sing her meaningless song, and he would work for hours on end at the figurines. Sometimes new shapes would visit him in his dreams, and he would want to create them the next day (1995a:25).

Jwara's figurines are in a sense the progeny of the creative energies inspired by Noria's "power" and ironically become the grotesque signifiers of his own death. The workshop in which Jwara locks himself recalls the room where the patriarch José Arcadio Buendá spends all his time in scientific discovery, in his attempt to unlock the secrets of the universe. Both men spend the last days of their lives in a state of madness.

Jwara sees Toloki as the son whose creativity and hence sexual energy is in competition with his own. When Toloki distinguishes himself as a budding artist and wins an important art competition his father is scathing in his dismissal of Toloki's talents:

After school, filled with excitement, he ran home with his new books, and went straight to his father's workshop.

"Father, I have won a national art competition. I got all these books."

"Good." Jwara did not look at Toloki, nor at the books. There were no horses to shoe, no figurines to shape. He was just sitting there, staring at hundreds of figurines lined up on the shelves where they were fated to remain for the rest of everybody's lives. And he did not even look at his son.

"Father, I have a picture of a beautiful horse here. It is a dream horse, not like the horses you shoe. Why don't you shape it into a figurine too?"

"Get out of here, you stupid ugly boy! Can't you see that I am busy?" (1995a:27-28).

Jwara's obvious loathing for Toloki, as reflected above, is indicative of the sexual conflict that exists between them because of Noria. Jwara's refusal to acknowledge Toloki's talent as an artist is possibly motivated by the threat Toloki poses as an artist and as sexual being.

Jwara's jealousy of Toloki's artistic ability is seen when Toloki's drawing is selected for use in a calendar. When he informs his father of this achievement, Jwara's reaction is similar to that indicated in the extract above:

"So, now you think you are better? You think you are a great creator like me?"

"I want to be like you, father. I want to create from dreams like you."

"Don't you see, you poor boy, that you are too ugly for that? How can beautiful things come from you?"

But Toloki's mother said Jwara was jealous.

"Ha! The stupid images that you make have never appeared in any calendar. Toloki's picture will be seen all over the country" (1995a:61).

Jwara's insecurity is revealed once again by the narrative voice towards the close of the text when we are informed that thieves had broken into his workshop and had stolen everything they could carry, but left the figurines. Jwara attributes the failure of the burglars to steal the figurines to the fact that the figurines are imbued with magical properties:

“The spirits that made me create these wonderful works are too strong for thieves. No one can touch these figurines.”

But Toloki's mother dampened his spirits by suggesting that the thieves had ignored the figurines because they were wise enough to see that they were useless.

“What would any self-respecting thief do with the worthless iron monsters that you spend your precious time making, instead of making things that will support your family?”

Those critical comments started some sobering self-doubt in Jwara. What if the woman was right? Were the thieves making a critical statement about the value of his art when they stole everything else, but neglected his works which were conspicuously displayed on the shelves for everyone to see? He became very angry with the thieves for not stealing his figurines (1995a:195).

The tensions that Noria causes between Toloki and Jwara increase when she begins to “give pleasure” to other men and fails to keep her appointments with Jwara. On one such occasion Jwara severely assaults Toloki and Toloki leaves home never to return. The narrative voice points out that “Throughout his long journey of many months he harboured a deep bitterness against his father. And a hatred for Noria. It was all her fault” (1995a:96).

Noria's new interests and her failure to honour her appointments with Jwara eventually lead to his demise. Jwara finds that he cannot create his figurines without Noria's singing. However, "his dreams did not give him any respite. The strange creatures continued to visit him in his sleep, and to demand that they be recreated the next day in the form of figurines" (1995a:93). When Noria finally leaves the village and marries Napu, Jwara is devastated and locks himself in his workshop. He refuses to live and we are told that he was "mourning the death of his creativity" (1995a:101). The text reveals that after Noria leaves the village Jwara's "dying was a long process" and "it took many years" (1995a:154). His body is discovered years later by men who wanted to buy the equipment that he used as a blacksmith:

And there was Jwara, sitting as they remembered him, but with his biltong-like flesh stuck to his bones. His bulging eyes were staring at the figurines as before. Glimmering gossamer was spun all around him, connecting his gaunt body with the walls and the roof. In front of him was a piece of paper on which he had written in a semi-literate scrawl, bequeathing his figurines to Toloki. We never knew before this that Jwara could write. In fact, we were sure that he could not write. He used to sign his papers with a cross, after Toloki or Noria had read them to him. But there it was, in his own handwriting, his last will and testament (1995a:102).

Jwara's death is presented as a magical occurrence in that it is a "process" and his body does not decompose. The fact that he writes a will in which he leaves the

figurines to Toloki, even though he did not know how to write, is also magical. The collective narrator suggests that the figurines have a magical quality. Jwara's bequest of the figurines can be read as his recognition, finally, of Toloki's creative and sexual powers. This is clearly evident when one considers the text narrating Toloki's relationship with Noria immediately after we are informed of Jwara's death (1995a:103). Toloki and Noria have a magical experience in which they enter the glamorous dream world portrayed by the pictures from the magazine, *Home and Garden*:

Then Toloki takes Noria's hand, and strolls with her through the grandeur. First they go to the bedroom, and she runs and throws herself on the comfortable king-size bed. Toloki hesitates, but she says, "C'mon, Toloki. Don't be afraid. Come and sit next to me." He sits, and the soft bedding seems to swallow them (1995a:103).

The magic of the scene demonstrated above is significant in that it reflects the burgeoning relationship between Toloki and Noria. Jwara's death as narrated by the communal voice, although unknown to Toloki at this stage of the plot, serves to set Toloki free from the patriarchal tyranny imposed on him. His relationship with Noria becomes an intrinsic part of the process of his self-construction. As though sanctioned by Jwara, and freed from their Oedipal traps, Toloki's and Noria's relationship develops from strength to strength until the tender moments of their first attempt at making love, a cathartic act that moves Toloki to tears: "Tears roll down Toloki's cheeks. He is ashamed to be seen crying like this. After all he is a man, is he not? Noria smiles reassuringly at him, and wipes his tears with the

back of her hand. She suggests that they both take a bath, as this will make them feel better" (1995a:179). The bath that Noria offers Toloki becomes a ritualistic act of lovemaking that in many ways is indicative of a baptism in which both are spiritually reborn in "a dream-like state" (1995a:180)

She lights the primus stove and warms some water in a big tin. She pours the water into a washing basin, and mixes it with the juice of aloes. She asks Toloki to take his clothes off. Toloki is taken aback. He thought that each one of them was going to bathe outside the shack in turn, as they had done in the morning. She meanwhile takes off all her clothes, unveiling her womanhood to him. She stands there completely naked, as if lost in a reverie. Toloki follows like a sheep to slaughter. He also takes off his clothes and unveils his maleness. They both kneel over the basin, and with their washing rags, bathe each other with the aloed water. They dazedly rub each other's backs, and slowly move down to other parts of their bodies. It is as though they are responding to rhythms that are silent for the rest of the world, and can only be heard or felt by them. They take turns to stand in the basin, and splash water on each other's bodies. All this they do in absolute silence, and their movements are slow and deliberate. They are in a dream-like state, and their thoughts concentrated only on what they are doing to each other. Nothing else matters. Nothing else exists (1995a:179-180).

Toloki and Noria emerge from their first act of love making described above as newly created beings who are capable of assuming control of their own lives. Noria helps Toloki to come to terms with his dreams by stating "...don't be ashamed to have dreams about me. It's not dirty to have dreams" (1995a:188).

For Toloki the process of re-construction comes a step closer when he starts drawing again, something he had vowed never to do again when Jwara had refused to acknowledge his ability as an artist. Noria's assistance in enabling Toloki's discovery of the essence of his sexuality also rekindles the creative forces that he had suppressed. She becomes the Muse who inspires him, in similar yet different ways from her inspiration to Jwara. On New Year's eve Toloki purchases crayons and paper and draws pictures while Noria sang "as she used to do for Jwara" (1995a:187). Significantly Toloki begins to draw pictures of children, something he was never able to do, even when he was a celebrated artist in the village. Noria's singing empowers Toloki to draw pictures of children in the same way that Jwara's figurines could be seen as the offspring of the relationship that developed between him and Noria. Toloki's drawing, however, becomes a symbol of new life and new beginnings, while Jwara's figurines were grotesque artifacts that suggested the death and impotence of an old order. Toloki's actions when drawing to the tune of Noria's song is portrayed as being profoundly sexual, indicative of the potentials for creativity that is embodied in the future:

The drawing becomes frenzied, as Noria's voice rises. Passers-by stop to watch, and are overcome by warm feelings. It is as though Toloki is possessed by this new ability to create human figures. He breathes heavily with excitement, and his palms are clammy. His whole body tingles, as he furiously gives shape to the lines on the paper. His breathing reaches a crescendo that is broken by an orgasmic scream. This leaves him utterly exhausted. At the same moment, Noria's song stops. The spell breaks, and passers-by go on their way (1995a:187).

Toloki's rediscovery of his artistic ability is significantly followed by the arrival of Nefolovhodwe, a rich businessman who used to live in Toloki's village, with Jwara's figurines. Nefolovhodwe tells Toloki that Jwara had invaded his dreams and instructed him to remove the figurines from the village and take them to Toloki. Nefolovhodwe is forced to carry out Jwara's wishes when his prized circus fleas began to die. The narrative voice points out that "In his nightly visits, Jwara laughed and danced, and warned that more fleas would die if Nefolovhodwe did not do what he, Jwara, was ordering him to do. He stressed that this was no longer a request but an order" (1995a:193-194). Jwara's instruction to Nefolovhodwe, issued from beyond the grave, is characteristic of magic realist texts such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Márquez 1978), *The Famished Road* (Okri 1992), *The House of the Spirits* (Allende 1993) and *The White Hotel* (Thomas 1988) where the dead communicate quite freely with the living. Nefolovhodwe eventually brings a truck load of the figurines to the shack that Toloki shares with Noria. In what is evidently another example of magic realism Nefolovhodwe discovers that there are far more of the figurines than anticipated and he wonders, "...did they perhaps multiply on their own, giving birth to more metal monsters" (1995a:195).

The arrival of the figurines, and their restoration to Toloki in accordance with Jwara's will provided the link between a repressive past as signified by the figurines and the promise of a new future as signified by Toloki's drawing of children. The fact that the figurines could possibly "multiply on their own" strongly suggests affinities with the narratives of Scheherazade's which give birth to more narratives. Toloki's recovery of the ability to draw and the arrival of the figurines

point to the continuation of the process of narrating the collective self from one generation to the next. It also signifies the power inherent in the community to create its own narratives by using its cultural heritage. Mda has emphasised the importance of such an act in his book *When People Play People* (1993a) and in articles such as “Learning from the Ancient Wisdom of Africa” (1994b). Mda’s *When People Play People* (1993a) documents the extensive research carried out in rural areas where theatre was used as a means of empowerment. The people in these areas were allowed to script their own plays that articulated matters of individual and social concern. In this regard Mda has stated, “we have created plays that have involved the community members in naming their problems from their own perspective, in reflecting on these problems, and in mapping out a definite course of action to solve the problems” (1994c:106).

The merging of time past with time present and the healing potential of time future make possible the dawn of a new era. Toloki and Noria are liberated from the repression of the past and the figurines no longer inscribe the signs of a sinister destructive force or their suffering:

“Or we could let them stay here with us, and bring happiness and laughter to the children. We could build a big shack around them, and the children could come and laugh whenever they felt like it” (1995a:198).

Toloki and Noria make this decision just before the bells toll at midnight, ushering in a new year and a new life for them. The figurines created by Jwara retain their magic and become intrinsically linked to the promise of a new future:

Two hours after midnight, we are still shouting "Happe-e-ee!" We revel staggeringly past Noria's shack. All is still. There is no movement. No light can be seen through the cracks of the door. The children have gone back to their homes. We look at the mountain of boxes that dwarfs the shack. We do not touch. We just look and marvel. Our children have told us about the monsters that make people happy. Maybe it is the drink, but it seems that we can see them through the boxes, shimmering like fool's gold. Not even the most habitual thieves among us lift a finger towards the boxes (1995a:199).

The legacy that Toloki inherits from Jwara embodies the traditions of an African ancestral past that cannot be ignored in any creation of a new order. Jwara's figurines are products of the inspiration he derived by listening to Noria sing, and the ancestral spirits that visited him in his dreams.

Jwara's figurines become the signifiers of the past, the reminders of a cultural history that was repressed due to apartheid's emphasis on tribal culture. The relocation of the figurines from the village to the urban squatter settlement suggests strongly that no future history can be recorded unless the artifacts of the past are preserved and given space in the present.

The carnivalesque images that constantly undercut the apocalyptic scenes in the text serve as indicators that death is a process that makes possible another

life. In all of this there is the knowledge that “the new, concrete, and realistic historic awareness was born and took form: not abstract thought about the future but the living sense that each man belongs to the immortal people who create history” (Bakhtin 1984:367). The fact that the ancestors cannot be ignored in any re-construction of history, and dreams of a better future, is also suggested by the following poem by Mda:

I fear the ghosts  
 With great love  
 I see them  
 In changing forms  
 Making idle explorations  
 Into the graceful steps  
 Of past ages.  
 They run among the trees  
 Now and then hiding  
 Behind the gleaming web  
 As the light of the moon  
 Hits against it.

(from Dance of the ghosts)  
 (1997:12)

Ndebele also opts for this theme in his story “Fools” (1983) where the aging teacher Zamini tells a youthful political agitator: “I was there, and would be there to the end of time: a perpetual symbol of his failure to have a world without me” (1983:276).

Mda’s use of magic realism in *Ways of Dying* (1995a), is consistent with that of the writers of magic realist texts mentioned above. The differences, however, are revealed in the influences of African folklore and traditions. What

one sees in *Ways of Dying* (1995a) is a syncreticism of a number of influences that suggests a more pronounced application of the mode of magic realism than that demonstrated in Mda's plays.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **MAGIC REALISM IN SHE PLAYS WITH THE DARKNESS (1995b)**

In our discussion of magic realism in *Ways of Dying* (1995a) we saw that Mda has combined the historical with the fictional lives of his characters to construct a novel that shares certain common elements with magic realist texts by writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Gunter Grass, Salman Rushdie, Isabel Allende, Ben Okri, Toni Morrison and Vikram Chandra. Like the characters in the magic realist texts by these writers, those in *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) also struggle to come to terms with the agencies of individual and national histories.

It is my intention in this chapter to explore Mda's use of magic realism in *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) and to investigate the extent to which the novel reflects common motifs, tropes, and structural elements with the magic realist texts that have emerged from within post-colonial contexts.

This chapter will also interrogate the various structural elements of magic realism that Mda has used in *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b). Evidently in this novel, as in *Ways of Dying* (1995a), he has utilised magic realism in ways that suggest a syncreticism of various international forms of the mode. The novel, however, retains Mda's particular mode of magic realism that characterised his plays, and demonstrates his further attempts at innovation with regard to this

literary form. Mda's use of magic realism in *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) is consonant with that of the more renowned authors of magic realist texts, but his use of the mode takes its impetus from African orature and myth. I will argue therefore that while *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) shares aspects of magic realism with certain other texts of the genre, it is deeply informed by African mythologies and world-views.

The story is set against the background of political upheaval in Lesotho and covers a period of over twenty-four years during which time the lives of many of the characters in the novel undergo various changes that correspond with the sociopolitical transformation of that country. During this period of historical change there is, however, a tremendous impulse towards moral and social disintegration that is hastened by the erosion of traditional values and conventions. The stasis and disintegration that face the community is reflected in occurrences such as the physical degeneration of the village hero, Sorry My Darlie, the break down of law and order in Maseru and the rape of Mother-of-the Daughters by her son-in-law, Trooper Motsohi. Among the people of Ha Samane touching one's mother-in-law is considered taboo. The rape of Mother-of-the-Daughters is therefore not only a flagrant violation of her body, but also signals the disintegrating social fabric of the people of Ha Samane. The opposing forces of decay and growth are mirrored in the unusual and supernatural occurrences in the text. At a time of intense historical change the values that determined the fabric of society degenerate and are replaced by the trappings of capitalist materialism. The conflicts that arise when individual and collective aspirations are asserted, is one

of the main themes in *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995a) and the magic realist texts discussed below.

At the focal point of the story are the so-called “twins” Radisene and Dikosha. They are called twins because Dikosha was conceived when her mother had gone to a night dance, only four weeks after Radisene was born. Dikosha whose name in Tswana means “one who dances” is shrouded by the darkness and the silence that characterises most of her life. The “darkness” that she plays and dances with has a form and substance, so much so that she can feel it against her breasts. It will be clear in the discussion that follows that Mda intended Dikosha to be a representative of the mythical figure of African spirituality. She is depicted as a spirit that becomes flesh and is capable of transcending space and time. Dikosha’s preoccupation and engagement with the darkness is presented as the antithesis of the mist that threatens to destroy the community. Reference to the mist is made in the opening paragraph of the novel: “Don’t be fooled by the sunshine in their faces. They are a sad people inside, tormented by the knowledge that one day the great mist will rise and suffocate them all to death. And no one can do anything about it. The mist has a mind of its own. It does what it wants to do when it wants to do it. No one can stop it. Even those who have the gift of controlling lightning and of sending it to destroy their enemies are powerless against the mist” (1995b:1). The mist signifies the destruction of traditional society by the forces of modernism and the inevitable processes of history. It also functions as a metaphor or analogy of history and fate, indicating that fate cannot be controlled by people.

The aforementioned introduction to the novel is typical of magic realists texts such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Márquez 1978), *Midnight's Children* (Rushdie 1981), *The Famished Road* (Okri 1992) and *The House of the Spirits* (Allende 1993), in which the apocalypse threatens to consume the world inhabited by the characters. The apocalyptic closure in magic realists texts suggests that in the final fusion of the “magic” and the “realism” the erasure of the world of the characters is inevitable. As Conniff puts it, “... apocalypse is only one more “scientific possibility” which the “primitive world” only understands after it is too late. Apocalypse is only the logical consequence of imperialist oppression, supported by science” (1970:175).

### **African Folklore and Magic Realism**

In an interview with me, Mda has pointed out that the aspects of African cosmology present in the novel are what people in the west may regard as superstition. For example, the power of the mist and the ability of individuals to harness the force of lightning are common beliefs in traditional African myth and folklore. The villagers believe that Hlong, the manager of the local airport, has the power to kill people by using the forces of lightning and that the mist has killed the strange boy Shana. These aspects of the power of nature are also reflected in some of the headings of the chapters: “The Great Drought”, “The Great Snow” and “The Great Mist”. These clearly signify a link to a past when people regarded the forces of nature as living entities. In this regard Mda himself has stated: “Here in

Africa there is magic happening all the time. There are many belief systems and in fact a lot of the things that the Western world refers to as superstition. For me such things actually happen and I portray them as such in my writings" (Naidoo 1997:250).

The forces of historical change, however, militate against these traditional beliefs and values and the twins, Dikosha and Radisene, represent the conflict between these forces. Dikosha represents the cohering aspects of African mysticism while Radisene represents the centrifugal forces of western values and capitalism. Together they express the dualism of a communal self that must come to terms with changes in the national consciousness of the inhabitants of Lesotho. While the world around her is caught in the vortex of change, Dikosha remains constant. She does not age and her red dress remains new over a twenty-four year period. Dikosha ultimately becomes the mythical symbol of African spirituality. On one level she represents the creative principle that forms a link with the past, present and future, and on another level the self that refuses to be seduced by western commercialism , or its values and religion. In short she is the antithesis of Radisene, the "twin" who is seduced by the education of the holy fathers and promises of extensive wealth that is possible by preying on the relatives of accident victims. The fact that both the value systems represented by these siblings cannot find a point of intersection is appropriately signified by Dikosha's silence. She initially refuses to talk to anyone but her brother, Radisene. Later when he spends his life in the accumulation of wealth, Dikosha refuses to talk to him as well. She communicates with the others by dance or by becoming a confessional figure.

Dikosha inhabits a world that has long since been abandoned by her people and she alone has the ability to decode the narratives of a past that records the signs of African spirituality. Imbued with the magic of transcending time and gaining access to the past and future, Dikosha communicates freely with the ancestral spirits of the Cave of Barwa. The erosion of communal values of the people of the village of Ha Samane corresponds with the fading paintings in the Cave of Barwa. The paintings come alive when Dikosha communicates with the people of the cave. The cave dwellers, however, are in danger of disappearing because “people had written their names on some of the paintings with white chalk to show future generations that they had once visited the Cave of Barwa” (1995b:17). The inscribing of names on the paintings by people who were “even ministers of the government, or important people whose names you heard mentioned on the radio all the time” (1995b:17) is a clear indication of the effacing of African spirituality in favour of modern modes of representation. Dikosha’s communication with the Cave People is in itself a magical occurrence that strongly suggests a link with the world of the ancestors. The text informs us that, “The Barwa, or Bushmen as the white people called them, were the original inhabitants of the land. They lived here happily for centuries, hunting animals and gathering wild fruits and roots, until the twins’ ancestors came and drove them away, and killed some, and married others. They left a legacy of caves with wonderful paintings on the walls, and the Cave of Barwa was the most famous of them all” (1995b:16). Dikosha wills the paintings to come to life and she is able to dance and sing with them in a powerful display of physical and spiritual energy. She finds that the Cave People have a tremendous

capacity for healing and for living in harmony with each other. The narrative voice points out that “men did not deem themselves to be more important than women. There seemed to be an equality among them that did not exist in the world of Ha Samane” (1995b:53). The fact that Dikosha’s link with the spirits that dwell in the cave paintings is not just a product of her imagination is borne out by a necklace that they give her as a gift. While the necklace is a symbol of the existence of the “ancestral spirits” and the shamanistic powers that they invest in her, it can also be read as a trope of Dikosha’s link with the spirituality of the African past. It is a spirituality that derives from a once displaced people who become the “other” to contemporary materialism.

As the story progresses, however, Dikosha’s ability to conjure the dancers becomes increasingly difficult. The writing on the cave paintings increases and the people of the cave are “imprisoned” by the writing:

The monster-woman told her: ‘One day you will not find us here. It is difficult already. The dance is dying.’ Every time she went to the cave she thought it might be the last. At first she thought she could save the dance by cleaning the obscene scribblings of the important personalities and the smudges of the misguided schoolboys from the walls. But soon she realized that she could do that without damaging the sacred paintings, hastening the demise of the dance (1995b:101).

Later in the narrative Dikosha’s inability to summon the Cave people corresponds with the political power struggles in Lesotho, and the rampant capitalistic aspirations of her brother Radisene. The clash of values, and the struggle between

political ideologies, as individual greed and capitalism take root in Lesotho, are conflicts that are underscored by the narrative voice. It is significant that only Dikosha is able to communicate with the people of the caves who are in fact the prehistoric spirits who represent the origins and first people of Africa. Her silence and her “playing with the darkness” points to the failure of the other characters in the novel, and the community at large, to provide a voice for the traditions of the past.

Dikosha’s ability to dance with the darkness is also another gesture which indicates her ability to create a space for her supernatural experiences with the unknown forces that defy rational understanding. Her dances express her ability to interpret, and to come to terms with the silences that have become a part of her life. Her childlike actions emphasise her determination to remain in what Lacan has called the Imaginary realm. She does not age and many of her actions are essentially child-like. Her closest companion is the child Shana and she displays no sexual interest in men. Shana’s sudden and inexplicable appearance in Ha Samane, is another “magical” occurrence in the text: “Shana just happened. No one knew how. One morning when people of the village woke up, there he was, playing his sekgankula. He had materialised out of nowhere. Nobody knew where he came from or whose child he was. He was there. And he was a fact of life” (1995b:99). It is interesting to note, however, that his arrival coincides with the disappearance of the cave people of Barwa. Shana’s music provides the opportunity for Dikosha to create narratives as “she substituted her words for his” (1995b:102). With the absence of the cave people, Dikosha becomes increasingly isolated. The narrative

voice points out that, "She was determined to live her life in her own way. And her way did not include marriage. Boyfriends and courting did not feature in her world" (1995b:5). Implicit in her refusal to enter the Lacanian Symbolic order and to engage in speech, unless forced to do so, is her withdrawal from the world after she was not allowed to go to school because she was a woman. For Dikosha verbal language has no meaning and cannot signify what the ritual dance can, nor can it penetrate the silence and the darkness that are her constant companions.

The conflict between Dikosha and Radisene continues over twenty-four years and she refuses to speak to him apparently because of his increasing pursuit of materialism. Eventually he decides to force her to accompany him to Maseru. When he breaks down the door to her hut, and looks at her, he is shocked to see that she has not aged while he has "changed beyond recognition" (1995b:200). The narrative voice informs us that "his face was gaunt. He looked like a battered old man. His hair had gone completely white, and the perm made it look as if it belonged on the head of some malnourished old white man" (1995b:200). As a character who does not age, Dikosha has intertextual links with characters such as Ayesha in Rider Haggard's *She* (1948), and Flapping Eagle in Rushdie's *Grimus* (1996). Ayesha lives for over two thousand years until her death in the cave of Kor. Flapping Eagle lives for over seven hundred years until his death when Calf Island disintegrates.

In their meeting, Dikosha and Radisene portray the two faces of Africa that the novel reflects. Radisene resembles a malnourished white man while Dikosha remains essentially pure. Together Radisene and Dikosha could signify the primal

God of the Fon which is a Janus figure, one side of the body is female and is called Mawu, while the other side is male and is called Lisa. It is Mawu who has dominion over the darkness while Lisa rules the day (Gates 1988:23). The dual nature of being of Mawu-Lisa also corresponds to what Gates has called “the notion of the double-voiced discourse” (1988:22). We could read the relationship between Dikosha and Radisene then as the textual conflict between the oral and the written. It is Radisene’s manipulation of the holy fathers that enables him to gain entry into the medium of alphabetic writing. This eventually causes his moral and physical disintegration. Like the trickster figures of pre-colonial African folklore, Radisene manipulates the trust of his victims. On the other hand Dikosha as woman is refused access to the texts of western education, leading her to establish a link with the ancient traditions of Africa. The twins are therefore representative of the double-voiced nature of the text; the written word and the oral story telling traditions of the past.

Significantly it is only Dikosha who remains unaffected by the process of historical change that affects all the other characters in the novel. Her story is told largely through the medium of her silence, it is a silence that resonates throughout the novel. Dikosha, it would seem, has access to the meaning of silence and she sees in it a powerful means of removing her self from the confines of the space inhabited by the villagers of Ha Samane. Dikosha’s entry into the world of silence and darkness frees her from the mundane existence of the people of Ha-Samane. She chooses rather to inhabit a world of silence and darkness in which her self reunites with the spirits of an African past in which myth, magic and reality are

energising forces expressed in dance. For Dikosha the dance becomes the only means of communicating with the villagers of Ha Samane, although they interpret her dancing as a sign of her madness.

Dikosha's dance imbues her with the power to enter the world of the shamanistic dancers who represent certain aspects of an African past and its history that has been eroded by the intrusion of foreign cultures. The energy of the group dance invigorates Dikosha and enables her to remain young forever. She immerses herself in the mysticism of the African past, while those around her age and become increasingly westernised. Her relationship with the cave people enables her to experience the physical, spiritual and sexual energy of those who lived centuries ago. These experiences are depicted as being *real* for Dikosha and are not fantasy or surreal experiences. She participates in the ancient dances of the cave people mainly because they have granted her access to their world. The narrative voice states: "When darkness fell small fires were lit and the dance continued. Dikosha found herself lying on the ground, and the men were dancing in circles around her, their maleness unflinchingly pointing at her. The song was loud and mixed well with jubilant clicks and laughter. She felt calm, as a woman knelt next to her, her breasts dangling over her, sometimes touching her body" (1995b:51). Mda's description here of the dances of the cave people closely parallels those of Lee and Bieseile in their respective studies of the ! Kung.

The sexual energy in the dances as demonstrated above enables Dikosha to unite spiritually and physically with the other dancers painted on the cave walls. Dikosha's sexuality finds expression only when she is with the cave people and to

the villagers she appears to be totally uninterested in men. She never marries and ignores the advances of the soccer star, Sorry My Darlie. For her the experience of dancing with the cave people is both rejuvenating and heals her body and soul, displacing the need for sex. The magic of her contact through dance and song with the people painted on the cave walls infuses her with the energy to recreate her self through the power of their “healing songs”. Expression through the medium of dance and song is one of the fundamental cultural determinants of pre-colonial African societies. In presenting Dikosha as a dancer who meets the people who lived centuries ago, Mda imbues in her an embodiment of African spirituality. Painting, dance, orature or song, are an embodiment of African culture and traditions, as demonstrated in the following extract:

While they were in a trance they pulled out arrows from Dikosha's belly and thighs with their hands. And her pain went with the arrows. The more arrows they pulled out, the more they seemed to lose consciousness. More men and women fell on the ground and died. Dikosha knew from previous experience that their spirits had left their bodies to make contact with the world of the ancestors. On the way they battled with sickness and death. They would come back in the morning armed with more songs that contained the powers of healing. They would implant those songs in their stomachs and buttocks. Their bellies and buttocks protruded precisely because they were reservoirs of the healing songs (1995b:52).

Mda's description of the Bushman trance experiences are so similar to those by commentators such as Bieseile (1986, 1979) and Lewis-Williams and Dowson

(1989) that one is inclined to believe that he has been inspired by these writers. In describing Bushman trance rituals, Lewis-Williams, for example, states that “the women sit in a circle around a fire as they clap the rhythm and sing special medicine songs. They believed these songs are imbued with a supernatural potency. This potency, which comes ultimately from God himself, is also in the stomachs of the medicine people, or shamans as they are called in the anthropological literature” (1990:28). The text quoted above implies that the people painted on the cave walls are able to exist on different energy levels and times and that the shamans were imbued with the power to heal when they were in trance. Lewis-Williams and Dowson point out that, “The commonest Bushman metaphor for trance is ‘death’. They say that shamans ‘die’ when they cross over into the spirit world, and trance itself is sometimes called ‘half death’” (1989:50).

The parallels between the observations by researchers such as Lewis-Williams (1980), Lee (1989) and Dowson (1988) and Mda’s descriptions of the trance dances are also evident in the following extract: “As the trance dance increases in intensity, the women’s clapping and singing combines with the men’s insistent dancing to cause the potency to ‘boil’, as they put it, and to rise up the shaman’s spines. When it ‘explodes’ in their heads, they enter trance. For them, trance is the spirit world, and in this dimension they heal the sick, remonstrate with malevolent spirits, go on out-of-body journeys and even confront God” (Lewis-Williams 1990:28). In *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), the narrative voice states, “They danced on and on for hours without rest. Soon their buttocks and their bellies began to boil, and some fell on the ground and died. The legs of some

of the women trembled. Both men and women staggered and collapsed on the ground" (1995b:51-52). Mda has also made references to the drawings of antelope and blood dripping from the noses of the shamans: "Others were kneeling down and blood was oozing from their noses ... And then there were dancers. Many dancers. Some with antelope heads and antelope hoofs" (1995b:51-52). Lewis-Williams has explained the significance of the blood and the antelope as follows: "The San saw parallels between the behaviour of a dying antelope, especially an eland, and a shaman 'dying' in trance. Both tremble, sweat profusely, stagger, bleed from the nose, lower their heads and eventually fall unconscious. An antelope's hair also stands on end, and the San believed hair grew on a man in trance. In the art, shamans are often shown bleeding, staggering, lowering their heads, and with their hair standing on end (Lewis-Williams 1990:53).

For the ancient cave people the body is perceived as a creative force that needs to be constantly rejuvenated and re-created as it increases its power. The supernatural abilities of the healers painted on the cave has a profound influence on Dikosha suggesting that she has free access to a world of magic that existed before recorded history. Her experience with spirits and people who inhabited the Cave of Barwa during a time far removed from her own, is an expression of her ability to experience time and space on different levels. Furthermore Dikosha's magical journeys through the world of spirit enables her to achieve altered states of being. In this her experiences are similar to those of the spirit child, Azaro, the narrator of Ben Okri's magic realist text *The Famished Road* (1992) and *Songs of Enchantment* (1994). Azaro freely communicates with spirits and he is able to see

them around him. Both the aforementioned magic realist novels by Okri are structured on the conflicting realities of the world of the spirit and the world of flesh. Reflecting on the nature of his existence in both these worlds Azaro states:

The spirit-child is an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dreams of the living and the dead. Things that are not ready, not willing to be born or become, things for which adequate preparations have not been made to sustain their momentous births, things that are not resolved, things bound up with failure and with fear of being, they all keep recurring, keep coming back, and in themselves partake of the spirit-child's condition. They keep coming and going till their time is right. History itself fully demonstrates how things of the world partake of the condition of the spirit-child (1992:487).

Like Azaro, Dikosha is invested with the power to “partake of the spirit-child’s condition”, the ability to communicate with the spirit world. Her relationship with the people of the past is consonant with Azaro’s reference to the “recurring” nature of historical events. Given the understanding that reality and meaning cannot be constructed by words alone’, Dikosha chooses the world of silence, rejecting the world of social meaning. This makes possible her becoming one with the cave people of Barwa, who have also been obliterated to silence by history and only “survive” in the painted dance scenes on the cave walls.

The motif of the “Bushman” painting is an old and powerful motif in South African literature. In Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (1992), first published in 1883, the second chapter of Part I is titled “Plans and Bushman-

paintings". Dikosha's communication with the ancient Bushmen paintings is also shared by Waldo, one of the central characters in *The Story of an African Farm* (1992):

‘Lyndall, has it never seemed to you that the stones *were* talking to you? Sometimes,’ he added, in a yet lower tone, ‘I lie under there with my sheep, and it seems that the stones are really speaking - speaking of the old things, of the time when the strange fishes and animals lived that are turned into stone now, and the lakes were here; and then of the time when the little Bushmen lived here, so small and so ugly, and used to sleep in the wild holes, and in the “sloots”, and eat snakes, and shot the bucks with their poisoned arrows. It was one of them, one of these old wild Bushmen, that painted those ... He used to kneel here naked, painting, painting, painting; and he wondered at the things he made himself...’ (1992:15-16).

The Bushman Cave paintings in both *The Story of an African Farm* (1992) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) provides a medium for the intersection of the narratives of the past and the present. This theme is also present in *Ancestral Voices* (Van Heerden 1989), and though not directly linked to Bushman painting, there are numerous references to ancient African art and sculpture in Haggard's African romances.

The cave people grant Dikosha the magical gift of healing, the ability to remain young forever and “the power to see songs” (1995b:53). She joins other protagonists in magic realist texts who have special powers. The narrators, Saleem in *Midnight's Children* (Rushdie 1981), Oskar in *The Tin Drum* (Grass

1987), Sanjay in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (Chandra 1996) and the matriarch Clara in *The House of the Spirits* (Allende 1993) and Sula in Toni Morrison's novel of that name, all have in common with Dikosha magical powers that set them apart from the "normal" people portrayed in these texts. Saleem has the gift of telepathy and a powerful sense of smell. Oskar the midget can break glass, over a large distance by using his voice. Sanjay can remember his previous lives and has been reincarnated as a monkey. Clara can see into the future and communicates with spirits and Sula is linked to unnatural occurrences. The unusual powers that these characters possess defies rational explanation. It is not surprising therefore that these characters are viewed with suspicion and are considered to be strange by the other characters in the texts mentioned. Dikosha's silence and her unconventional behaviour make her an object of curiosity, and distinguishes her as being different from the other girls in Ha Samane. The narrative voices state that, "passersby stopped to look at her closely, and uttered words of sympathy among themselves, 'Poor Dikosha, it is because she was conceived at a night dance'" (1995b:4). The villagers also consider her lack of interest in men as strange: "People of the village referred to Dikosha as a lefetwa, a girl who had long passed the age of marriage ... it was supposed to be the worst insult that could be hurled in the direction of any woman" (1995b:5).

Mda's use of orature, African myths, references to the cave paintings of Barwa, dance and song reflect the influence of African language literatures, anthropological discourses on African belief systems, philosophy, literary theory, and books on orality and writing. *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), however,

also demonstrates commonalities with magic realist texts mentioned in the previous chapter, such as *One Hundred Days of Solitude* (Márquez 1978), *The Tin Drum* (Grass 1987), *Midnight's Children* (Rushdie 1981), *The House of the Spirits* (1993), *The Famished Road* (Okri 1992), *Songs of Enchantment* (Okri 1994) and *Grimus* (Rushdie 1996) to name but some of the texts that will be discussed below. This is not to say that Mda was influenced by these texts in his writing of *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b). What is apparent, however, is that the aforementioned texts share common narrative structural features, themes, topoi, motifs and character types that characterise them as being magic realist. Some of these will be discussed below.

### **Historical Realities vs Magic Realism**

Mda has acknowledged that one of his concerns in *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) is the effects of historical forces on the lives of ordinary people. In this regard the novel challenges Ndebele's assertion in his article, "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa" (*Rediscovery of the Ordinary* 1991), that South African black writers focus on "the representation of spectacle" (1991:37), rather than "rediscovering the ordinary" (1991:55). Mda has stated that the characters in *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) are forced to engage with history because the "story happened within that particular historical context, and the fate of some of those characters was tied in with the political situation in Lesotho then. Those grand historical events had a great effect at a personal level

on those little people who had no part in them. But it is crucial to emphasise that the characters themselves are also creators of history as they struggle to create their own histories" (Naidoo 1997:258).

The "little people" that Mda refers to is an appropriate description of all the characters in *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b). None of the characters occupies any important position in the country or is imbued with the heroic qualities associated with certain characters in magic realist novels such as Allende's *The House of the Spirits* (1993) Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1978) Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) or Grass' *The Tin Drum* (1987). If anything many of the characters in *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) are mainly village types whose perceptions of reality have been shaped by life in a rural hamlet that is not easily accessible by road. Even those characters who live in Maseru are caught up by the events there and are powerless against the socio-political forces that sweep the nation. It would seem that in *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) Mda has constructed characters who are forced to come to terms with the realities of historical change. Many of the characters in the novel use history to establish their own meaning in life. Radisene and Dikosha and all the other characters gain power within the context of an oppressive history. Mda's characters in *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) are presented as protagonists whose place in their communities is determined by their ability to "create their own histories" (Naidoo 1997:258). Sorry My Darlie, however, is a telling example in this regard. When the story opens he is a local football celebrity, hero-worshipped by all around him, except Dikosha. At this stage of the story Sorry My Darlie

dresses in the latest fashion and drives a flashy car. He is also commissioned to appear in numerous advertisements which earn him large amounts of money. His obsessive love for Dikosha, and a football accident, however, reduces him to a pathetic drunk, spending his time outside Dikosha's rondavel while the flies circle his urine soaked trousers. Sorry My Darlie's degeneration results from his inability to contend with the forces of his personal history.

Sorry My Darlie is transformed from village hero who was envied by the men and sought after by young women, to the social degenerate who becomes the object of pity and scorn. A similar reduction of social status is visible in Father-of-the-Daughters, Radisene and Trooper Motsohi.

Father-of-the-Daughters is the richest man in the village of Ha Samane, having accumulated a number of cattle and vast areas of land. As the story progresses he is portrayed as a doddering old fool who enjoys court cases and he is unable to interpret the actions of those around him. He insists that punishment be meted out to innocent herd boys who saved his life and he has to face the humiliation of his wife being raped by his ex-son-in-law. At the close of the story he sits "forlornly outside the prison gates" (1995b:197) awaiting the release of his wife from prison. Father-of-the-Daughters, who is an authority in tribal law, is confused and fails to comprehend a western judicial system which imprisons his wife because she participated in beating up the man who raped her. The conflict between western and African judicial systems is also a typical theme of literature in African languages.

When we are introduced to Trooper Motsohi we find that he is the object of derision and contempt. His wife Tampololo constantly beats him up and mocks him even when he is in the presence of his friends. His friends also make reference to his effeminate mannerisms. Trooper Motsohi enjoys a brief period of authority and forced respect after the first political coup in Lesotho. He is invested with power which he wields by freely assaulting the innocent and defenceless. Radisene also becomes the victim of Motsohi's assaults on the innocent when he is beaten up savagely during a curfew. Trooper Motsohi, however degenerates into a simpering wreck. With the successive changes in political control he loses his job and the brief spell of power that he enjoyed. Eventually he is employed by Radisene who goes into business as a Third Party Insurance processor. Motsohi also loses this job and later he loses his wife to Radisene. By the end of the story he is found guilty of raping his ex-mother-in-law, Mother-of-the-Daughters, and is beaten up by Tampololo, Mother-of-Twins and Mother-of-the-Daughters, almost to the point of death. In narrating the attack on Trooper Motsohi, Father-of-the-Daughters informs Radisene that "As soon as they saw him they fell upon him, waving the knives they were using to peel the peaches. He screamed and hollered and said that he was sorry and that he had actually come to apologise and make amends in whatever possible way. But the women were in no mood to listen to his pleas. Tampololo suggested, 'Let's cut the very thing that causes his wildness!' But the other women recoiled at the thought. They beat him senseless and stabbed him instead" (1995b:195-196).

Radisene's degeneration from part-time teacher to burnt-out insurance fraudster is perhaps the most tragic in the novel. When he begins his pursuit of wealth and spurns the villagers and their way of life in Ha Samane he is ignored by his sister, Dikosha. She refuses to speak to or see him for a period of over twenty-four years. Eventually, when the world of wealth and luxurious living that he had created crumbles around him, he is overcome by the uncontrollable desire to see Dikosha again. He breaks down the door to her rondavel and he is shocked to see that she has not aged, and the red dress that he had bought her twenty-four years earlier is still new. He, however, is changed beyond recognition and his head resembles that "of some malnourished old white man" (1995:200). In this Radisene mimics the coloniser, recalling the views of Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi that the colonised subject often yearns for self construction in the image of the coloniser.

While Radisene is ravaged by the effects of time Dikosha appears to have become immune to it. Ironically he recreates himself in the image of the holy fathers who taught him how to read and write. The fact that he looks like "some malnourished white man" (1995b:200) suggests the physical manifestation of the transformation that Radisene undergoes. The quest for material wealth leaves Radisene bereft of the values and history of African spirituality that Dikosha has kept close to her heart. In this way Radisane faces the results of the western dream of individual material wealth while Dikosha immerses herself in African spirituality. The power that she enjoys comes mainly from her withdrawal and isolation from society.

The characters in the novel are exposed to the forces of history that threatens to alter their way of life. There is also the effort to reclaim black spirituality that is in danger of being effaced by capitalist materialism. Dikosha's strong links with the cave people is a sharp contrast to Radisene's obsessive search for material wealth. His desire to be financially successful is motivated by the need to escape the poverty he suffered as a child and to be recognised as an important person in Ha Samane. Similarly, characters such as Father-of-the-Daughters, whose wealth is based on cattle, the traditional measure of wealth in rural Africa, and A.C. who, like Radisene, works with money and money institutions, see wealth as a means of self-affirmation. All these characters expect to be revered and venerated because of their affluence and become caricatures of capitalism. Father-of-the-Daughters expects the traditional village court to rule in his favour in his case against Hlong, in recognition of his wealth. The lawyer A.C. sacrifices his legal practice for the easy money that could be made by processing Third Party Insurance claims. Radisene believes that his money will enable him to buy the loyalty and services of people.

It is interesting to note that while the men in the novel are presented as characters who have succumbed to the trappings of wealth and power, many of the women choose to retain their links with African spirituality. Although their men are involved in the pursuit of commercial wealth they refuse to be seduced by it. In the novel Dikosha is the obvious example of a woman who refuses to sever her links with the spiritual. Her distaste for western commercialism, religion and education is so intense that she isolates herself from her brother who she

apparently associates with the illusions of wealth and power. Other examples of women who retain their African roots are Mother-of-Twins, Misti and Tampololo.

Mother-of-Twins insists on living the life of a simple black rural woman, refusing to use the money that her son, Radisene, sends her. She is a poor woman who survives primarily by subsistence through her small vegetable patches and the goodwill of neighbours whom she assists during family functions. When Radisene's business booms he decided to build his mother a mansion in the village. The house is built at considerable expense and is the largest house ever seen in the village and even compared "with the very best in the suburbs of Maseru" (1995b:77). The house is furnished with expensive furniture and promises to provide Mother-of-Twins a lifestyle that "was even better than that of Queen 'Mamohato, who was the queen of all the land'" (1995b:78). Mother-of-Twins, however, lives in only one room of the house. The house eventually falls apart because of disuse and lack of maintenance. When Radisene visits his mother after twenty years he is shocked to find the house in ruins and his mother working in a self-help, road building project for "a tin of cooking oil" (1995b:109). When Radisene questions her motive in doing so she replies: "I am working in this project not because I am starving, my child, but because I am building something for my community" (1995b:109).

Misti has completed a B.Sc. in medical laboratory technology at an Irish University and she is employed at a hospital in Maseru. Radisene's hopes of marrying her are dashed when she informs him that she has decided to abandon her career and any plans for marriage and has chosen instead to become a traditional

healer. Her decision shocks Radisene who cannot accept that Misti, who has acquired the education and sophistication of the west, was willing to practise as a traditional healer.

This willingness of entrepreneurs such as Radisene and A.C. to take advantage of the ignorance of the poor and illiterate, in order to acquire vast individual fortunes and power, is also consistent with the actions of politicians in Lesotho and in other parts of Africa. The quest for power at the expense of life is in direct conflict with the image of Mother Africa who heals and nurtures her children. The text seems to suggest that in the absence of men, who have gone to the cities in search of employment, women have led the way in maintaining their communities.

The notion of women as the sustaining force that ensures the survival of the family and community is a common theme in magic realist texts. In their determination to ensure the survival and prosperity of their families the women in these texts recall Brecht's *Mother Courage* (1975), whose protagonist by that name struggles to maintain the family against tremendous odds. Similarly in Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1978) it is the matriarch Ursula who holds her family together, through wars, floods, sickness, capitalist exploitation, riots, poverty, magical occurrences and death. When Ursula dies, her clan dies with her, until finally there is no trace of their ever having existed.

In Okri's *The Famished Road* (1992) and the sequel *Songs of Enchantment* (1994) it is Azaro's mother who ensures the physical and spiritual survival of her family. Her daily routine as a street vendor supplements the meagre earnings of her

illiterate husband. She also has the ability to communicate with various spirits and in this way she protects her family from the evil spirits that always threaten to consume her family.

Allende's *The House of the Spirits* (1993) depicts Clara as a woman whose strength of character enables her to match her husband's physical strength and to guide her family and community during times of political unrest. It is Clara's indomitable spirit that tames her husband's ferocious temper and safeguards her family. In what is characteristic of magic realist narratives her spirit even reaches out from beyond death to infuse her granddaughter with the will to survive when she was imprisoned during a political coup.

In Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) Padmini and Parvathi the Witch are only two examples of a long list of women in the narrative whose actions ensure the survival of their families during times of political and social unrest.

### **The Absent Patriarch**

In Mda's *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) and the magic realist texts mentioned above the father is either absent or plays a subservient role to the mother in terms of having a shaping influence on the lives of the characters. It would appear that in these texts the role of the patriarch is subverted as capitalism destroys the family and traditional social forms. Implicit in this there appears to be the notion that a literary mode such as magic realism must give recognition to the role of women in society. The myth of Mother Africa, or even Ceres arising from the Underworld to bring fruit and fertility to the world are all consonant with roles

played by women in the magic realist text in that they prove to be the sustaining forces of their families and communities. The absence of the father, however, does not imply the unimportance of men. Where fathers are absent or fail to occupy a central place in these texts their sons play the important roles of narrators, focalisers or characters. The strong presence of mothers and sons in magic realist texts combined with the absence of the father coincides with a reconfiguration of Oedipal structures in the post second-world-war world. As we saw in chapter one, magic realism as an international literary mode became established during this period. Guenther points out that, “The unprecedented cultural migration from Europe to the Americas in the 1930s and 1940s, as the muses fled the horrors of the Third Reich, ... played a role in disseminating the term [magic realism]. Over one-fifth of the 500,000 exiles who fled Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Austria between 1933 and 1941 settled in Central and South America” (In Zamora and Faris 1995:61).

Radisene and Dikosha in *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) although called “twins”, are children of different fathers. Dikosha is often reminded that she was conceived when her mother had gone to a “night dance” (1995:3). Mother-of-Twins does not know who their fathers are. Radisene attempts to play the role of father by providing for his mother and sister but he fails to fill the vacuum left by the absent father. His mother and sister do not live in the mansion that he has built or use the money that he sends them from Maseru. His business interests keep him away from home for prolonged periods and his wife, Tampololo, finally leaves him, taking their baby daughter with her. Tampololo, who has a B.A. degree, is

presented as a strong woman who openly challenges the patriarchal power of black men. When she was married to Trooper Motsohi she used to beat him up in public, whenever she thought it necessary. Her actions are presented as a carnivalesque inversion of the abuse of women by men. The women who saw this abuse were overjoyed, stating that, "it served him right, because men had been abusing women for centuries" (1995b:194). Tampololo is recognised by other women as the symbol of resistance against male oppression. Radisene also acknowledges Tampololo's power as a figure of feminine authority when he remarks that the support that Tampololo enjoys by other women is, "payback time for all the centuries of oppression women have suffered" (1995b:194). Although Mda satirises Tampololo, bringing out the hypocrisy in her feminism, she emerges as a woman of strength who refused to be controlled by both her husbands.

Radisene's failure as a father and husband stems primarily from his inability to place his family above his commercial interests. Radisene's failure as husband and father, and his own unconscious search for a father, is closely echoed in the actions of the protagonists of magic realist texts discussed below.

In *One Hundred Days of Solitude* (Márquez 1978) José Arcadio Buendía the founder of Macondo and head of the Buendía clan is reduced to becoming a mad, decrepit man who has to be tied to a tree. Soon his role as head of the family becomes obsolete and life continues without him. His sons and grandsons fail as fathers and are unable to protect their families or fulfil their patriarchal roles. Colonel Aureliano is powerless in preventing the murder of his seventeen sons in

spite of his fame as a military genius. The last of the Buendía clan, the baby Aureliano, is carried away by ants because his father was absent.

Oskar the narrator of *The Tin Drum* (Grass 1987) and Saleem the narrator of *Midnight's Children* (Rushdie 1981) both have in common fathers who are not really their fathers. Both these narrators are also aware of who their respective fathers are. The course of their lives is determined by the actions of fathers who are weak and insipid. Saleem was fathered by the Englishman, William Methwold, and Oskar by the Pole, Jan Bronski. In their respective narratives they construct selves that are free of the voice of the father. This enables them to give free expression to the authoritative voice of their narratives without the censoring intervention of their respective fathers.

Similarly in Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1996) the "twins" Sikander and Sanjay have fathers who are not really their fathers. The absence of their father, the Englishman, Lieutenant Skinner, results in their search for their identities and a sense of purpose in life, corresponding to the unconscious search for their father.

The spirit child, Azaro, the narrator of *The Famished Road* (Okri 1992) and *Songs of Enchantment* (Okri 1994) knows even before he is born that the person that he refers to as 'Dad' is not really his father. Azaro constructs his father as a man who is physically powerful, but lacking in intelligence and knowledge of the spirit world. In a perverse inversion of roles Azaro often emerges as his father's saviour, as he attempts to prevent his father from being manipulated or robbed by others.

In Mike Nicol's *This Day and Age* (1992), Enoch Mistas was conceived when his father, who is stricken by a plague, is taken in by the widow Ma Fatsoen. His father dies after he is conceived and Enoch assumes the role of the father of the clan founded by Enoch Hemelswerd, as he fulfils a prophecy of blood and destruction.

Radisene shares with all the male characters mentioned above, the need to establish his sense of identity and independence. Dikosha on the other hand finds the father figure she lacks in the ancestral spirits that inhabit the Cave of Barwa. In Dikosha's case there appears to be a link between the absence of the father and the signs of schizophrenia that she displays. Her search for a father, however, is not portrayed as being a conscious one, and she is quite content to play with the darkness and to surround herself with the silence that she values so much.

The act of sons superseding their fathers is common in magic realist narratives and is a common feature of post-World War literature. Texts such as Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1990), "First Love" (1974) and "Not I" (1974), and Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, all point to what Kristeva has called "the trivial rigor of paternal Death" (1980:158). Kristeva (1980), in her exploration of Beckett's "First Love" (1974) and "Not I" (1974) suggests that in these texts the dialectical tensions between the celebration of maternal fertility and paternal death makes possible the search for meaning: "As long as a son pursues meaning in a story or through narratives, even if it eludes him, as long as he persists in his search he narrates in the name of Death for the father's corpses, that is, for you, his readers" (Kristeva 1980:151).

## Twins

A common feature of many of the magic realist texts mentioned above is the presence of twins in the narrative. Although Radisene and Dikosha are not twins in the biological sense they are perceived as twins by the villagers, and by themselves. When the story opens the narrative voice informs us that Dikosha is only willing to break her long periods of silence when her brother arrives from the city. Later, when Radisene is caught up in his commercial pursuits she isolates herself completely and refuses to speak to him or to anyone else. Dikosha is imbued with the ability to communicate with spirits through thought and dance and she experiences the gifts of magic that are invested in her. Radisene, on the other hand, faces the harsh realities of the illusionary nature of monetary wealth, when obtained at the cost of personal health, and his family.

The theme of twins in search of the meaning of their existence is not only characteristic of *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) but is also present in other magic realist texts such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Márquez 1978), *Chronicle of a Tale Foretold* (Márquez 1982) *The House of the Spirits* (Allende 1993), *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (Chandra 1996), and *Midnight's Children* (Rushdie 1981), *Shame* (Rushdie 1984) and *The God of Small Things* (1998). These magic realist texts also have in common with *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) the notion of the twins as metaphors of the Apolonian and Dionysian aspects of the alternative realities featured in magic realist texts. The tendency for

the text to alternate between reality and magic and still function cohesively, suggests that such a tendency is indeed reflective of the twin nature of magic realist texts.

Yet, on another level, it could be said that in the texts mentioned above twins represent mirrors that reflect each other, in the same way that the magical and real reflect each other. Such reflections create the possibilities for alternative realities that might not be consistent with so-called historical reality.

The notion of the binaries, self and other, and split subjectivities is also worth considering. In the magic realist texts mentioned above the notions of realism and what constitutes the self and other are implicitly and explicitly challenged. The definition of identities and personalities and the ability of twins to assume each other's characters is a common theme in the aforementioned texts. In Rushdie's *Grimus* (1996), two characters, Grimus and the Flapping Eagle, who look exactly alike, and are said to be parts of the same self. They actually merge at the end of the story and become one. In this process of becoming one, Flapping Eagle states: "Self. My self. Myself and he alone. Myself and his self in the glowing bowl. *Easy does it. You swallow me, I swallow you. Mingle, commingle. Come Mingle. Grow together, come. You into me into you.* His thoughts" (1996:242). In *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Márquez 1978) the twins José Arcadio Segundo and Aureliano Segundo constantly assume each other's names and characters to the extent that there are questions as to whether "they themselves might not have made a mistake in some moment of their intricate game of confusion and had become changed for ever" (1978:152). Similarly in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*

(Chandra 1996) Sanjay obtains the strength and military prowess of his twin brother, the soldier Sikander who emulated the military feats of Alexander. This theme is also visible in *Midnight's Children* (Rushdie 1981) when the “time” twins, Saleem the narrator, and Siva the soldier, are switched at birth and each is forced to live the life the other would have lived. Furthermore in *Distant Relations* (1982) by Carlos Fuentes, Victor and André become a twinned foetus floating in a pool. The theme of twin foetuses joined together is also present in another novel by Fuentes, *Christopher Unborn* (1990).

The dissolving of separate selves in these magic texts seems to imply that in such texts there is the potential for erasing the boundaries between self and other, and between what is perceived as real and magical. In Mda’s *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), however, the twins Dikosha and Radisene retain their particular identities. When Radisene attempts to find the self that he has lost, in Dikosha, the reflection of such a self turns out to be more than he had bargained for. Radisene realises how different he and Dikosha have become. She is exactly as she was when he last saw her twenty-four years ago. She had not aged nor changed in any way. Radisene’s view of the twin sister who has not changed over time forces upon him the realisation that he no longer knows Dikosha, or himself for that matter. This act of what the Russian Formalists called “defamiliarisation” (Eagleton 1988:111) is a technique common in magic realist texts when characters who are faced with an unnatural situation, are forced into facing reality. Radisene’s view of the Dikosha who has changed her beliefs or aged serves to bring to his mind the futility of his own existence, and the fact that he had squandered his

existence on empty dreams. By the end of the story Radisene and Dikosha are far removed from their initial position as twins, so much so that a petrol attendant asks Radisene, “Where are you going with your daughter ... or is it your granddaughter?” (1995b:200).

### Time

The reference to Dikosha’s lack of ageing made above is an obvious indication of the fact that time in *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) works on different levels in magic realist texts. Mda has expressed his fascination with narratives which allow characters to experience different periods in time. He has made reference to *Melville 67* (1998) a recently published novella, and *Ululants* a work in progress, in which characters “move in time and space from one period to the next” (Naidoo 1997:260). In *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), characters experience time in relation to their particular constructions of reality. While many of the characters are swept along by linear time, which is essentially the European notion of historical or Hegelian time, before it was revolutionised by Freud, Einstein and Nietzsche. Dikosha’s experiences with time are unique in that she is also able to interact with people from past centuries. Her experiences with the Cave people of Barwa and the fact that she does not age is indicative of her ability to defy the limitations and restrictions of linear time. These experiences are “proved” to be “real”, by the fact that she is given food to eat and trinkets that are made from shells that do not exist in the village of Ha Samane. There appears to

be, however, a larger purpose in Mda's construction of Dikosha as a character who can live in the past and present and visualise the future that awaits her brother, Radisene. Dikosha is the link between the mythical African past and a postcolonial present in which many of the characters aspire towards materialism. When focalised through her, the pre-colonial past is idyllic and free of pain, illness, poverty and hunger. The myth of a past in which communication with spirits, ancestors and the gods was possible before the advent of colonialism is common in magic realist texts, as the discussion of the present section will reveal.

The inclusion of myth with regard to time in the text would suggest that spirituality has to be retrieved, experienced and given its place in history. There is a strong suggestion that there has been an erasure of much of what was important to African spirituality. In a sense Dikosha's experiences with the past in the Cave of Barwa suggests an interruption of historical time. Dikosha appears to be quite oblivious of the political changes and violent coups that take place in Lesotho, and the effects that these have on the people mentioned in the text. Her experiences in the Cave of Barwa point to alternative realities and ways of living. This also implies that linear historical time is in fact responsible for effacing and supplanting another possible way of being in Africa.

In his choice of heading for the fourteen chapters in *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) Mda has included references to coups in 1970, 1986 and 1994 that actually took place in Lesotho, and weather conditions during certain seasons. While reference to the years of the coups is obviously indicative of linear time,

there is also the timelessness of the seasons, from whose influences none of the characters depicted in the text can escape.

Time in the text therefore operates on different levels and affects individuals in unique ways. Apart from the obvious reference to linear historical time as indicated by the coups and the day by day accounts of the lives of the characters, there is the circular time that Dikosha experiences in the Cave of Barwa and cyclical time as denoted by the changing seasons. The text time, however, covers a period of centuries if one considers the fact that the inhabitants of the Cave of Barwa occupied the cave centuries ago. Mda's use of time in the narrative is very much in the tradition of magic realist texts in which linear time is suspended, fragmented, interrupted or even scattered. Time in these texts is also circular or spirals towards infinity. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Márquez 1978), for example, the text supposedly covers a period of one hundred years in the solitary lives of the Buendía family. Time in this text is both linear and circular, and spirals between past, present and future. For some, such as the narrator Melquíades and the patriarch José Arcadio Buendía, time is suspended because it "stumbled and had accidents and could therefore splinter and leave an eternalised fragment in a room" (1978:283). In the room in which Melquíades worked it "was always March" and "always Monday" (1978:283). At the end of the narrative Aureliano realises that Melquíades "had not put events in the order of man's conventional time, but had concentrated a century of daily episodes, in such a way that they coexisted in one instant" (1978:335). Similarly in *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) for some of the people it

was the same every Wednesday. As soon as the plane arrived, people from Ha Samane and from neighbouring villages such as Ha Sache rode their horses to the post office to see if they had received any letters from their husbands, sons, fathers and brothers who worked in the mines. They waited outside while the postmaster and his assistant quickly sorted out the letters. Then the assistant would stand at the door of the small building and read out the names on the envelopes or the registered slips. The lucky ones who had received postal orders jumped with joy, while others went home disappointed. But they would be back the next week. Some wives and parents had been coming to the post office every Wednesday for years on end. Their husbands and sons had long been swallowed by the city of gold, and had established new families there. Perhaps the table had fallen on some of them, which meant that they had died underground. Yet their relatives never lost hope. They came every Wednesday (1995b:8).

The description of the people awaiting their letters, the action of the postmaster and his assistant, and the endless return of the disappointed are presented as cyclic actions as though these people are actors in a drama where the same actions are repeated endlessly. The cyclic nature of time and the repeated actions of the people described above recalls Nietzsche's notion of "eternal recurrence".

The idea of time being non-linear is also apparent in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1996), Okri's *Famished Road* (1992) and its sequel *Song of Enchantment* (1994). Saleem the narrator of *Midnight's Children* (1981) bottles each chapter in a pickle jar in this way freezing

time. He also visualises historical time “leaking” into people. Saleem’s narrative is an unreliable account of Indian history after Indian Independence and he distorts historical facts as he attempts to manipulate it to suit the purposes of his narrative. There is in his actions, however, the sense that time, whether past, present or future is easily malleable. History for Saleem, is a matter of individual choice, and therefore the use of time is a matter of the individual’s conception of it.

Similarly, Sanjay one of the narrators of *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1996) whose present incarnation is that of a monkey, tells a story of one of his lives when he lived in the last century. Sanjay’s narrative proves to be a reconstruction of a life that has passed through time from one rebirth to the next. Time in this text spirals from present to the past to the possibilities of life in the future.

Okri’s novels *The Famished Road* (1992) and *Songs of Enchantment* (1994) share with *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) a common African setting and the influences of orature. In Okri’s novels, mentioned above, time is a function of a particular space. For most of the people of Azaro’s village linear time is experienced individually as they come to terms with the socio-political changes that face them. For some, however, there are experiences of the spirit world and dream world in which time moves erratically backwards and forwards or in circles. Azaro’s experience with a man who lived five hundred years is characteristic of a narrative in which the movement of time defies rational explanations. Towards the close of *The Famished Road* (1992) Azaro meets a black man who was white two weeks earlier. The man informs him that in the two weeks since he had last seen

Azaro five hundred years had passed and that “Time is not what you think it is” (1992:484).

While the treatment of time in *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) is consonant with that of the aforementioned magic realist texts, Mda has attempted to use time as a device to draw attention to the sharp contrast in the values of the ancient African past and the materialistic present. The shocking reality of being the victim of time and circumstances is a theme that Mda had used effectively in his plays such as “And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses” (*And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses* 1993b), “The Road” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), “We Shall Sing for the Fatherland” (*The Plays of Zakes Mda* 1990), and “Joys of War” (*And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses* 1993b), and in his novel *Ways of Dying* (1995b). In bringing his characters to face the realities of the time that mirrors their existence, Mda displays links with the aforementioned writers of magic realist texts. Like the magic realist texts by the writers mentioned earlier, in Mda’s novels and plays the multiple nature of time functions as an integral aspect of the narrative structure. The influences of African orature which Mda has acknowledged, and his awareness of time as it is viewed in terms of African spiritual beliefs, has enabled him to create characters who can transcend linear time while others succumb to its effects.

Time operates independently for the respective characters in the narrative, and the plot structure itself is based on time operating on different levels. It is interesting that these operations of time occur simultaneously and do not cause any disruptions to the plot itself. Thus characters live out their lives against the

backdrop of historical events such as the political coups in Lesotho. During this time Dikosha plays with the darkness and silence in which time is suspended, Radisene races towards old age, the soccer hero, Sorry My Darlie, becomes decrepit, and the centuries old customs of the people of Ha Samane are challenged when Trooper Motsohi rapes his mother-in-law. By the end of the narrative all the characters mentioned are forced to come to terms with the changes wrought by time.

In *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) there is also a strong impulse towards drawing attention to the effects of historical time on the lives of ordinary people. Implicit in the narrative is the suggestion that the "little people" are swept along by time as they struggle to narrate themselves into the pages of a history that denies their existence. There are indications, however, in the opening paragraphs of the novel that the villagers of Ha Samane are out of joint with time and that this is the cause of their disrupted lives. The advent of colonialism and capitalism, as represented by the mines, has robbed the villagers of the harmony that their ancestors enjoyed with regard to the time and the rhythms of nature. Time therefore assumes apocalyptic proportions and the villagers become victims of both historical time and cyclic time.

The narrative voice points out that the disrupted rhythm of the villagers' lives is evident in the fact that, "in the evening you can hear the girls singing the songs of the pumpkin. In the olden days these songs were heard only at harvest time. But nowadays the girls - sometimes joined by the lonely young women whose husbands are toiling in the mines a world away - sing them all year round.

Even in the middle of winter ... they sing and dance to the songs of the pumpkin" (1995:1). Further evidence of the villagers being at odds with time is the fact that "for a reason no one understands, the village of Ha Samane has taken to cooking the evening meal late at night, instead of just before sunset like other villagers throughout the land" (1995:2).

Evidently Mda's purpose in presenting his characters as victims of time and circumstances in the opening paragraphs of the novel, is to draw attention to their increasing alienation from the familiar. The narrative voice states:

Don't be fooled by the sunshine in their faces. They are a sad people inside, tormented by the knowledge that one day the great mist will rise and suffocate them all to death. And no one can do anything about it. The mist has a mind of its own. It does what it wants to do when it wants to do it. No one can stop it. Even those who have the gift of controlling lightning and of sending it to destroy their enemies are powerless against the mist.

Yet they conduct their lives in song and laughter, as if their world will live for ever (1995b:1).

Having intruded into the African world, colonialism and capitalism, through their agencies such as the mines and the other industries which exploit migrant workers from Lesotho, have inscribed linear time on the traditional African system of circular time. The conflict between these systems of time and the attendant tensions that this causes in the lives of the characters is one of the main structuring principles of the novel. Individually and collectively the characters in the novel succumb to the forces of historical time and the threat of socio-political change.

The novel closes with many of the characters in a state of confusion and disarray as they are overwhelmed by the forces of history.

### **Mansions**

In many of the magic realist texts discussed here the image of the mansion is an integral aspect of the plot and narrative structure. Radisene, for example, builds a mansion for his mother and Dikosha, which is more beautiful than any other seen by the people of Ha Samane. The house looks incongruous among the humble dwellings of the people but the villagers are overawed by its beauty and size. They “imagined that when Jesus said in the Bible, ‘In my Father’s house are many mansions’, he was talking about Mother-of-Twins’ house” (1995:77).

Common to many of the magic realist texts discussed above, is the tendency to depict characters who desire to build or live in large houses. The mansion becomes a symbol of self affirmation and the social status of the owner. Curiously these mansions assume a life that corresponds with that of its owner. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Márquez 1978), Ursula extends the house built by her husband and it becomes the largest building in pre-capitalist Macondo. The narrative voice states that it was “not only the largest house in the town, but the most hospitable and cool house that ever existed in the region of the swamp” (1978:52). Ursula’s physical and mental deterioration is matched by that of the house. When she dies the large house crumbles and is infested with ants. The ants “feed” on the house as though it were a corpse.

In Allende's *The House of the Spirits* (1993), the house built by the temperamental Estaban Trueba in San Sebastián is a testament to his financial power and ego. He decides that it should be the "largest, sunniest, and sturdiest house imaginable, built to last a thousand years and lodge several generations of a bountiful family of legitimate Truebas" (1993:114). His last days, however, are spent as a lonely and broken man in the dusty, dilapidated house in the city, which was once the envy of the neighbourhood. The house becomes a locus for memories past, present and future and a place where spirits dwell.

In Mike Nicol's *The Powers that Be* (1990) Lady Sarah's mansion is strategically located high on a hill overlooking the isolated harbour village, that cannot be located on a map. The narrator Montague points out that no one "had satisfactorily explained how raw fisherfolk had built a double-storey house that looked like the work of master craftsmen, pillared entrance and the sweeping arches of its tall windows" (1990:27). The house is not only expertly crafted, but it is also furnished with "gracious treasures from the outside world" (1990:27), which no one saw entering her house. The narrator affirms that Lady Sarah's house and her possessions are obtained through magical means. When Lady Sarah is isolated from her house by the evil Nunes, she becomes mentally and physically ill and her house loses its magic, and begins to decay as well.

Ivan Vladislavic's magic realist text *The Folly* (1993), centres on the house that the stranger Nieuwenhuizen designs and builds on the vacant lot next to the Malgas's property. Mr. Malgas's curiosity gets the better of him as he watches the stranger prepare the property for the building of the mansion. Eventually he is

allowed to assist Nieuwenhuizen to build a house that is invisible to everyone else but the two of them. The novel focuses on the relationship between these two men as the “magical” house begins to take shape. When Mrs. Malgas is unable to make sense of the long hours her husband spends with Nieuwenhuizen, and on the construction of a house that is invisible, she decides to question her husband:

‘I’ve tried to be happy for you,’ Mrs said, ‘but I really don’t get this. Are you imagining things? Is it a case of play-play? Are you hallucinating? What the hell’s going on out there?’

‘None of the above,’ Mr replied firmly. ‘The new house...*materializes*. It’s a manifestation.’

‘Goes without saying.’

‘Then it’s like this - although words don’t do it justice: a paintbrush with a tousled head swooshes across a blank screen, and swooshes back again, scattering gold-dust and glitter, and 1-2-3, a multi-storey mansion appears, in full colour.’

‘As if by magic?’

‘Hey presto! Clinker brick and corrugated iron.’

She thought: He’s flipped his lid, he’s seeing things. But I suppose we should count on our blessings. At least it’s all in the mind; the real thing would be intolerable (1993:115).

Towards the close of the novel Nieuwenhuizen decides to destroy the house:

The house was full of holes and the night poured in. The rafters turned to charcoal, the roof crashed down onto the observation deck, and that crashed down onto the floor below. Flocks of nails flew up into the sky. Storey after storey, amid clouds of dust and laughter, the house fell in on itself. The walls

flared up and faded, and died down, and flaring up again - guttering -

The world drained out of Malgas. On an empty screen a single nail revolved into an exquisitely formed full stop.

Malgas was struck dumb. He fell down in a stupor, and the new house fell down with him, at last. Crash (1993:142).

The narrative focus of *The Folly* (1993) is the description of the house that Nieuwenhuizen built and the process of its building. With the “death” of the house, the story too runs its course and “dies”.

In Mda’s novel *Ways of Dying* (1995b) the house built by Nefolovhodwe, the undertaker and coffin manufacturer, has already been discussed in the previous chapter. When Toloki visits him he is led by a “guard across spreading lawns, past a dozen or so German, British and American luxury cars, to the back of the double-storey mansion” (1995b:119). Nefolovhodwe’s house stands as a symbol of his immense wealth and his entry into capitalism. The contrast between his house and the shack in which Toloki lives points to the disparities between the rich and poor black people living in contemporary South Africa. It signals the beginnings of a class structure in which idealised black solidarity, founded on colour, fractures as the emerging black middle and upper classes isolate themselves from the working class blacks.

In Rushdie’s *Shame* (1984) the three Shakil sisters choose self-imprisonment for a period of sixty-five years in their “high, fortress-like, gigantic residence” (1984:12) which is also described as an “infinite mansion stuffed from

floor to ceiling with possessions ..." (1984:14). The house functions as one of the powerful metaphors of shame in this magic realist text and also serves as the stage for the climactic ending when all the tropes of shame in the narrative finally intersect.

In Mda's *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) the house that Radisene builds in the village of Ha Samane disintegrates and lies in ruins. The deterioration of the house parallels his own physical and moral deterioration and is seen by the villagers as a manifestation of his ego. The narrative voice points out that: "People of the village concluded that it was the same pride they had seen many years ago when he refused to take money from the grandmothers. He was just showing off his wealth. He had the nerve, they observed, to build such a fancy house next to the homestead of Father-of-the-Daughters who had been, until then, the richest man in the village" (1995b:75).

Not content with building a mansion in the village, Radisene decides to build one in the city of Maseru as well. Radisene resolves that his house would be "like the Prime Minister's. Only bigger, with an Olympic-size swimming-pool and a Jacuzzi. It was going to be bigger than the king's palace" (1995b:85). Radisene never gets to build this second mansion and years later when he eventually finds time to visit the mansion in the village he is shocked to find that:

The mansion was only a shade of its former self. Most of the windows were broken and everything seemed to be falling apart. . .

For all these years Radisene had imagined the house as a palace, and he was devastated by what he

saw now. In every room spiders had built their webs. Bats hung upside-down from the ceilings. The mirrors of the dance studio were so thick with dust that they no longer reflected any image. The floors were like deserts (1995:105-106).

The construction or destruction of houses as metonymic representations of the postcolonial identities of the respective characters mentioned above, invites comment on houses as both symbols of status and the house as a representation of the structure of the postcolonial magic realist text itself. It is worth noting that quite often in the magic realist texts the decay and destruction of buildings often occur at turning points in the lives of the protagonists or at the closure of the novel. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Márquez 1978), for example, the great Buendía mansion is destroyed in the last paragraph of the novel thus signalling the link between the house and the text. In *The Powers that Be* (Nicol 1990) at the close of the novel we are presented with an image of Lady Sarah's house in ruins with, "the brocade curtains now shredded, the furniture in skeletons" (1990:176). Similarly in the concluding paragraph of *Shame* (1984) the narrative voice states: "And then the explosion comes, a shock-wave that demolishes the house, and after it the fireball of her burning, rolling outwards to the horizon like the sea, and last of all the cloud, which rises and spreads and hangs over the nothingness of the scene" (1984:286).

### **Silence and Solitude**

Dikosha's silence and the solitary life that she leads provides her with the opportunities to reflect on her life and that of people around her. Her solitude and her playing with the darkness provides her with the power to establish links with the ancient African past. Her communication with the Cave people who lived centuries ago also imbues her with the energy and the divine shamanistic gifts of healing and the ability to defy the restrictions of time and space. For Dikosha the darkness is a living entity that provides her with lessons on life. She feels it against her breast and it comforts her when she is distressed. The darkness and the silence that Dikosha insists on, become her refuge in a disintegrating world.

Zakes Mda's depiction of Dikosha as a character who is different from the others in the novel, places her in the company of certain other characters in magic realist texts who embrace silence and solitude as pathways to self affirmation. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Márquez 1978), José Arcadio spends his time in the solitude of scientific discovery and his final days tied to a tree and is almost forgotten by his family. The narrator Melquíades also spends prolonged periods in silence in a room where it is always "May and always Monday" (1978:283). Similarly both the military hero Colonel Aurelianos and Aureliano Babilonia, the last surviving member of the Buendía clan who witnesses the final dissolution of Macondo, prefer isolation and silence to the company of people.

Other characters in magic realist texts who, like Dikosha, consciously inhabit a world of silence during particular periods in their lives are Clara in *The House of the Spirits* (Allende 1993), Sanjay in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*

(Chandra 1996), Oskar in *The Tin Drum* (Grass 1987), Simple Martha in Mike Nicol's *This Day and Age* (1992), Saleem in *Midnight's Children* (Rushdie 1981) and Azaro's mother in *The Famished Road* (Okri 1992) and its sequel *Songs of Enchantment* (Okri 1994). Of the characters mentioned here, perhaps it is Clara that Dikosha comes closest to with respect to their initial decisions to use silence to come to terms with individual conflicts during traumatic moments in their lives. Clara witnesses the autopsy performed on her sister on the kitchen sink and she never speaks again until many years later when Estaben visits to ask her hand in marriage. The text narrating Clara's decision to remain silent points out that, "Clara was ten years old when she decided that speaking was pointless and locked herself in silence" (1993). All these characters have adopted the mode of silence as a strategy for withdrawing from the realities of the world.

The code of silence that Dikosha enters into results initially from the fact that the missionary school that she and Radisene attended, did not see it fit to allow her to continue her studies because of her gender. She refuses to speak to anyone else but her brother Radisene. When he chooses to squander his life in search of material wealth she even refuses to speak to him. Dikosha chooses instead to articulate her thoughts through the medium of dance. For her, dancing becomes the energising force that enables her to transcend time and space. In creating Dikosha as a character who chooses dance and song over speech, Mda is pointing to alternative modes of self construction in a postcolonial location. Dikosha is not willing to accept the views of others on how she should conduct her life. She refuses the identities imposed upon her by both the villagers, and the holy

fathers at the mission school, and inscribes her self in accordance with her own beliefs. The narrative voice points out that:

Her quiet beauty was in keeping with her own silence. She never spoke with anyone, not even with her mother or the girls with whom she sang and danced. They heard her voice only when she sang. She broke her silence only when her twin brother, Radisene, visited from the lowlands. Then she would actually talk, and giggle happily, and ask him all sorts of funny questions about life in the lowland towns where he attended the high school. Since he only came once or twice a year, Dikosha had long periods of silence, broken now and then by outbursts of song (1995b:2-3).

The text informs us further that Dikosha's silence was self-imposed and her songs and dances are substitutes for communication with the villagers of Ha Samane.

The world of silence that Dikosha shares with the other characters in the magic realist texts mentioned above, does not only point to a regression to the stage prior to what Lacan called the speaking mirror. There is, however, also the suggestion that writers of these magic realist texts have depicted their characters as being able to consciously enter the speaking mirror and see into it. Thus rather than seeing a reflection that enables speech, they see the possibilities that silence offers in transcending the limitations of speech. Their thoughts are not mediated through speech but rather through their actions. Dikosha dances and sings, and through these actions she establishes a link with a past when dance and song broke down social barriers created by spoken language.

Dikosha's dances are also significant in that they enable her to go beyond the limitations of the space of her hut, where she confines herself for most of the time. Her passion for song and dance is even present in her dreams:

In her dreams she saw the new dance steps that she was going to teach the girls the next day. Even when she taught the girls she never spoke: she just danced the new steps and the others followed suit. Her dreams were always rich with new songs and new dances. Her worst nightmare was that some evil people would steal her dreams, and take her dances and her songs away, leaving her as empty as a hollow shell. She feared this as much as she feared the mist (1995b:3).

In the world that Dikosha creates for herself, the narratives of dance and song, sustain her determination to "live her life her own way" (1995b:5). For Dikosha dance also enables her to share in the collective energies of the ancient people who once inhabited the Cave of Barwa. The powerful energy of the dancers painted on the cave walls is realised when Dikosha succeeds in bringing them to life in what can be seen as a magical occurrence:

Deeper in the cave there was a group of men dancing around a person lying on the ground, their maleness pointing firmly outwards. A woman was kneeling next to the supine figure, her breasts dangling over it. And of course there was the monster-woman-dancer, who seemed to be leader of all dancers in the cave; and, as far as Dikosha was concerned, of all the dancers in the world. Her painting was the most beautiful of all the cave paintings. It was so harrowing in its beauty that it made Dikosha cry (1995b:50-51).

The description of the dancers in the painting that moves Dikosha to tears is a typical healing scene as found in many rock paintings and in some anthropological texts. Dikosha is overcome by the energy of the dancers as represented by the paintings and in the image of the “monster-woman-dancer” she sees her alter ego. The sexual energy of the dancers and the creative energies of the ancient painters merge to present a scene in which Dikosha is healed.

Dikosha’s experiences with the cave people enables her to realise that she has strong links with dancers who lived centuries ago:

She willed it to life, and summoned it to her. At first she was ashamed of herself for being so presumptuous as to summon such an important personage to herself. But as she stood in the middle of the cave, the monster-woman-dancer assured her that there was nothing to be ashamed of. She had long been welcomed as a member of the family, and any member of the family had the right to summon help when the world was becoming too thorny. Then she summoned the hunters, and the dancers, and everyone else from the walls. The activity they were engaged in continued unabated. They spoke and sang in clicks that Dikosha did not understand. However, she could construct images of all the things they were saying in her mind. They could also read her thoughts, which they said were always beautiful (1995b:51).

Dikosha’s summoning of the cave people is indicative of the power that she discovers in her self. Although she cannot understand the language that they speak, she is able to communicate with them telepathically in thoughts that

transcend the barriers of language. Having lived in a world of silence since she was denied entry to secondary school, Dikosha discovers a form of communication based on telepathy. Implicit in the fact that the cave people communicate with her telepathically in “images”, is the notion of her entry into a realm that lies beyond articulated speech. Mda is suggesting in this scene that cave paintings, artefacts, dance and orature are important in that they are texts which celebrate the history of ancient people who lived in Southern Africa in the centuries that pre-date the ownership of property. The existence of these people as focalised through Dikosha is idyllic and an obvious contrast to the fear and lack of social harmony in her village. She is overcome by love for the cave people and

wished that she could spend all her days with them. She loved the peace that reigned among them. No voice was ever raised in anger, and they did not seem to know any form of violence directed at other human beings. Men did not deem themselves to be more important than women. There seemed to be an equality among them that did not exist in the world of Ha Samane (1995b:53).

Dikosha’s mythic construction of the existence of the cave people provides her with an alternative to her life in Ha Samane. Her juxtapositioning of life with the villagers of Ha Samane in the present, and life with the people who inhabited the caves in the past, are significant in positioning Dikosha at the confluence where past and present meet. She sees herself as “part of a chain” (1995b:53), and her meeting with the cave people is as “real” as the gifts that they give her. Apart from the material gifts such as the beads made from ostrich-egg shells, she is also given

the gifts of healing, the ability to see dances in her dreams and “the most beautiful gift of all …the power to see songs” (1995b:53). For Dikosha such gifts are the desired alternative to life in Ha Samane and the education of the “holy fathers”. Her exclusion from the texts of western discourse is superseded by the invitation of the cave people to share in their narratives.

Dikosha’s choice of the dances and songs of the cave people, instead of the education of the holy fathers and conversations with the people of Ha Samane, imbue her with the power to inhabit a world of silence in which dance and songs that are seen, rather than vocalised, are given expression. The world of silence that Dikosha inhabits is one that she chooses, rather than one that is forced on her. In Dikosha, Mda has created a character who answers the silence forced on the colonised by the centre with a powerful silence of her own. In this she acquires a power of expression denied to other characters in contemporary literary texts such as Friday in Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986) and Ndi in Lewis Nkosi’s *Mating Birds* (1987). Her interpretation of the silent songs and her dances imbues Dikosha with an understanding of time and space that none of the other characters in the text possess. Her dances enable her to physically experience a spiritual past that transcends materialism. Through her dances and the songs that she sees, Dikosha retrieves a past that is being eroded by greed and property. Her dances can be read as textual segments of Barwa transcendentality.

Dikosha refuses to construct her identity in the language, culture or religion of western consumerism. The narrative voice points out that, “Radisene was given the church name of Joseph, but Dikosha refused to be named Mary. She

insisted that her name was Dikosha, and no church could change that" (1995b:15).

Her entry into the world of the cave people lends support to her denial of western education and history. Through the medium of dance and silence, Dikosha transcends the Lacanian Symbolic realm of speech which defines reality and the self. The magical occurrences that Dikosha experiences affirm her beliefs in a spirituality rooted in the past and which offers hope for the future..

In Dikosha, Mda has created a character who defies the position of other that western-derived materialism and consumerism seek to impose on the characters. Dikosha chooses to construct and articulate her self in accordance with the realities of the spirituality that she invents for herself. Her privileging of dance and silence over speech is her way of narrating a self that "was part of a chain" (1995b:53) of African spirituality. Dikosha's silence, however, is twice removed from the written text. She communicates through dances which are open to an infinite number of interpretations.

Through the course of the narrative Dikosha proves that her dances have a higher purpose and are an essential part of the magical powers that she possesses. The creative, spiritual energy of the dances of the cave people that Dikosha emulates is a sharp contrast to the earthy dances described elsewhere in the text. The raw, physical force of the famo dance, for example, which represents lust, lacks the dignity and healing power of the ancient dances. Dikosha participates in the dances of the cave people and their dances are focalised through her:

The monster-woman-dancer led the women in a frenzied singing that rose in an ear-shattering crescendo. They were sitting in a circle around the fire. Their thighs touched one another, and they clapped hands and breathed very heavily. The men stamped their feet on the ground, dancing around the circle of women. The rattlebones on their legs provided a slow dignified rhythm. They danced on and on for hours without any rest. Soon their buttocks and their bellies began to boil, and some fell on the ground and died. The legs of some of the women trembled. Both men and women staggered and collapsed on the ground.

While they were in a trance they pulled out arrows from Dikosha's belly and thighs with their hands. And her pain went with the arrows. The more arrows they pulled out, the more they seemed to lose consciousness. More men and women fell on the ground and died. Dikosha knew from previous experience that their spirits had left their bodies to make contact with the world of the ancestors. On the way they battled with sickness and death. They would come back in the morning armed with more songs that contained the powers of healing. They would implant those songs in their stomachs and buttocks. Their bellies and buttocks protruded precisely because they were reservoirs of the healing songs (1995b:51-52).

The power of the Barwa dance is a creative regenerative force that enables the dancers to transcend time and even death. The dance is an important signifier in the text of Mda's unique brand of magic realism that seeks its roots in African forms of spirituality, as expounded in recent texts on the meaning of rock paintings and dances of the hunter-gathers. The belief in a world of ancestral spirits and the ability of these spirits to move through the worlds of the living and dead is one of the intrinsic beliefs in traditional African religions. Ben Okri has used these beliefs

as one of the structuring principles of his magic realist texts *The Famished Road* (1992) and *Songs of Enchantment* (1994). Indeed in all the magic realist texts mentioned above life and death are seen as different states of consciousness. These magic realist texts demystify death and present an alternative reality of death based on cultural and religious beliefs.

The collective healing and regenerative power of the dances of the cave people is presented as a medium of reaching an altered state of consciousness, and a spirituality that provides the participant with a sharper focus on life and death. The famo dance, on the other hand, is firmly rooted in the individual's enjoyment of the flesh in the present. The fact that the famo dance is focalised through Radisene also reflects the transience of physical gratification. The sharp contrast in the purposes of the ancestral dances of the cave people and the famo dance is visible in the extract below:

A woman, also brandishing a stick, jumped into the circle and challenged the man in a mock fight. She too was singing her own praise poetry as she danced aggressively towards the man. Their sticks met in the air and they danced back again, giving each other room to prance around. Her poetry was punctuated by the soulful refrain: 'Sewelelele...! Awu ... welelele!', as she made wild love to the stuffy air. She sang of her exploits when she used to run around with the Russians in Johannesburg. She boasted that she was a whore who had devoured many men, who continued to tell the story of her prowess in their graves. The man responded that he wanted to be taken by her and devoured until he was completely finished and there was not even a trace to show that he once lived in a world of sorrows. The woman would shake her waist, kick her leg up

and lift her dress to display her femaleness, around which a white circle called a 'spotlight' had been painted (1995b:58).

The famo dance has links with the praise poem and war dance tradition of the Nguni and Sotho. The famo dance described above is witnessed by Radisene during one of his insurance scams. The woman who is dancing has lost her husband, whom she has not seen in many years, in an accident, and she readily falls prey to Radisene's scheme which would effectively give him half of the money claimed.

The famo dance described above can also be read as a masque of death. However, in this instance it lacks the healing power of the sacred dances of the cave people. Eventually the cave people are unable to dance for Dikosha because of the desecration of the cave walls by vandals:

It finally happened. The people of the cave were totally imprisoned by the scribblings and graffiti on the sacred walls. Dikosha was powerless against the most powerful people in the land, and against the tourists from across the seas, who took their cue from the high and mighty and desecrated the cave with their vain names.

On the day that she learnt of the final imprisonment Dikosha sat on the warm ashes of the floor and summoned her friends with all her might. But they could not come. She tried again and again, but the monster-woman-dancer and her people stayed behind the scrawls. Dikosha knew that this was the end of her healing dances of the night with the people of the cave. It was not only the death of the dance, but the death of a lifestyle as well. Her

world and her life with the people of the cave had been destroyed for ever. She would have to find a new way of expressing herself and a new life in the world that was far away from this place. She would not come here again. It would be too painful to reawaken all the memories of a beautiful and peaceful life that had been rudely dashed by vandals (1995b:129).

The disappearance of the cave people and the “death of the dance” mark a turning point in Dikosha’s life. She spends her time listening to the music of the boy Shana who suddenly appears in Ha Samane. She does not dance again until many years later when Shana is “killed by the mist” (1995b:167). Dikosha is overcome by grief and she dances at Shana’s funeral:

Suddenly she jumped up and danced. The proceedings of the funeral stopped, as everyone watched her. She danced like a woman possessed ... like the whirlwind of August. She raised helical dust to the skies, which could be seen for miles around. It was visible even in distant villages.

She danced her last tribute to Shana. Then she walked away to her rondavel. People of the village applauded in spite of themselves (1995b:169).

Shana’s death unleashes the energy and the urge to dance. Her dances become expressions of the magic of life and death. After Shana’s death Dikosha devotes herself to dancing and playing with the darkness:

When she was not in her room playing with the darkness, she went to wherever dancing could be

found. She was seen at the tlhophe dances, where the drums of the mathuela diviners throbbed. She danced alongside the Zionists as they drummed themselves into a frenzy, possessed by Holy Spirits. She joined the mokgibo dancers as they responded to the rhythm of a lone drum interwoven with singing, whistling and handclapping. She danced with the little girls, who could easily have been her grandchildren although she didn't look much older than them, in the songs of the pumpkin and the monyanyako dance. She danced the dances of the men: the fast-paced ndlamu of the Matebele, and the graceful mohobelo with both its SeMolapo and Sematsieng variations. She even danced the famo dance of the fuchu parties of the night, to the rhythm of the organ or accordion and drums (1995b:170).

Dikosha's participation in the dances listed above signifies her role as the historical link between the past and present. As the "keeper of memories" (1995b:169), her dances become the medium through which history can be experienced and recorded, and the means of expressing the unity of the different black tribes. The magic of her dancing is also suggestive of the value of dance as an ancient medium of transcending the barriers of language, culture and creed. The Pan-African impulse of Dikosha's dances would seem to suggest Mda's belief in cultural signifiers as a means of breaking down the barriers of language that separates the people of Africa. As Mda has pointed out, "*Pan-Africanism to me acknowledges and celebrates the common history of the African people. Also the common interests and common destiny of the African people on the continent and in the diaspora.*" That common history is manifested very much in the culture of

these people...This is what Pan-Africanism means to me, and my whole outlook is informed by that kind of Pan-Africanism" (Naidoo 1997:258).

Dikosha's movement from the sacred dances of the cave people to dancing with the people, even if it included the famo dance, suggests that through dance she has cleared spaces that makes possible the joining of African people. While such a notion is obviously mythical in its construction, it emphasises the capacity of magic realist texts in presenting possibilities for new realities. Her dances offer new ways of interpreting reality and of evoking memories of the past, present and even the future. They also signal the possibilities of African myth and culture as unifying forces.

Dikosha is portrayed as a figure whose mystical powers set her apart from the other villagers. The magic invested in her by the cave people enables her to die "many times in the dances of the night", and to wake up "again in the morning rejuvenated" (1995b:71). Her special abilities are even recognised by snakes. In what is characteristic of magic realism the world of man and animals often merge and animals are given a voice to articulate their feelings and their thoughts. The narrative voice informs us that:

Snakes no longer cried. They could be seen gambolling and prancing around on the hillsides. In the evenings, when snake families gathered at the fireside, grandmothers told the story of how at one time their life had been a misery. An emaciated girl, who looked very much like them in shape, used to mesmerize them with a dance. Then she would torture and make them do all sorts of humiliating tricks as though they were lap-dogs. To add insult to

injury, when she was tired of amusing herself she would skin them alive and roast them. Grandmothers of the snakes, keepers of this sad history, would point at the anthills dotting the hillside and tell the little snakes that there had once been ovens, where many a forebear saw his or her fate. But, as fortune would have it, the emaciated girl found other interests. Anthills began to grow (1995b:70).

The reality of snakes discussing Dikosha is a magic realist device that Mda uses to draw links with the fables popularised by oral story telling. This is clearly a device that interrogates the type of narratives that one would expect to find in metropolitan literature. It is interesting to note that Dikosha functions as a character who can inhabit different levels of reality and in different narrative structures. The narrative of the snakes demonstrates Mda's tendency towards including strands of African folklore and myth in his particular brand of magic realism. Mda, however, also differs from traditional African beliefs as demonstrated by his depiction of Dikosha as a figure feared by snakes. In traditional African belief snakes are regarded as the physical manifestation of the ancestors. In A.C. Jordan's *The Wrath of the Ancestors* (1980), Thembeka is severely punished for killing a snake, believed to be the spirit of a dead chief. The intermingling of myth, fable and orature is an indication of the fact that structurally *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) is a syncreticism of both western and African narrative influences. As a magic realist text, *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) also uses these structures to engage the reader in questioning established notions of what constitutes reality.

In creating a mythic space in the narrative for snakes to maintain their own history the text also undermines the Biblical account of the serpent as the embodiment of evil. This oblique challenge of an established religious doctrine demonstrates the purpose of a magic realist text such as *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) in asserting African folk-culture.

### **Wars, Civil Strife and Political Uncertainties**

Individual and collective conflicts during times of political unrest is another characteristic of magic realist texts. The problems experienced by individuals and communities in defining their identities is a theme that Mda has used effectively in his novel *Ways of Dying* (1995b). Our discussion of this theme in the previous chapter focused on the uncertainties of life in South Africa during the political violence leading to the period prior to the country's first democratic election in 1994. In *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), the characters are faced with political unrest in Lesotho in a period that spans over twenty years.

The battle for political power in which innocent people are brutalised and killed is a common theme in all the magic realist texts mentioned above. In all these texts the lives of ordinary people are disrupted by civil war. During such times of social upheaval the characters lose a sense of a stable reality. The magical episodes described in these texts provide opportunities for interrogating power struggles in postcolonial locations. The civil strife which accompanies the end of colonialism, described in all the magic realist texts mentioned above, represent the

apocalyptic forces of history which overwhelm the characters. These characters are caught in the ambivalent state of not being able to define themselves in accordance with the lives that their ancestors led in the past. The choice for characters is often represented as one which involves supporting politicians bent on material power or by joining in the opposition to these politicians. Irrespective of the choices made, however, the historical forces of these civil wars loom larger than the characters themselves and their individual and communal lives are changed for ever.

In both *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), and many of the magic realist texts mentioned above, the images of death in the opening paragraphs suggest that the reality of death forces on the readers an awareness of the transience of life.

The opening sentence of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Márquez 1978) reads: "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice" (1978:9). Márquez's *Chronicles of a Death Foretold* (1982) opens with "On the day they were going to kill him, Santiago Nasar got up at five-thirty in the morning to wait for the boat the bishop was coming on" In the third paragraph of *The Famished Road* (Okri 1992) the narrator, Azaro, states: "There was not one among us who looked forward to being born. We disliked the rigours of existence, the unfulfilled longings, the enshrined injustices of the world, the labyrinths of love, the ignorance of parents, the fact of dying, and the amazing indifference of the Living in the midst of the simple beauties of the universe. We feared the

heartlessness of human beings, all of whom are born blind, few of whom ever learn to see" (1992:3). In the third paragraph of *Midnight's Children* (Rushdie 1981) the narrator Saleem reflects: "Now, however, time (having no further use for me) is running out. I will soon be thirty-one years old. Perhaps. If my crumbling, over-used body permits. But I have no hope of saving my life, nor can I count on having even a thousand nights and a night. I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, If I am to end up meaning - yes, meaning - something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity" (1981:11). Saleem attempts to escape the absurdity of his life by turning to the art of writing.

A common feature of magic realist texts is that the characters are "handcuffed to history" (Rushdie 1981:11) and play out their roles as figures caught up in the currents of civil strife and wars. The need to mean something is expressed in different ways by the characters. Saleem for example attempts to change history, Aureliano makes history as a rebel leader, and Radisene hopes to become the richest man in Maseru.

Civil strife, wars, coups and social violence in which death predominates over life is a recurrent theme in these magic realist texts. Death, however, is depersonalised and the characters survive with the understanding that like life, death too is transient. As Clara in *The House of the Spirits* (Allende 1993) remarks during the civil war in Chile: "Dying is like being born: just a change" (1993:332). The threat of the apocalypse is often replaced by the possibilities of the carnivalesque. Indeed the apocalyptic often becomes the flip side of the carnivalesque in the magical realist texts discussed here. The last chapter of *She*

*Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), for example, describes the laughter of people who had inhaled the smoke of a dagga crop that had been burned by the police: “Old grandmothers and grandfathers were roaring with laughter. Peals of laughter came even from little children. Everywhere people were clutching their aching ribs and gasping for breath” (1995b:198).

For Radisene the civil wars in Lesotho present opportunities to get richer. The narrative voice points out that he “had risen from the ashes of unemployment caused by that first coup to become a very rich man indeed. He was determined to rise further still, and be the richest man in the land” (1995b:83). Radisene has these dreams of riches during the coup in 1986, the second of the coups described by the text.

While the coups and the resultant civil strife in Lesotho affects all the other characters in the novel, Dikosha remains isolated in her rondavel. Like Clara in Allende's *The House of the Spirits* (1993) Dikosha emerges as a mythic figure who is unaffected by the forces of history. During the civil war in Chile, Clara retreats into the world of the spirits, and provides assistance to those affected by the war. According to her granddaughter Alba, one of the narrator's of the story, Clara “seemed to be detaching herself from the world, growing ever lighter, more transparent, more winged ... She had begun to take leave even of light, to enter slowly into darkness” (1993:331). Clara's dissociation from the light and the “lightness” of her being are suggestive of her conscious efforts to transcend the weight of history. She finds refuge in the darkness, even if that darkness is death. Similarly Dikosha “plays with the darkness” to escape the oppressive realities of

her life. She is unaffected by the civil wars in Lesotho and spend her time in the darkness of the Cave of Barwa or her rondavel. Unlike Oskar in *The Tin Drum* (Grass 1987), or Saleem in *Midnight's Children* (Rushdie 1981) she refuses to be “handcuffed to history” (Rushdie 1981:11). During the time of intense civil disturbance in Lesotho she assists migrant workers by listening to their confessions. The narrative voice states that for Dikosha those “were busy times for confessions” (1995b:198). In this she creates the opportunities for these economically exploited people to express their individual histories. In performing the role of a confessional figure Dikosha also invokes the oral texts of the African past.

In *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), Mda has used the actual names of political figures in Lesotho who were directly involved in the civil wars. The actions of politicians such as Leabua, Jonathan Mokhele and Major-General Lekhanya impact on the lives of the fictional characters mentioned in the novel. While this is a common feature of all the magic realist texts discussed thus far, in *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) characters are overwhelmed by historical realities that follow the civil wars. Although Dikosha was initially able to “play with the darkness” and lose herself in the mythic glories of the African past, she is forced into the realities of the historical present and the apocalyptic effects of the civil war. The close of the novel points to a tragic sense of loss. Radisene loses all his family and all his wealth. Dikosha loses the ability to play with the darkness because she has been wrenched from the solitude of her rondavel by her brother. They sit together, marooned on a hilltop. In answer to Dikosha’s question as to

what was to become of them, Radisene replies, “I don’t know. We’ll sit here for ever until the marwana ants finish us” (1995b:206). Their ending recalls the ending of the last of the Buendía clan, the baby that is carried away by ants in *One Hundred Days of Solitude* (Márquez 1978): “And then he saw the child. It was a dry and bloated bag of skin that all the ants in the world were dragging towards their holes along the stone path in the garden” (1978:334).

## CONCLUSION

When a writer such as Mda claims that he is in "the god business" and that he is the "the god of his creations", one is immediately alerted to the writer's view of the potentials inherent in the act of writing as a magical means for constructing narratives that are given form and substance by the power of the word. Like two mirrors facing each other, the co-existence of magic and realism in a text extends the imaginations of both writer and reader. The freeing of the imagination is thus both empowering and liberating. Magic realist texts have therefore functioned as discourses that are counter-hegemonic. In *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) Mda describes the absurd realities of political power and the historical antecedents of social oppression.

In my introduction I made the claim that Mda's novels signal a radical new direction in South African literary representation. The direction is quite evident. Mda's novels, as I have demonstrated, point to a universal trend in which writers from marginal countries and social groups have created literary styles that are quite *novel*. While South African writers such as Gordimer and Coetzee reflect modes such as realism and postmodernism respectively in their novels, thereby maintaining their links with a Euro-centric literary tradition, Mda establishes links with a growing international family of writers who are proving to do more than merely "write back". Writers in these marginal locations are now establishing, through their work, their own "centres" of influence. It is not surprising therefore that magic realist writers such as Márquez, Morrison and Kawabata, have received

the Nobel prize for literature while Rushdie and Roy have received the Booker prize.

Mda's use of magic realism in *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) points to his interest in extending the boundaries of the imagination and in interrogating conventional attitudes to representation. In my discussions with Mda on magic realism in his prose he has insisted that "he has been writing in this mode without knowing that it existed as a literary movement or how it actually worked" (Naidoo 1997:256).

In spite of Mda's insistence that his innovative use of magic realism is unique, in that it has not been influenced by other writers, there is no denying that *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) have a number of typical magic realist elements. What distinguished Mda's novels from the other texts mentioned above, is Mda's strategy in fusing devices related to traditional African folk-culture and mythology with contemporary elements of magic realism.

As Mda himself comments:

I write about the supernatural, but I don't present it as being problematic, in other words my characters take it for granted. In *She Plays with the Darkness*, for example, the characters are not surprised by the sudden appearance of the mist ... Things that seem to contradict the laws of reason, happen in my novels, even in my plays for that matter. They are put there as a matter of fact, as though they do not contradict empirical reality (Naidoo 1997:256).

Mda's ability to juxtapose reality with the supernatural or what could be termed the superreal, has enabled him to create novels that depict worlds of multiple realities during times of historical change. Ricoeur's hypothesis that "historical time is like a bridge thrown over the chasm which separates cosmic time from lived time" (1991:343) is worth considering with regard to Mda's depiction of time as a medium that can be transcended by the characters in his novels. In using magical realism to write his characters into the historical times from which they were excluded by the political process, Mda establishes links with other writers who have also used this mode. South African literary works such as Modisane's *Blame Me on History* (1986), Mokgatle's *Autobiography of an Unknown South African* (1990), Naidoo's *Coolie Location* (1990) and Matshoba's *Call Me Not a Man* (1979), are but some of the texts that portray contesting versions of reality. The struggle between the individual and the forces of history is a major trope in magic realist texts. In a world where historical reality is constructed by language, the individual's only refuge, magic realist texts seem to imply, is in language itself. In Mda's novels language does not only mean the verbal and the written but includes mediums such as painting, dance, songs, handicrafts and even silence.

Mda's attempt at using magic realism to rewrite time and space and the consequent laws of cause and effect, is a substantial step in the creation of novels that affirm the functioning of language in eliding binary oppositions such as self/other, male/female, centre/periphery, white/black, privileged/ underprivileged or magic/reality. While all these issues are interrogated in his novels, they point to the absurdity of life in a world where reality and the supernatural are constructs of

individual and group perceptions. If the carnivalesque and the apocalyptic are merely mirror images of each other, as I have argued earlier, then the supernatural and the real in *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) and other magic realist texts are the means of transcending the forces of history at a particular moment of time. These texts are consistent with Nietzsche's notion of the power inherent in the combination of the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of creativity, and the fusion of opposites.

*Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) are not only hybridised forms of magic realism, but are also texts that reflect a syncreticism of Mda's unique use of the magic related to the African situation, and those elements of magic realism peculiar to texts that have emerged mainly from "third world" contexts. In this *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b) affirm Cooper's claim that: "A syncreticism between paradoxical dimensions of life and death, historical reality and magic, science and religion, characterizes the plots, themes and narrative structures of magic realist novels" (1998:32).

In Mda's novels, *Ways of Dying* (1995a) and *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995b), as we have seen, shares with a number of texts discussed above, narrative structures, character types, thematic concerns and topoi that point to the fact that both novels have been constructed in the magic realist mode.

Writing magic realism has enabled Mda to play god. A role that a writer who finds himself in an absurd world, constructed by language, evidently does not find strange. As he himself asserts:

I will continue to use magic realism and I will continue to be as innovative as I have always tried to be. I will attempt to bring other elements of magic realism into my novel as I think of them. Perhaps it might even be a different type of magic realism from the one I am using now in my novels. But the fact is I will still be writing, I will be creating different types of works, novels mainly, and perhaps even the occasional play. I don't see myself as a playwright anymore, I see myself as a novelist (Naidoo 1997:257).

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