

## Original Article

### Experiments of Power in Zakes Mda's Ways of Dying

Shankar Haibati Bhoir

Research Student at Shivaji University, Kolhapur, GES's HPT Arts and RYK Science College, Nashik

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#### Abstract:

One of the most important post-apartheids South African books is *Ways of Dying* (1995). The book examines how power functions in political institutions, social structures, communities, and interpersonal interactions. It is set during the transition from apartheid to democracy. Through the experiences of Noria, a strong survivor, and Toloki, a professional mourner, Zakes Mda shows that power can take many different forms, including political, economic, cultural, gendered, and psychological. The book reveals how the fight against apartheid did not instantly end oppression; rather, new kinds of power arose in local communities. This paper analyzes Mda's power experiments and makes the case that the book depicts power as a dynamic force capable of both empowering and destroying human lives. Mda challenges violence and dominance while imagining opportunities for recovery, resiliency, and reconstruction through humor, symbolism, collective storytelling, and magical realism.

**Keywords:** Power, Apartheid, Post-Apartheid South Africa, Violence, Resistance

#### Introduction

Power, oppression, and resistance have all been major themes in South African literature. *Ways of Dying*, written during the nation's transition from apartheid to democracy, depicts a society undergoing social change and political unpredictability. The book depicts the daily lives of common people who, despite the end of apartheid, nonetheless endure poverty, violence, and displacement. Mda examines how power operates in society and how people react to it using these experiences. In the book, power is not limited to the authority of the state. People's lives are influenced by economic systems, social standards, patriarchal customs, political institutions, and local leaders. Mda illustrates how power is frequently contested and dispersed rather than concentrated. As a result, the book turns into an investigation into how power functions in times of historical change. According to academics, the book challenges if political freedom inevitably results in social justice, exposes ongoing systemic violence, and criticizes liberation politics.

#### Political and Historical Background:

*Ways of Dying* takes place amid the last years of apartheid and the beginning of South Africa's democratic transition. Violence persisted despite the end of apartheid. Ordinary residents were nevertheless impacted by social unrest, economic disparity, and political disputes among black groups. By emphasizing the fatalities and suffering endured by marginalized people, Mda contradicts the conventional narrative of a smooth transition. (ResearchGate) The book shows that when politics change, power does not just vanish. Rather, it alternates between different forms. Individuals fight for survival in unfair social arrangements, political groups vie for influence, and local leaders for power. The complexity of power in a society trying to remake itself is made clear by Mda's portrayal of transitional South Africa. (icla.openjournals.ge)

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#### Address for correspondence:

Shankar Haibati Bhoir, Research Student at Shivaji University, Kolhapur, GES's HPT Arts and RYK Science College, Nashik

Email: [harshalee617@gmail.com](mailto:harshalee617@gmail.com)

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### **The Violence and Political Power:**

Political violence is one of the novel's main power experiments. The story shows many deaths brought on by rivalries within the community and factional wars. Mda also highlights violence in black communities, even if apartheid is still a fundamental source of social unrest.

The book questions oversimplified divisions between oppressors and victims. People in the community frequently engage in violent acts against one another. Mda implies through these depictions that even people who have personally been oppressed can become corrupted by power. New types of misery and victimization are brought about by the fight for political control. (icla.openjournals.ge)

Ideological rhetoric is a common tool used by political leaders to defend violence. Common people are used as tools in more significant political conflicts. The fatalities that Toloki laments highlight the discrepancy between political goals and socioeconomic realities and represent the human cost of power battles.

### **Power and the Marginalization of Common People:**

Instead of focusing on political elites, Mda's story emphasizes common people. His worry about the impact of power on daily life is reflected in this emphasis. The main character, Toloki, is a social outcast. He makes a living as a professional mourner by going to funerals and openly lamenting the deceased.

Toloki's line of work represents opposition to the invisibility that prevailing power structures impose. He gives common people their dignity back by lamenting victims whose deaths could otherwise go unnoticed. His art questions official narratives that highlight political advancement while downplaying continued hardship. According to academics, Mda's focus on commonplace experiences is an intentional attempt to reclaim the voices of underrepresented groups. (KCI)

As a result, the book turns grieving into a political act. Respecting the deceased turns becomes a means of opposing power structures that want to obliterate uncomfortable pasts.

### **Social Inequality and Economic Power:**

Another significant aspect of power in *Ways of Dying* is economic disparity. Numerous characters reside in impoverished, jobless, and unstable informal communities. Large portions of the population continue to face difficult economic circumstances notwithstanding political shifts.

Mda depicts poverty as a tool of power. While the impoverished are still at risk of exploitation and violence, those in charge of resources have considerable influence. The book

makes the argument that social inequality cannot be completely resolved by political liberty in the absence of economic change. (Penn State) Unequal power relations are reflected in the urban environment itself. Informal settlements represent being shut out of social and economic prospects. Every day, locals fight to obtain needs, illustrating how economic power affects human lives.

### **Patriarchy and Gender Power:**

The novel's gender interactions highlight yet another significant power experiment. Patriarchal customs restrict women's autonomy while giving men power. Marginalization, brutality, and exploitation are common experiences for female protagonists.

But Mda also uses the character of Noria to question established gender norms. Noria exhibits fortitude, inventiveness, and emotional fortitude in contrast to many male characters who get caught in violent and frustrating cycles. She appears as a symbol of rebirth and optimism.

By highlighting its flaws and inconsistencies, the book criticizes patriarchal authority. The experiences of women demonstrate how gender injustice endures even in liberation movements that purport to advance equality and freedom. Mda challenges male authority and emphasizes women's potential for leadership and self-determination, according to critics. (Online, Taylor & Francis)

### **Toloki's Symbolic Power:**

One of Mda's most inventive examinations of power is found in Toloki's function as a professional mourner. Despite his lack of economic or political clout, he has symbolic power. His capacity to grieve in public makes sadness a shared experience.

Toloki helps communities deal with pain and grief by acting as a cultural mediator. He establishes venues for group healing through his performances. His strength comes from compassion and empathy rather than dominance.

The violence and coercion used by political players stand in stark contrast to this alternative concept of power. Mda contends that moral and emotional strength, not coercion, is necessary for true social change. As a result, Toloki's persona represents a humanistic ideal of leadership founded on compassion and unity.

### **The Power of Memory and Mourning:**

The novel's examination of power heavily relies on memory. Official political narratives frequently urge countries to advance without adequately addressing historical injustices. Mda emphasizes recollection in order to counteract this inclination.

In the book, grieving is portrayed as a form of resistance to forgetting. Communities perpetuate memories of violence and suffering through rituals, myths, and celebrations. According to academics, Mda believes that memory is crucial for societal healing and reconciliation. (KCI)

Thus, control over historical narratives is linked to power. Collective identity is shaped by those who decide what is remembered and what is forgotten. The book challenges prevailing historical narratives and strengthens underprivileged groups by resurrecting repressed memories.

#### **Collective Resistance and Community Power:**

The book emphasizes the beneficial power of community while also exposing harmful kinds of power. In times of difficulty, characters often band together to assist one another. Bonds that cut across political divides are formed by shared experiences of suffering.

Collective grief, storytelling, and community rituals are strategies of resistance. In the face of injustice and violence, these techniques allow people to reclaim agency. Mda presents community as a source of resiliency and optimism rather than as a flawless institution.

The book makes the argument that power can be used cooperatively as opposed to hierarchically. An alternative to authoritarian conceptions of social structure and leadership is collective action.

#### **Narrative Strategies and Power Representation:**

Mda's examination of power is greatly aided by his narrative approach. The book makes use of symbolism, humour, communal narrative, and aspects of magical realism. These methods cast doubt on traditional depictions of historical truth and authority. (Wikipedia)

Instead of reflecting individual authority, the collective narrative voice represents communal viewpoints. The ridiculousness of power is revealed through satirical portrayals of governmental figures. Symbolic imagery turns everyday occurrences into more comprehensive analyses of societal circumstances. By using these literary devices, Mda challenges readers' preconceived notions of expertise and authority.

#### **Conclusion:**

Ways of Dying by Zakes Mda provides a thorough analysis of power in South Africa during the transition. The book illustrates how political institutions, economic structures, gender dynamics, cultural customs, and historical narratives all play a role in the exercise of power. Mda highlights the shortcomings of official narratives of independence and advancement by concentrating on the realities of common people.

Redefining power is the novel's main experiment. Alternative kinds of power arise via memory, grief, community, and compassion, whereas political and economic power frequently results in violence and exclusion. Characters like Toloki and Noria serve as examples of how empathy, fortitude, and group effort may be used to oppose dominance. In the end, Ways of Dying makes the case that more than just political reform is needed for true transformation. It calls for a rethinking of power itself, moving away from dominance and toward human solidarity, justice, and healing.

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#### **Conflicts of interest**

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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