

South African Crime Fiction: The Philosophical Imports of Death in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*

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Received: 28/10/2023

Accepted:07/03/2024

Published:24/04/2024

المخلص : تقدم هذه الورقة نظرة شاملة لروايات الجريمة في جنوب أفريقيا فيما يتعلق بفلسفة الموت. وفي الواقع، أحدث التحول من الفصل العنصري إلى الاستقلال في جنوب أفريقيا تغيرات ملحوظة على المستوى الاجتماعي مثل زيادة الجرائم والوفيات. في "طرق الموت" لزاكيس مدا، تولوكي، الشخصية الرئيسية، هو حداد محترف يتمتع بأسلوب حياة منسوب إلى نفسه ومكرس لفهم العلاقة بين الحياة والموت. انطلاقاً من هذه المصادقية، هناك حاجة إلى معرفة المضمون الفلسفي للقصة وصلتها بفلسفة الموت باعتبارها تحقيقاً وجودياً. تشير هذه الورقة إلى نظام خفي من القيم والمقاييس التي أنشأها تولوكي والتي قادت إلى الفلسفة حول الموت. ومن المثير للاهتمام أن أسلوب تولوكي في التفكير هو في الواقع مزيج من الفلسفات، فهو في جزء منه هايدجري، ولوبيري، وأبيقوري.

الكلمات المفتاحية: رواية الجريمة؛ وجودية؛ فلسفة الموت؛ جنوب أفريقيا؛ قيم.

Abstract:

This paper offers a holistic view of South African crime fiction in connection to the Philosophy of Death. In fact, the transition from apartheid to independence, in South Africa, brought about noticeable changes at the social level such as an increase in crimes and deaths. In Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*, Toloki, the main character, is a professional mourner with a self-ascribed lifestyle dedicated to understanding the relationship between life and death. Given this credence, there is a need to find out the story's philosophical imports and their relevance to the Philosophy of Death as an existential inquiry. This paper points out a hidden system of values and metrics established by Toloki that led him to philosophize about death. Intriguingly, Toloki's reasoning style is in reality a medley of philosophies – it is part Heideggerian, Luperian, and Epicurean.

Keywords: Crime Fiction; Existential; Philosophy of Death; South Africa; Values.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Life and death are two gates by which we, living creatures, enter and leave this existence. Life and Death are existential phenomena that provoked countless debates being two certainties in this world. Artists express themselves through paintings and writings; whereas scientists manipulate numbers and figures to decipher these existential matters. In this spirit, this paper offers holistic view of the Philosophy of Death in South African Crime Fiction. The main focus of this study is not the original formulations of philosophers but rather their philosophical imports in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*. Philosophers are above all human beings who have concerns and worries. However, the specificity that distinguishes them from the mainstream is their ability to define what has not been defined or thought about yet. They are the ones who are able to see through earthly riddles and remove barriers from the way of science. Many philosophers wrote about death such as Martin Heidegger, Steven Luper, and Epicurus, among others. In *Ways of Dying*, Toloki, the main character of the novel, acts like a growing philosopher who seeks knowledge through a self-ascribed atypical life style. Humbling experiences like living in the streets, mourning, wandering and thinking about the ways of living and dying are part of Toloki's ambition to connect with his higher self and become a better version of himself.

The present article is structured as follows: in the opening part, death will be briefly defined using a sample of three philosophers as references. In the next part, the researcher will explain the research roadmap followed by an attempt to interpret the novel cover page as a literary twilight zone. Finally, the closing part of the article encompasses the main tenets of the resulting mixture of philosophies which may be called arbitrarily the 'philosophical-medley'.

2. A Holistic Overview of the Philosophy of Death

Death is finality; dying, however, remains a mystery. It has always triggered artists, psychics, thinkers and scientists' curiosity. As Michel de Montaigne put it, "we drag everything with us." (159)¹. In this part, the researcher explains the philosophical medley of death from the three following perspectives:

First of all, Heidegger approaches death as a trilateral figure. He argued that it is own-most, non-relational and not-to-be-outstripped. Death is own-most because we own it, it is non-relational because we experience it alone and we cannot share it, and it is not-to-be outstripped for being an inevitable outcome (Diane Zorn 11). Henceforth, Steven Luper arguably depicts death in his essay "Annihilation" as a misfortune that would hinder our potential desire for wish-fulfillment (Luper-Foy 2) even though death can be equally a liberation from any kind of affliction like sickness.

Jeremy R. Simon is an associate professor at Columbia University and he discussed through his articles the various perspectives from which some philosophers perceive death. For example, Epicurus approached death from a time-oriented perspective (Simon) (10). Epicurus claimed that the shift from life to death is a shift from a state of existence to a state of non-existence in the material world, an annihilation — a conversion of matter into energy (Jones 2). That alone opens a breach between life and death, and this breach renders death harmless. Interestingly still, he claimed that our ways of living are our ways of dying; thus, he associates the art of living well with the art of dying well.

In sum, this trio of philosophers have their own ways of defining the paradigm of death, however, all of them agree upon the importance of time. Heidegger defines it geometrically, Luper perceives it pragmatically, and Epicurus spiritually.

2.1 Scope of the study and research apparatus

Compellingly, humans are complex creatures that coexist in a social ecosystem resulting in a constellation of contradictions whether it is kinesthetic, psychological or social. Henceforth, the qualitative methods will enable the researcher to identify intangible factors such as social norms and socioeconomic status, etc. In connection to the context of the study, it helps understanding the story's social context and phenomena taking into account Toloki's circumstances and background. Consequently, the greatest objective of this study is to figure out what motivated Toloki, the main character of the novel, to become a professional mourner? What justifies his strong relationship with death? And most importantly, how did he manage to blend three philosophers' stand points in one tenet?

Existential values are individual; they respond to external and internal factors. Consequently, any change of belief is the result of a change in the values hierarchy which is in fact our life lessons' in-put. Therefore, this could be the reason behind Toloki's ability to connect three seemingly independent philosophies.

As for the research apparatus, Hyperbase is an AI based workmap (aka Data Base Management System). It offers researchers the possibility of analyzing large corpuses expeditiously and effectively. The application executes in-text word searches, analyzes themes, and sets words distributions, among other options. The results display in a form of graph supported by a table of co-occurrences which facilitates immensely the monitoring of words repetitions in the novel.

2.2 Psychoanalytical criticism: A multidimensional approach

Psychoanalytical criticism focuses on the language as a psychic process that is artificially constructed (11). Thus, the researcher will clarify the process in the following part of this article. The qualitative research method chosen for this study is based on investigation. Firstly, its fundamental role is answering research questions using a systematic set of predefined procedures to ensure the problem solving. Secondly, it collects evidence to produce results that were not predetermined and that are applicable beyond the immediate boundaries of the study. Thirdly, it seeks to observe and interpret the research problem. In this case, this research aims at providing a holistic description of South African crime fiction across a psychoanalytical reading. Importantly still, the qualitative method will facilitate the collection of data in regard to the characters' childhood, culture, social context, events, among other elements prone to be psychoanalyzed. (3)

3. Results

3.1 The literary twilight zone: analyzing the cover artwork

First, the book is entitled *Ways of Dying*. In English language, "Way" signifies a route, a direction or a path (Online Cambridge Dictionary). Combined together, ways of dying refer to the numerous possibilities of exiting life. Indeed, death is a certainty, thus, it is a reality. Death is also rebirth and new beginnings as it is mentioned in the three monotheistic religions (i.e. Judaism, Christianity and Islam) besides other cultures and philosophies.

Secondly, the cover picture presents an interesting combination of colors namely blue, black, white, and yellow. The color blue is predominant on the cover picture, the latter has primarily represented hope ("Colors in Christianity - Google Arts & Culture"). On that note, it represents stability, an aspect of life that is, in some way, missing in Toloki's life.

Black, however, epitomizes mystery, power but also sadness and anger. Curiously enough, the mourner is wearing a cape and a hat; both carry for the most part thick layers of blue and black in addition to streaks of yellow and white. A contrario, the yellow color in psychology, denotes happiness, hope, clarity, loyalty, honor, and remembrance on the one hand, and cowardice and deceit on the other. This controversy serves two points that recall the dark side of society. Nevertheless, white suggests peacefulness, purity, cleanliness; though it is symbolically linked to death and sadness in some cases.

Thirdly, at the center, there are three different types of flowers; a red rose, a yellow daffodil, and a blue sunflower shining from the mourner's chest. The trio of flowers could symbolize Christianity since three (3) appoints trinity; the Father (i.e. the source), the Son (i.e. the representation of God in a human form) and the Holy Spirit (i.e. life-force). Into the bargain, each type of color could, equivocally, carry distinct meanings. For example, the red rose is the epitome of romance, love, beauty but also courage. Besides, the daffodils came contrasting the mournful title with an ideogram of rebirth and new beginnings desired by Toloki. Similarly, the blue sun-flower channels meanings of loyalty, adoration and hope. Conclusively, this trio of flowers walks along the avenues of hope, love and peace; elements that were missing at that time -during the apartheid era- and that come across as concealed inside the mourner's chest.

Fourth, Toloki's posture and attire suggest more than they show with the surrounding background elements. His body is surrounded by bewildering scriptures besides a kafkaesque background where distinguishable bodies and sad faces are seemingly floating around disturbingly. The scriptures, the floating bodies and sad faces levitating in the sky are, in fact, an allegory of the post-apartheid status quo in South Africa. Apart from that, Toloki being crossed legged, sad looking with a fading mask falling off his face, breathes bleakness and restlessness. Furthermore, the big left hand, however, seems too heavy for him to carry.

This could be another allegory of the difficulty of writing and publishing during apartheid knowing that only a few south african writers were allowed to publish.

Following the debate on philosophy, the psychoanalytical work was greatly supported and facilitated by the big amount of absolute threshold level (ATL) messages on the book cover. On that account, the novel's big picture displays a significant amount of introspection, ambivalence, dark humor revealed through the description of xenophobic crime scenes fused with a constant focus on death and most importantly biblical symbolism.

3.2 Toloki's Philosophy of Death: Values and Metrics

For reference, values are "... internalized cognitive structures that guide choices by evoking a sense of basic principles of right and wrong...a sense of priorities...and create willingness to create meaning and see patterns." (Oyserman 1). As for the metrics, it is a scale or a system used unconsciously by individuals to judge life. Find Toloki's values hierarchy and metrics below.

In connection with the book cover, *Ways of Dying* is the story of a sad young black boy who lived in a rural area very far from the city of Cape Town. This young boy had an abusive relationship with his father Jwara who used to belittle and compare him all the time to the other children of the village, notably to Noria. Noria and Toloki went to the same school in the village, and she was known for her pleasing voice; especially her laughter. The latter was so pleasing to hear that all the children of the village used to volunteer to make funny faces just to make her laugh. Toloki, being constantly brought down by his father, was admittedly jealous of her and started bottling up negative emotions, for he had toxic narratives. Toloki's father was superstitious. He had a workshop where he used to spend all his time religiously sculpting figurines of deities he dreams of every night. Noria, on the other

hand, was his little assistant; her role was singing while he was working. According to Jwara, Noria's beautiful voice helped him remember his dreams and so design his divine figurines with more ease and precision. He felt it was a duty and Noria was helping him achieve this wish fulfillment. On the other hand, Toloki's mother used to argue a lot with his father about Noria because she could not condone the fact that a father could treat his descendent this way – being harsh to his own son and sweet to Noria, his friend's daughter. Toloki was in fact an artist. He loved drawing still lifes which many of his classmates found beautiful including Noria. Despite all this recognition, he was still seeking his father's seemingly inaccessible emotional validation for long years.

A few years later, all the children grew to become young adults. Some of them left the village to go to the city and Toloki was one of them. Henceforth, Toloki left the village out of necessity after getting physically abused by his father after a violent fight. It was the ultimate fight that made him consider this big decision – that is leaving the village in silence. He walked a very long distance before arriving to the city. He was so full of turmoil and anger that he kept walking till he reached the city to become a professional mourner. At that time, death was striking everyday at anytime, and anywhere. He was not just mourning the dead and sharing their families' sorrow. He was fascinated by the ways of living and dying. Interestingly enough, Toloki's attachment to death was deeply rooted into his childhood and early adolescence— his father's hostility, the last dispute that almost killed him, the physical pain he went through during his long walk to the city, and the shocking stories of racial crimes he had heard from his co-workers at the mill house where he worked for a few days when he was on his way to the city and last but not least his experience while he was working for his father's friend, Nefolovhodwe, the creator of De Luxe coffins. Despite his lack of humility and empathy for Toloki, he helped him discover his hidden gift by telling him "your face is a constant reminder that we are all going to die one day." (Mda 100) After

getting fired by Nefolovhodwe, he went through a long period of introspection that made him discover his hidden gift that is mourning at funerals. He was not doing it for the thrill but rather out of need for financial security. On a happy note, this new vocation made Toloki become a better person.

Toloki's values and metrics breathe philosophy of death as it came into his words: "I cannot stop mourning, Noria. Death continues everyday. Death becomes me, it is a part of me." (Mda 87) Indeed, Noria left the village to live in the city many years before Toloki. She married the man she loved, and they had a son together. The couple split, thus, she had to do many jobs to raise her only child who grew up to get married as well. Unfortunately, he ended up murdered by unknown people. His lifeless body was found in a parking lot by a security agent who called the police right after he saw the crime scene. The body was taken to the morgue without any proof of identity. Many families came to take back their corpses, and Noria's son was mistakenly taken by another family to be buried in another city. A lot happened in the meanwhile, thus, Noria arrived late at the morgue. Nevertheless, the staff informed her where the corpse was sent to be buried. Intriguingly, Toloki was called to mourn at the same funeral and he saw her arriving with men in the cemetery a few minutes before the burial. After a virulent negotiation between Noria, her relatives and the family that was insisting it was their corpse, the family accepted to open the coffin to confirm the corpse's identity. It appeared it was Noria's son that was in the coffin. When Toloki saw Noria, he had a *déjà-vu* feeling. The woman's voice and face were familiar to him. Still, Noria did not recognize him until he broached a conversation with her about the village and his childhood.

In physics, opposite charges attract each other, just like the mournful Toloki and the lively Noria as it came into her words: "Think seriously about it, Toloki. We must be together

because we can teach each other how to live. I like you because you know how to live. I can teach you other ways of living. Today you taught me how to walk in the garden. I want to walk in that garden with you everyday.” (Mda 87)

The essence of Toloki’s philosophy of death was markedly oxymoronic, epicurean and stoic. The main character, Toloki, believes that “our ways of living are our ways of dying”(Mda 250). The latter deductively constructed these beliefs based on the death stories he remembers from his childhood. When Toloki and Noria were younger, they were invited, among other children by their school, to sing in a choir for a political event in the city. Luckily, Toloki’s father intuitively refused to let him join his friends. After that, they got informed that a choir singer got killed by a stray bullet at that event. Noria was there and she reported that the young girl died with a smile on her face. Becoming a professional mourner was Toloki’s way of using the Alan Watts backward law in life (Watts) (11). This law works by reversing wants in life. For instance, if we want to live fully, we need to remember death, live by *amor fati* (aka. acceptance of faith), and be ready for it (Friedrich Nietzsche 19) (5). If we want everything we need to let go of everything. Again, opposites attract. Toloki had genuinely given up on earthly matters such as love, yet he found Noria after years, they fell in love with each other in the end, and he has also found his path in life.

Despite the despairing circumstances such as the political disturbances in the country, Noria and Toloki’s values helped them find a way toward happiness. They found the way and the time to build a comfort zone (i.e.the shack that Toloki helped Noria building) where they could lie down, share food, and stare at the aesthetic brochures of gardens and beautiful houses he brought her from fancy furniture stores. Thanks to Toloki’s spiritual ascendance and all his experiences at the city, he was able to blend between philosophies in order to build his own middle ground between life and death.

Table 1. The distribution of the words ways and living in Zakes Mda’s Ways of Dying

Corpus	Frequency	Corpus	Size	Word
Frequency	Partition	Size	Partition	
16	5	149623	138	Ways
17	2	149623	138	Living
41	8	149623	717	Death

Source: Hyperbase online ²

The table above shows that the distribution of the words ways and dying are frequently used by the author Zakes Mda in some parts of the novel. On the other hand, the graphs enclosed in the appendices display in a more illustrative manner the key-words of the novel; i.e., living, dying, death.

4. CONCLUSION

Returning to the questions posed at the beginning of this study, it is now possible to state that Toloki succeeded in applying the backward law in his life in founding his own philosophy of death across an intense hope crisis by examining his own ideas, thoughts and feelings. Given this premise, the professional mourner, Toloki, found love at the moment and at the place he expected it the least despite the turbulence Cape Town was going through in the story and the hope crisis he was experiencing – that is the essence of the backward law; living by oxymoronic goals and expectations. Emotion is a biological hydraulic system that influences our thoughts and actions. Although Toloki's system was shattered by his formerly mentioned trauma, it did not inhibit him from changing his metrics and values from caring excessively about earthly concerns such as seeking validation from his surroundings to a partial even a total disconnection from society. Wherefore, Toloki's philosophy was a combination of stoicism, oxymoronic logic, and a mixture of three philosophies defined in

the opening part of the paper. He exhibited his stoicism through his personal ethics vis-à-vis the natural aspects of life. Importantly, there is abundant room for further progress in determining the source of violence in South Africa presently. The story shows that violence in South Africa did not stem only from colonialism; however, it is also ideological it was rather a collective problem that arose from society itself and which deserves scholarly attention for future studies in the field.

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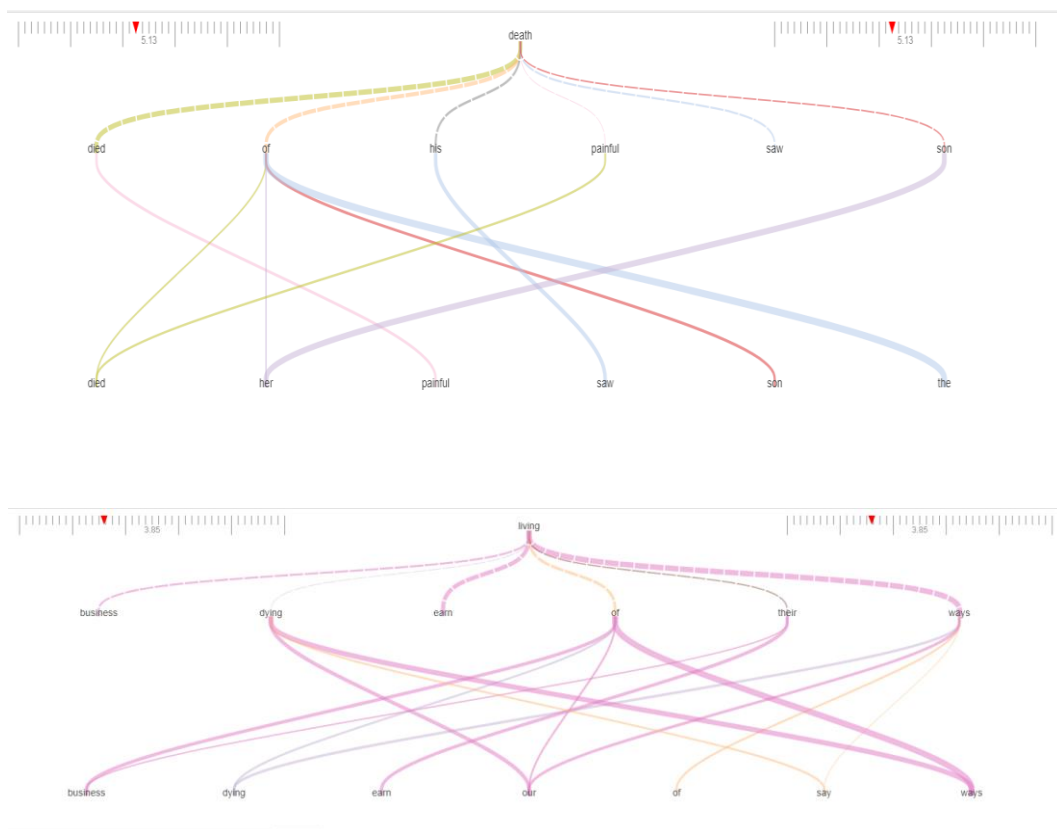
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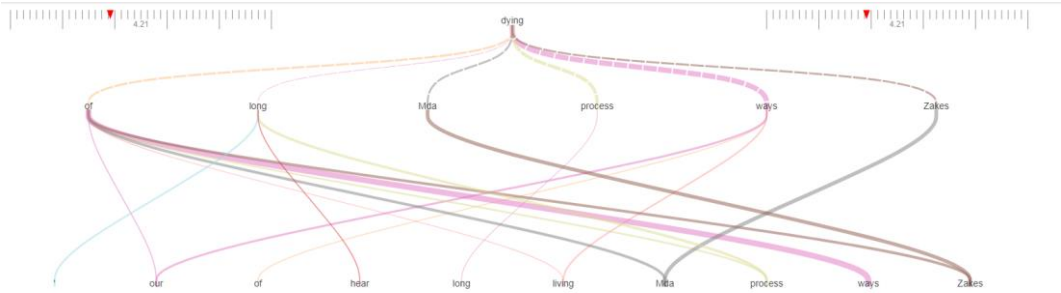
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6. Appendices

Appendix A.

Figure 1: Hyperbase data





Z-Score	Probability	Corpus Frequency	Frequency partition	Corpus size	Size partition	Mot
7.06	2.69e-12	16	5	149623	138	ways
5.46	4.28e-08	8	3	149623	138	process
4.73	1.88e-06	1536	10	149623	138	of
4.67	2.52e-06	3	2	149623	138	Zakes
4.67	2.52e-06	3	2	149623	138	Mda
4.21	2.16e-05	57	3	149623	138	long
3.88	9.23e-05	1524	8	149623	138	'
3.83	1.14e-04	17	2	149623	138	living

Appendix B.

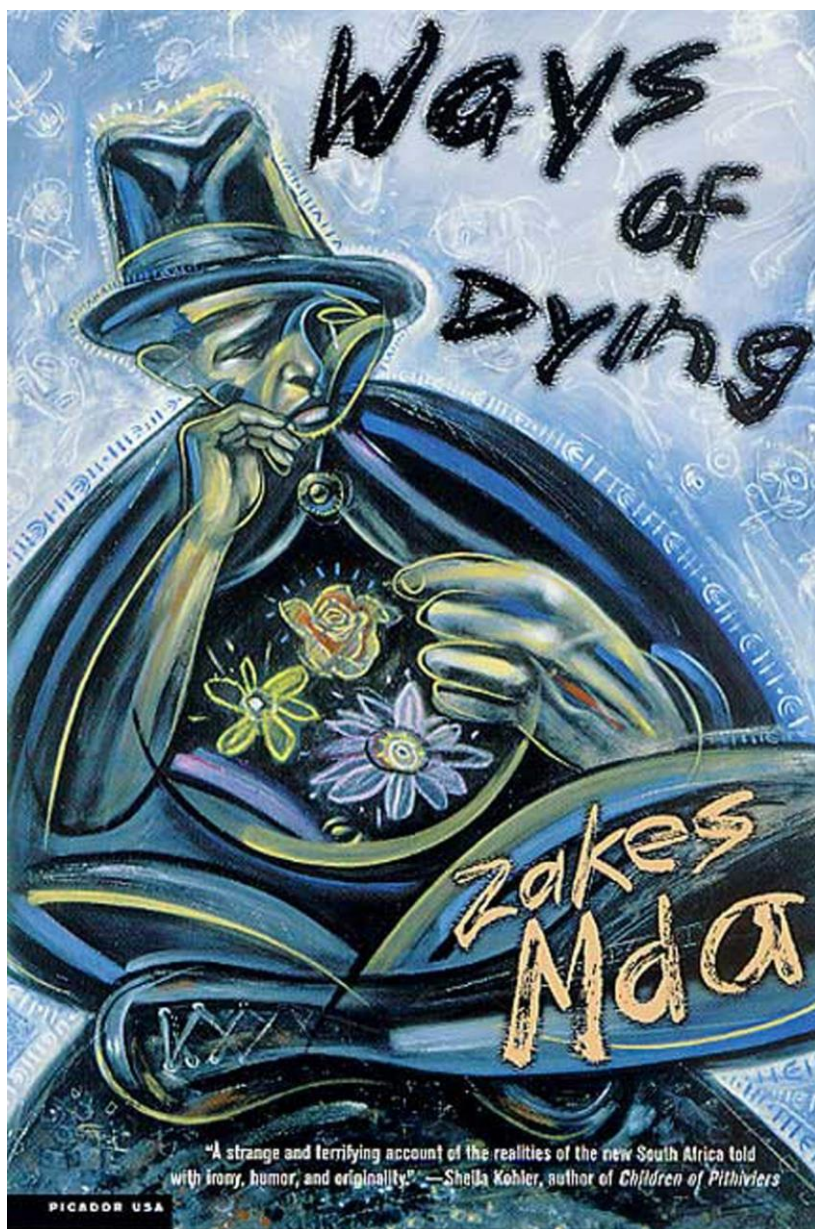


Figure 2 : The sample's novel cover picture

¹ The researcher's translation of : « Nous entraînons tout avec nous ».

² Lexicometry online app : <http://hyperbase.unice.fr/>