1. Toloki has invented the profession of the professional mourner along with stringent rules of habit and spiritual involvement (17, 51). Toloki considers his role to be integral to the mourning process and has created a “dialogue” of mourning, complete with movements, sound effects and a costume. Due to the professional nature that Toloki assumes, he intends to establish a payment schedule and a list of prices for his services. This concept comes across as comical. What kind of commentary is Mda offering regarding the payment of professional services in general and for the professional mourner?

2. Mda frequently refers to death in living terms. We are “all victims of the raging war consuming our lives. ‘I tell you, mothers and fathers, thee is death out there. Soon we shall experience the death of birth itself if we go on at this rate’” (20). “‘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?’ ‘It works both ways’” (98). What does the intricate connection between life and death mean?

3. Toloki survives on funerals: “’As long as there are funerals, I’ll survive.’ Shadrack laughs. ‘How do people survive on funerals?’ he wants to know. Toloki explains to him, and also for Noria’s benefit, the intricacies of his vocation. ‘Oh, so that is how it works? I have never been to a funeral where there is a Professional Mourner,’ … ‘I did not know of your profession, Toloki. Homeboys and homegirls say you work as a beggar in the city, and you go to funerals to mooch food off the beveaved.’” (53-4). And yet at the same time, Toloki is afraid of death and being killed on the trains (98). Discuss the irony of his profession and of his own fears of dying.

4. Death and dying take on many characteristics and seem to represent many things. Discuss the varying perceptions of death.

5. Noria is often referred to as powerful. In what ways does she have power and in what ways is her power not effective?
   a. Giving pleasure (72)
   b. Laughter: Noria’s power to heal troubled souls (95)
   c. Noria created peace in Toloki’s family (102)….or did she?
   d. Power over Toloki (148)
   e. As muse to both Jwara and Toloki

6. Because of his removed status from society, Toloki seems to offer a perspective of who has the power in the political system along with a vision of the solution: “I believe the salvation of the settlement lies in the hands of women” (176). Are Toloki’s perspectives accurate? What does Mda tell us about the political situation in South Africa?

7. What does this novel tell us about the roles of men and women in South African society?

8. “He [Toloki] attributes his keen sense of observation to the fact that he has not lived with other human beings for many years. He therefore sees things with a fresh eye” (176). Is Toloki a reliable storyteller? Can we understand his perspectives as the truth? Is Toloki a fresh observer or is his perception of reality skewed by his status in society?
   a. Ethnicity exploited by tribal chief (55)
   b. Factional violence (56)
   c. Black/White relationship, Whites “playing” with Blacks (64-5)
   d. Noria as entertainer of white men (89)
   e. Ethnic group violence (97)
   f. Violence on trainx by gangsters (98)
   g. Police corruption (140)

10. There are a number of instances in which truth seems to be stretched and elements of magical realism are introduced. What are those instances and what do these elements mean for the story and for the history that is being told?
   a. Jwara’s ability to create while Noria sings
   b. Noria’s pregnancies lasting for 15 months each
   c. Noria’s mysterious second pregnancy and The Second Vutha
   d. Noria and Toloki’s walk in the garden
   e. Toloki’s ability to draw human figures while Noria sings
   f. Jwara’s haunting of Nefolovhodwe
   g. The mysterious death of Nefolovhodwe’s fleas
   h. Glow of the figurines from Noria and Toloki’s shack

11. Toloki often mentions that Noria teaches him new ways of living? Noria comments that she is learning as well from Toloki. What new ways of living do each learn? What does co-habitation and shared living offer each of them?
   a. Noria makes Toloki wash himself everyday- he earns greater respect from people and people don’t mind being near him since he does not smell.
   b. Learning new ways of living (192)
   c. Noria is able to escape through Toloki’s garden
   d. Noria likes to each Toloki’s diet of a professional mourner (swiss roll and green onion) (211)

12. What does home mean? How do people live and what does the construct of the house represent?
   a. Mansions in the suburbs
   b. Toloki living in waiting rooms (116-7)
   c. Townships versus settlements
   d. Hostels
   e. Shacks
   f. Noria’s colorful shack
   g. Homeboy and homegirl

13. Discuss the role of the family in the novel. What are the roles of the mothers, fathers, husbands, wives and children? What familial expectations exist? How do relationships among family members affect future actions?
   a. Toloki desires attention from Jwara, wants to be an artist like him, creativity and colors (68)