

THE FLASH-BACK AND THE FLASH-FORWARD TECHNIQUES IN NDEBELE NOVELS

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Abstract

This article examines how Ndebele fiction employs the flash-back and flash-forward techniques. It observes that use of letters, old pictures and unplanned meeting of old friends are the common tools of flash-back while dreams, omens and superstitions are used for flash-forward. It also evaluates the effectiveness of these techniques by examining a number of Ndebele novels and concludes by stating that it is important for the reader to have knowledge of Ndebele culture in order to gain access to the meaning of the various incidents communicated through those techniques.

It is generally accepted that the effectiveness of a novel in communicating its author's subject matter and theme depends on the literary techniques that the author uses. Writers select their literary techniques with the hope that the techniques will help to give life to their subject matter and communicate their theme to their readers effectively. This article examines the literary techniques of flash-back and flash-forward as they manifest themselves in selected siNdebele novels. It discusses the various forms these techniques take in siNdebele literature and evaluates their effectiveness in communicating their author's subject matter and themes.

The flash-back and flash-forward techniques have been discussed extensively by many critics and it will suffice here to refer to two definitions of these techniques in order to place the subsequent discussion in its proper perspective. The intention is not to elaborate on these techniques and make new discoveries, but rather it is to focus on how these techniques are used by siNdebele writers. The article will also evaluate the extent of the effectiveness of these techniques in their application in siNdebele literature.

We can define flash-back as "an interruption in the continuity of a story by presentation of some earlier episode". Outside literature, "flash-back" may refer to a vivid memory of some past incident. The flash-back technique in novels is based on this idea of a vivid memory. The technique further enables the writer to provide the reader or audience with background information that appears not to be part of the story that is being told, but is considered essential by the writer for the understanding of the meaning of the story.

According to Richard Taylor,

If an episode from a distant and seemingly unrelated past is introduced as though it were happening in a present time (a time machine or flash-back so called), it is to give some relevant information as to character formation or motive on the one hand or to focus attention towards a resulting pattern of ideas on the other hand.¹

Thus, the flash-back technique is used for specific purposes in narratives, one of which is to help readers appreciate events in the unfolding story in a more enlightened way because they have been supplied with the relevant background information.

Flash-forward, on the other hand, casts the readers' eyes into the future and provides brief glimpses into what is going to happen. Flash-forward is, thus, the opposite of flash-back and can be defined as an interruption in the continuity of a story by presentation of some future episodes. As a literary technique, flash-forward, like flash-back, is introduced to provide subtle hints to the reader on the outcome of either the whole story or of an episode as a way of enhancing the reader's curiosity and the story's suspense. The two techniques will now be examined with respect to their use by Ndebele novelists.

FLASH-BACK

The study discusses three common forms of flash-back found in many Ndebele novels. These are: (a) the use of an event to bring back vivid memories of past events, for example when one character mentions the name of an old friend; (b) the use of old pictures which remind a character of the good old days and (c) the use of old letters that a character comes across, which refer to a specific event or events in the past.

The use of an event to trigger old memories is very popular with some Ndebele novelists. For example, in her novel, *Impilo Yinkinga*, Makhalisa (1983) introduces her central character, Ngonyama, at a time when the character is experiencing serious conflicts with his wife over a child that Ngonyama had just brought home, after the child had been dumped by its father at the school where Ngonyama is headmaster. Ngonyama's wife, Mamsie, shows no respect to her husband and does not seem to appreciate what Ngonyama has done for the child. As a result, Ngonyama finds it difficult to sleep that night and questions why he married such a woman. He muses:

¹ Richard Taylor (1981) *Understanding the Elements of Literature* (Macmillan Press), 50-51.

*Kanti kwakutheni aze akhethe kubi kangaka? Yamthatha ingqondo yakhe yamuthi qithi kuloya nyuka ka 1963, beqala ukwazana, okwathi uphela njalo sebethethene. UMamsie wayekade ebambele esikolo...*²

(But what led him to such a bad choice? His thoughts took him to the year 1963 when he first met this woman, the meeting that resulted in their marriage by the end of that year. Mamsie was standing in for someone at the school...)

Through Ngonyama's reminiscences of the past, the reader is afforded the opportunity to learn details about Mamsie's character and to evaluate Ngonyama's own character and personality. Makhalisa uses the technique several times in the novel to provide background information concerning the father of the abandoned child and the mother who had already died before the story begins.

Unfortunately, in *Impilo Yinkinga*, Makhalisa uses only this one form of flash-back, running the risk of producing a monotonous narrative, especially since all the past episodes come through the mind of the same character all the time, that of Ngonyama.

In contrast, Makhalisa varies her narrative techniques in her earlier work, *Umendo*. In this novel, we meet the central character, Gugu, as both her husband and mother-in-law abuse her. Gugu is experiencing financial hardships because her town-based husband stopped sending her any money and food, while her mother-in-law is not convinced that her son is no longer sending money to his wife. Instead, she believes that her daughter-in-law is deliberately hoarding the money and not sharing it with her, hence the conflict between them.

As a result, a fight nearly breaks out between them one evening. That night, Gugu cannot sleep, worrying about her problems. She then decides to pass the time by re-arranging things in her old suitcase. While she is doing this, she comes across an envelope containing photographs, one of which was of her school friend. As she looks at this picture, she says to herself:

*Ngabe lami ngangilobaba ofuna ngiphumelele, engathandi imali ngabe gingunesi njengoMusa.*³

(If I also had a father who wished me to succeed, who did not love money, I would be a nurse like Musa).

Thus, through Gugu's memories of her schooldays, triggered by her friend's photograph, the reader begins to understand Gugu's past and why she never became a trained professional woman. Once the photo

2 B. Makhalisa (1983) *Impilo Yinkinga* (Longman Zimbabwe, Harare). 17.

3 Makhalisa (1977) *Umendo* (Mambo Press, Gwelo). 16.

has evoked Gugu's old memories, the whole past opens up and the reader is able to re-live her experiences through her consciousness and learns, for instance, that Gugu was, at one time, in love with Thulani, who would have made a good husband for her. This technique demonstrates David Lodge's observation that:

Through time-shift, a narrative avoids presenting life as just one damn thing after another, and allows us to make connections of causality and irony between widely separated events. A shift of narrative focus back in time may change our interpretation of something which happened much later in the chronology of the story, but which we have already experienced as readers of the text.⁴

As the story unfolds, the writer changes her technique and introduces a letter written by a former schoolmate as a mechanism for providing details about past events. In the letter, the friend refers to Thulani, thus, helping the reader to confirm that Gugu made a wrong decision in the past by opting to marry Ndaba instead of Thulani. By this technique, the writer helps the reader understand the origins of Gugu's present predicament. Thus, by varying her narrative technique, Makhalisa succeeds in creating interest and excitement in her story.

Another Ndebele writer who uses this flash-back technique extensively is Hleza (1991) in his novel *Uyangisinda Lumhlaba*. In this novel, the main character, Noliwe, is given a lift in a car driven by an old schoolmate, Dingilizwe. Noliwe is greatly impressed by Dingilizwe's nice car and, in her excited comments about the car, she reminds Dingilizwe about his school days' ambitions. As Dingilizwe explains that he still has those ambitions, the writer brings in a time-shift and allows Noliwe's mind to slip back to their school days at Manama Secondary School, while the omniscient narrator says:

*Yasuka imicabango kaNoliwe yabuyela emuva.*⁵

(Noliwe's mind drifted back.)

At that point, the writer takes the reader back many years through Noliwe's memories. The writer achieves this through the use of an omniscient narrator and by permitting Noliwe to speak in that past episode. Thus, the reader is given an opportunity to assess the two characters by comparing and contrasting their present situation with what is revealed through the character's recollection of the past.

This is an effective way of giving necessary background information that a reader needs to enjoy the story, provided, of course, the technique

⁴ David Lodge (1992) *The Art of Fiction* (Penguin Books), 75.

⁵ E. S. K. Hleza (1991) *Uyangisinda Lumhlaba* (Mambo Press, Gweru), 9.

is not used too often. Unfortunately, Hleza uses the same technique several times in the novel, providing all background information through the reflections of either Noliwe or her mother. Varying the technique, as Makhalisa does in *Umendo*, would have made the narrative more interesting.

While it is easy to achieve flash-back in a third person narrative because the writer can easily shift focus from one character to another, it is not the same in the first person narrative. In this genre, the narrator has no easy access into the past of all the characters in the story. Furthermore, there are times when some characters in the narrative will not want their past to be known; yet, that information is vital to the reader if the reader is to interpret the story well. Such a situation is found in Sibanda's (1982) novel, *Kusempilweni*. In this novel, the reader needs to know more about Florence's past in order to compare and contrast her with Thembi, both of whom are in love with the same person, Paul; the narrator of the story.

The reader is already familiar with Thembi from the narrator, Thembi's former friend, and now lover. It is thus easy for the reader to make an assessment of Thembi's character from what the reader has seen and heard of her so far. Nevertheless, it is necessary that enough information be given to the reader about Paul's new lover, Florence. The writer has already tried to use one of the narrator's friends, Hakurotwi, but this technique was limited because the friend is not entirely objective, as he is also interested in Florence. Thus, the writer eventually resorts to what may be described as a well-conceived and rather artificial time-shift.

Sibanda allows the narrator, Paul, to take an afternoon siesta when his girlfriend Florence goes back to work. While Paul is enjoying his siesta, Florence returns to the house with a friend. As she looks at the apparently sleeping Paul, Florence remarks to her friend:

*Ulele, uphakathi kobuthongo. Angazi kumbe uphupha esekoBulawayo.*⁶

(He is asleep; he is in a deep sleep. Maybe he is dreaming of being in Bulawayo.)

Thus, convinced that her boyfriend was fast asleep, Florence feels free to talk about anything with her friend. In their conversation, they talk about their past as well as about their hopes for the future. This gives the reader the opportunity to know Florence's past, the background information that the reader needs in order to interpret the story correctly.

As has been demonstrated, the flash-back technique is employed by a number of Ndebele novelists and helps to provide information about

⁶ J. Sibanda (1982) *Kusempilweni* (Longman Zimbabwe, Harare), 78.

characters in the novels which would, otherwise, not be available and which enables the reader to interpret developments in the stories correctly.

FLASH-FORWARD

As already noted, Ndebele novelists also use the flash-forward technique. This study focuses on two forms of this technique. These are: (a) the flash-forward that uses dreams, and (b) the flash-forward that uses omens that are based on Ndebele culture.

Dreams that are used as part of the flash-forward technique in Ndebele novels can be classified into two categories: first, dreams in which the contents are so straightforward that any reader can interpret their meaning correctly and, second, dreams whose meaning is based on symbols in Ndebele culture and which can only be fully understood by readers who are familiar with the Ndebele belief system. For example, Ndebele people believe that a dream in which the dreamer dreams of eating meat, portends the arrival of bad news, namely, news of the death of a relative. Both forms of dreams feature frequently in Ndebele novels to provide the reader with hints about what is about to happen and so heighten the reader's interest in the story. If handled properly, the flash-forward technique based on dreams increases the suspense.

In his novel *USethi Ebukweni Bakhe*, Sigogo (1962) uses dreams to heighten the reader's expectations of what might happen when Ndlovu, one of the main characters in the novel, visits his brother who works as a labourer at a neighbouring farm. The night before Ndlovu sets off on his journey, members of the family have strange dreams. The following morning, one of them, Senzeni, narrates her dream and is greeted with laughter by the younger members of the family who find the dream funny. Their mother stops them at once and warns them that this is not a good dream. She says:

*Libi iphupho leli. Kukhombani ukubona ithunzi elimnyama elingaphetsheva komfula ongako libuye libonakale linguyihlo? Kasiphupho kodwa leli.*⁷

(This is a bad dream. What does it mean to see a dark object across such a big river and that object turns out to be your father? No, this is not just a dream.)

From her knowledge of the meaning of Ndebele symbols and analysis of the sequence of events in the dream, she is able to recognise that the dark object across the river that the daughter could not cross suggests

⁷ N. S. Sigogo (1962) *Usethi Ebukweni Bakhe* (Mambo Press, Gwelo), 50.

the world of the departed ones and that the dream is a warning of bad things to come. The mother's interpretation of the dream creates in the reader a sense of anticipation and suspense and heightens the reader's need to find out what happened to the character and how it happened. In the story, Ndlovu subsequently visits his brother, but during the visit, the brother poisons him and he dies in agony. Thus, it turns out that this is what Senzeni's dream had portended.

In the novel *Umendo*, the writer Makhalisa (1977) also uses a dream whose meaning depends on a close analysis of the events in the dream and in the story as a whole. As already noted, the background to the dream is Gugu's quarrel with her mother-in-law over money. When Gugu eventually falls asleep that night, she has a strange dream. She dreams of crossing a big river and, when she is in the middle of the river, she is attacked by crocodiles and tries to swim away from them. She then sees her husband and his friends standing on the banks of the river. When she calls out to her husband for help, he laughs at her. Gugu struggles alone until she sees someone else on the other side of the river who encourages her to try harder and offers to assist her. She is, however, not able to see who this person is, before she wakes up.

As this suggestive dream appears early in the novel, the reader becomes increasingly anxious to know whether there is going to be any link between the dream and what happens to the relationship with the central character, and her husband. The story ends with the break-up of the marriage and the beginning of a very close relationship between Gugu and former schoolmate, clearly, the helpful man in the dream whose face she could not identify.

A similar approach is also used in Ndlovu's novel (1959), *Inhlamvu ZaseNgodlweni*.⁸ One of the main characters, Mzondiwa, has a strange dream in which he is surrounded by dangerous wild animals. When his mother finds him in this predicament, she cries and blames Mzondiwa's father for all her son's problems. When the animals hear her cry, they laugh at her but, as they laugh, they are transformed into people. When Mzondiwa wakes up, he is anxious to know what the dream means and seeks his friend's advice. The friend, equally, blames Mzondiwa's father for not sending Mzondiwa to school.

Mzondiwa's dream becomes important in stimulating the reader to want to discover the outcome of the story. Is Mzondiwa's life going to end? Are the hardships going to be transformed into joy? The story ends with Mzondiwa escaping from Rhodesia and vowing to return to fight the colonial system. It thus ends on a hopeful note in which the reader is

8 E. M. Ndlovu (1959) *Inhlamvu ZaseNgodlweni* (Shuter and Shooter, Pietermaritzburg). 8.

made to feel that, perhaps, Mzondiwa will return better equipped to fight and triumph over the colonial regime. The dream can, thus, be seen as a hint of the joys that will come with Mzondiwa's victorious return.

The second type of dream, namely that which requires an understanding of Ndebele beliefs, does not feature in many Ndebele novels but some writers use it. An example is E. Hleza (1991) in *Uyangisinda Lumhlaba*. As already noted, with this type of dream, it is important for the reader to have some knowledge of specific Ndebele beliefs concerning the interpretation of dreams in order to understand its significance. In Hleza's novel, the story's main character wakes up earlier than usual one morning. The narrator explains the reason as follows:

*Into eyayimenza abe ekhangele liphupho ayesanda kuliphupha. Wayephuphe inyama emanzi igcwele umkulu wangakibo.*⁹

(He was awake so early because of the dream he had just dreamt. He dreamt seeing a lot of fresh meat in his parents' kitchen.)

In the Ndebele belief system, such a dream portends death. A reader with this knowledge would then quickly anticipate that this character is going to receive bad news. Without the knowledge of the Ndebele belief system, the dream may not appear significant. In the novel, the events anticipated by the dream unfold when the main character receives the news that robbers had killed his father.

The second type of flash-forward involves the use of omens. There are numerous omens that the Ndebele people use to interpret the various aspects of their lives. A reader of a siNdebele novel who has no knowledge of these omens will fail to appreciate the significance of an event or situation described. Sometimes, however, writers assist the reader who is not familiar with the culture to appreciate the significance of the omen by providing clues through the narrator or character. A case in point is the novel *Umuzi Kawakhiwa Kanye*, in which a character called Nsimbi has been proposing love to a certain girl. When they part company, Nsimbi secretly observes what the girl is doing before she rejoins her friends. In the narrator's words:

*Wayibona isima eduze kwesihlahla sogagu idonsa ugatsha oluncane. Ngemva kwalokho yaludabula phakathi lwathi thwe lwayofika ekucineni lungaqamukanga lwathi ngqe esiqwini sesihlahla. Yasuka lapho intombi isigijima ithabile isisiyatshela abanye ukuthi isibonile ngesihlahla ukuthi uNsimbi uqinisile ukuthi uthando lwakhe aluyikuqamuka.*¹⁰

9 Hleza, *Uyangisinda Lumhlaba*, 28.

10 P. M. Khumalo (1970) *Umuzi Kawakhiwa Kanye* (Longman Rhodesia, Salisbury), 29.

(He saw her stop near a thorn bush, which is known as "ugagu". She pulled a tender branch and holding it with her two hands she pulled it apart carefully. The branch split into two halves right down to the bottom of the branch with neither side breaking. She was thrilled. She ran to join the other girls and she told them that the behaviour of the branch had shown her that Nsimbi was sincere in his proposition.)

The narrator's comments above enable the reader to understand what this omen portends, making the reader keen to find out whether the foretold events will happen. In the novel, the love affair between Nsimbi and the girl referred to in the excerpt does grow and eventually leads to marriage.

In another episode in the same novel, a duiker crosses in front of Nsimbi on his way home and Nsimbi hesitates over whether he should proceed home because he knows what this omen portends. At this point, Nsimbi does not say what the encounter with the animal tells him about the future. Thus, the writer leaves it to the reader who has the knowledge of Ndebele culture to know what to expect. In this case, the flash-forward is available mainly to those readers who know Ndebele beliefs in these omens. This emphasises the importance of the link between literature and culture. In some cases, therefore, for one to enjoy and fully understand the literature of a people, it is important to have a thorough understanding of their culture and belief systems.

With reference to the above example, it is important to note that the Ndebele people believe that, when a duiker crosses the traveller's path, it is a warning of bad things ahead. In the example above, when Nsimbi got home, he found his wife sleeping with another man.

Hleza also uses this technique in *Uyangisinda Lumhlaba* in which Ndlovu's wife, MaNyathi, wakes up one morning and finds a black and white snake, called iLoyi, in her kitchen. When she reports this to her husband, his response is that they will receive news of death. Indeed, by the end of that day, death strikes in their family when their daughter, who had arrived home that afternoon, is killed in crossfire when the Security Forces engage in a shoot-out with dissidents. The omen of the Loyi snake is fulfilled, although this happens in a manner that Ndlovu had not anticipated, for death strikes their daughter when they had been expecting news of a relative's death, instead.

Readers of siNdebele literature must, therefore, always examine how the writers of siNdebele literature use various aspects of siNdebele culture to present their subject matter and themes. Every aspect of culture that is included in the story must be regarded as designed to convey a specific meaning.

In conclusion, it is important to highlight the fact that, although siNdebele writers have adopted the technique of flash-back and flash-

forward from European literature, they have adapted the techniques to suit the specific cultural forms of Ndebele society and have done so quite effectively, as has been demonstrated above.