

A Text-oriented Study of Religious Context in Christian Themba Msimang's Poetry

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Abstract:-*This is the text-oriented study of religious context in selected Christian Themba Msimang's Poetry. The objectives of this article are to define and describe a religious theme in a comprehensive and analytic manner. A systematic account on how to relate and interpret the theme as the subject of discourse needs consideration. The expression of thoughts that are manifested through mental and physical forms warrant observation, synthesis and appraisal. The significances of analysing the religious theme will be validated by explication of the cultural phenomenon, spiritual source and religious personae. The poet as a sender, the reader a receiver and the text as a message are envisaged to share their roles to determine the ultimate poetic meanings and significances. The text-oriented approach allows the literal work of the art to reveal itself through their whole edifice of poetic diction and its arrangement within the poems.*

Keywords: *Cultural Phenomenon, Compassion, Ecclesiastical institution, Spatial and temporal settings, Universe.*

I. Introduction

Theme is the total meaning by the writer in the process of writing and by the reader in the process of reading. This statement in a sentence or two can be more than a useful simplification, a way of pointing to the more complex experience of the story as a whole. The theme of a poem can be discovered only by thorough and responsive reading of the poetry through constant awareness of the relations among the parts and the whole poem. What follows in a discussion of some of the things to which a reader must give his or her attention in the search of the theme. It is the reflection in poetry of the human desire to make sense of experience. It reflects basic and universal desire of mankind as an important part of the basic and universal appeal of poetry.

Scheffler (2015:175) sees a theme as follows:

The central idea or focus underlying a literary text. It may be stated directly or implied.

Crane (1972:273) defines theme as follows:

The central and dominating idea of a literal work, the message or moral implicit in any work of art.

An explicit qualifying definition of theme in terms of narrative, is that of Shipley (1972:417) which is as follows:

The subject of discourse; the underlying action or movement; or the general topic that is implied in the process of the story emphasis.

Wellek and Warren (1971:272) aptly express this view:

The theme is what is made of the topic. It is the comment on the topic that is implied in the process of story emphasis.

Theme is the central meaning or purpose of the entire context as it is presented to the reader by the text he or she is scrutinizing. Everything that is in the poem namely; vocabulary, imagery, selection of details, overall organisation and form are related to what is meant by theme. It may be the defence of a particular cause, such as social, political, ethical, or religious necessity.

II. Research methodology and Theoretical Underpinning

The research approach adopted for this study is New Criticism. It originates as a reaction to the positivistic and other approaches that concentrated on cause-effect relationships between the author and work while the form or structure of the literal work was greatly neglected. It strives for a theory which would separate literature from other perspectives. It attaches great importance to the analysis of the structure of literal works. The text oriented approach concentrates more on the text and less on the poet (and his or her intentions) and the reader (and his or her responses) on the other. It is clear from this premises that the new critics believes in the study of the literal work. Rabinowitz (1982:27) sees the literary text as follows:

... a self-defining and self-sufficient matrix of formal structure.

Swanepoel (1990:13) contends that:

The New Critics believes in the in the organic theory of literature according to which the work has total significance where content and form are inseparable.

The study is informed by textual analysis of religious context and content in specific poems.

III. Religious contexts

The poems that are cited for religious theme are *Nezinyoni Ziyamdumisa* (Even the birds are praising Him), *Insimbi Yesonto* (The church bell) and *Ngiyamazisa* (He is highly noted). All three poems render the religious theme in detail. Religion as a complex phenomenon entails the beliefs, values and morals of people to serve as a unifying force. Durkheim, (1965:47) supports this idea when he states that:

Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden - beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community called church all those who adhere to them.

Religion as social reality is not a new concept to the Zulu nation, as some people believe. It has long been a unifying system of beliefs and practices about *uNkulunkulu* (the very earliest progenitor or the Supreme Being), ancestors, offerings, prayers and sacrifices. The complexity of religion often arouses different feelings among people. Those who perceive it as a unifying force appreciate and cherish it, while those who look at it as a divisive force, despise and resent it. All three poems mentioned above are about religious faith looked at from different angles. The first religious poem, *Nezinyoni Ziyamdumisa* was written by the poet while in the United States of America. He wrote the poem because of the communication between him and the inspirer:

Phelakwakusandakungenaintwasahlobo,

*manjeengixoxelangemvungeyezinyoni...
Isifisosakhekwakuwukubasibabazelowomlayezoozanomculowezinyonientwasa
hlobo... ubudlelwanophakathikwakhenendalonoMdali.
(Msimang 1990:vi).*

*(Actually, it was a beginning of springtime when he (Prof JM Khumalo)
talked to me about the music of the birds... His aim was that we must applaud
the message that is brought about by springtime music of the birds... the
relationship among himself, nature and God.)*

This gives a brief background to the poem, which was composed and written to be sung. The extract reveals the situation of the sender, particularly the spatial and temporal settings which led to the composition of this religious poem. The conversation of the two scholars in a foreign country in 1986 resulted in the composition of the Christian poem, where the singing birds give reference to the American nation. What inspired the poet is the music that was heard during springtime from the twittering of birds.

IV. Spiritual Source

The poem, *Nezinyoni Ziyamdumisa* is based on Christianity and entails faith, goodness and righteousness. The poet appeals to his senses of sight and hearing because of what he sees and hears. He looks hypnotized by the group of singing Americans who praise God through their melodious music. Their voices are likened to ululating birds. The first line of the first stanza serves as an introduction or *exordium* as follows:

*ZinyoniezinhlezaseMelika...
(Msimang 1990:34).
(Beautiful birds of America...)*

It appears that the poet listens to the melody while in America. The exotic music makes him think deeply about indigenous, praise music. The central idea is the praising of God as Omnipotent. The inspiration to write this poem emerges from looking at nature and hearing its musical sounds. When following the rhetoric strategy, that shows a system of stating facts called *inventio* in Latin and *heuresis* in Greek, the following four lines depict the statement of facts or *narration* as follows:

*Nin' enikhulumekimizinganizwa
Kwelakithizinyoni, kwaMthaniya,
Ngangith' izinyoniziyatshiloza;
Ngangith' izinyonizishay' umlozi...
(Msimang. 1990:34).*

*(You who have spoken to me and been heard
In our country of Mthaniya
I would say the birds are twittering;
I would say the birds are ventriloquizing...)*

We are all aware that the only creature capable of praising God through his deeds is the human being. However, the poet discloses that even birds praise the Almighty through singing, ululating and flight. He feels that the birds' singing is a special way of communication: a bird is seen as the sender while those who listen are seen as the receiver.

The next two lines serve as proof of *confirmatio* that the twittering of birds has a message. This message unites the sender and the receiver and is quintessentially an act of human communication:

*Sengiyazizixoxaizindaba
ZixoxelathinaZithulu...
(Msimang 1990:34).*

*(I know they tell us stories
They tell us deaf people...)*

Confirmation is followed by *refutatio* or an opposing view - the following line expresses that there is no longer any deafness:

*Namhlanjeizindlebezivuliwe,
Xoxanizinyoningibek'indlebe...
(Msimang 1990:34).*

*(Our ears are opened today,
I am listening to you birds twittering...)*

The last line of the stanza serves as a conclusion or a *peroration* thus:

*Impolopol' ingaphez' ukumpompoza.
(Msimang 1990:34).*

(The loud voices should not cease an incessant talking.)

The religious theme is emphasized in all stanzas through the wide use of vocabulary to praise God. The poet maintains a consistent use of praising the Almighty by using the twittering birds to emphasize his idea as follows:

*The emphasis is on praising God as one
Who made heaven and earth?
The sea and all that is in them;
Who keeps faith forever...
(Psalm 146:6-7).*

God takes pleasure in those who fear him, adorns the humble with victory, upholds those who are falling, raises up those who bow down and fulfills the desire of those who fear Him. His power is beyond measure. Therefore, he must be praised with flute, harp and all sounding cymbals as expressed:

*Vumanisimdumisenathinani;
Sishayeamageklenemitshingo...
(Msimang 1990:35).*

*(Allow us to praise Him with you;
Blowing the reed whistles and oblique flutes)*

The poet humbly requests, on behalf of other human beings, people to praise God along with those 'birds'. Religion eases pain as asserted:

*...Kwedlule kith' usizilwemisiko...
(Msimang 1990:35).*

(to us ... passes by the sorrow of labour pains...)

Pain is made more tolerable. In addition, the difficult situations that prevail are made more bearable. The praising of God dulls the sorrow of pain, heals the brokenhearted, lifts up the

downtrodden and watches over sojourners, widows and orphans.

V. Religious figure

The poem, *Ngiyamazisa* is a sonnet. It has a religious theme. The congregation bestows honour and respect upon the Almighty through preaching and singing. All members are bound together by the Word of God. The joyous, delightful and heavenly mood is seen in the following lines:

*Lapho sezingwaba ezevangeli,
Lapho sezikhokhelwa ngokuzidela,
Lapho sebefakaza abavangeli...
(Msimang 1980:22).*

*(When the congregation is rhythmically dancing,
When they are fully dedicated to religion,
When the evangelists are preaching...)*

The poem is about the conflict between the Devil and Christians. The poet describes the coming of evil things, such as catastrophes, harm, pandemonium, empty promises, misery and pain. The Devil replaces harmony with conflict, sincerity with hypocrisy, politeness with rudeness. God is asked to give people strength to trample the Devil to death as he persistently lures the God-fearing towards himself. The Devil is revealed as the most cunning person who continues to make empty promises. This is noticeable in the verse:

*Abethembise igolide lakwamhlaba.
(Msimang 1980:22).*

(He promises them the gold of the earth...)

The poet candidly reveals the Devil as an ill-mannered and ferocious person who is all out to pull in many followers. During his campaign he openly portrays antagonism, pretense, obstinacy, deception and cunning. The poet appeals to the Almighty to give people the power to oust the Devil and clip his wings, when he says:

*Siphe amandla simnyathele.
(Msimang 1980:22).*

(Give us strength to suppress him.)

The Devil is a religious figure who has crafty skills which are always deceitful, conflicting and socially intolerable.

Cultural object

The poem, *InsimbiYesonto* is a religious one. The church bell is used in the poem as a cultural object for a specific reason. The religious theme is portrayed by many elements in the whole poem. First and foremost, the monosyllabic ideophones for the ringing bell: *Nqe! Nqe! Nqe!* are used as introductory lines to each stanza for effect. Hearing the ringing bell makes us associate the sound with the church. The compass points are religious elements used in the context to ascertain the theme preceded by the Holy Spirit in the following extract:

*Umoya waseMpumalanga
Nomoya waseNingizimu,
Umoya waseNtshonalanga*

Nomoya waseNyakatho...
(Msimang 1980:16).

*(The spirit of the East
And the spirit of the South;
The spirit of the West
And the spirit of the North...)*

The precious good that is brought about by an angel from heaven to all compass points on earth is elementary to the religious theme. The poet points out that the angel flies like a hawk from heaven (*Yehlaezulwininjengokhozi*), singing with the spirit of waves (*Ihubangamagagasiomoya*). Its face is like a new-born baby (*Ubusobayobunjengobengane*) while its body shines like the sun. The blessing shows how gracious God is to us for giving his only son, Jesus, so that whoever believes in him should have eternal life. Jesus, the son of God, appears on earth as a blessing to save the people. His birth draws the attention of the poet:

KuwenaMariyaonenhlanhla...
Isisusakhosibusisiwe.
(Msimang 1980:16).

*(To you blessed Mary...
Your stomach is blessed.)*

Mary was the mother of Jesus Christ. She was engaged to Joseph, a descendant of David. She conceived through the Holy Spirit and gave birth to Emmanuel which means God is with us. Mary's offspring is vividly revealed in the poem as a blessed, gracious, righteous and upright being (Matthew 1:18-24). The poet has used a church bell to highlight the various influences and prestige of the church. Mary endorses the involvement of women in the ecclesiastical institution that has a long tradition and is deeply rooted in older patterns of life. The religious facts are significantly emphasized by religious events, settings as well as religious characters. The allusion has a reference on character, facts and events about the central figure. The poet appeals to people to organize themselves for Christian service. His encouragement is depicted in the following lines:

Hlomani izikhali niye ekulweni,
Makungabikho kini oyimbila.
(Msimang 1980:17).

*(Arm yourselves with weapons and go to battle,
Nobody should stay behind.)*

The words *ekulweni* (in the battle) and *oyimbila* (who is a dassie) are used figuratively to mean being together for the sake of Christianity and not staying behind. The ringing of the church bell that is usually heard on Sundays and during certain congregational hours during the week, will also be heard on judgment day. It will be a special day where the following words will be uttered:

Wozani kimi zimvu zami,
Dedani kimi zimbuzi zomubi...
(Msimang 1980:18).

(My sheep come to me,

Goats of the evil move afar from me...)

The words *izimvu* (sheep) and *izimbuzi* (goats) illustrate people. Sheep depict to innocence, grace and humbleness while goats are associated with evil. The poet insists that on judgment day happiness and joy will dominate those who are associated with the 'sheep', while sadness and fear with those who are associated with 'goats'. The atmosphere that dominates the whole poem is simply Christianity. The ringing of the church bell denotes an invitation to the Almighty. The poet tells the readers, listeners and audience that the ringing of a church bell is heard far and near, here and there and in all corners of the world, East, West, South and North. He adds that despite all the forces of evil working against God-fearing people, his heart manages to resist all temptation. People are encouraged to arm themselves with the Word of God, irrespective of age: *Bedondolozelaabadala* (The aged using walking sticks) and *Bengqabithekaabancane* (The young jumping about excitedly). In conclusion, the ringing of the church bell, which is onomatopoeically depicted in the poem, *Nqe! Nqe! Nqe! Nke! Nke! Nke!*, invites people to come to worship, honour and praise God as the only Creator of the universe and all its contents. The church is regarded as God's institution which emphasizes spiritual cleanness, acceptable teachings and the customs of approved religion.

All three cited poems deal with the sharing of Christian values. The poem, *NezinyoniZiyamdumisa* uses birds to portray the intended meaning. It is used as a spiritual source. The poem, *InsimbiYesonto* emphasizes moral, spiritual and mental cleanliness to all worshippers. Lastly, the poem, *Ngiyamazisa* portrays the craftiness of the Devil. It can be deduced from these poems that Christianity plays a major role in the poet's life, and it is his intention to pass on his religious experiences to his readers.

VI. Discussion

An analysis of this religious theme entails the categorization of various sub-themes that lead to the main theme. The assertion of Brooks (1974:568) on New Critics that "attempted to distinguish art from religion and morality, rather than to make art a substitute for religion and morality" is vital in this poetic discourse because religion is looked at as a central idea using a text-oriented approach. Bowler (1994:1072) posits the following about a theme:

A central message or insight into life revealed through the literary work. The theme is not a condensed summary of the plot.

It is a generalisation about life that the poetic discourse communicates. It can be in a technique of an influence or innuendo. It is further noted that while generalizing about life, the mind is entangled by differences in expectation and result, meaning and intention as well reassurance and disconcert. Martin and Nakayama (2013:197) comment about religious identity as follows:

It can be an important dimension of many people's identities, as well as an important site of intercultural domain.

Religious identity is looked at as a sense of belonging to a religious group. All cited poems mention Christianity and further acknowledged many religious beliefs. They broadly highlight unity in all cultural, social and religious practices.

VII. Conclusion

The poet has shown that religious experience is pervasive and fundamental to African

people and is integrated into all aspects of their lives. Integration is evident in the poem when the singing birds refer to the power of God, *Nezinyoni Ziyamdumisa*. According to the poet in, *Ngiyamazisa*, the Devil should be trampled for new identity which emphasizes on the development of co-operative practices, procedures and values. The poem, *Insimbi Yesonto* tries to balance and reconcile the polarities of stability and chaos, harmony and conflict in human lives. Religion is looked at through religious figures, spiritual sources and cultural objects. There are various religions on earth, but Msimang has focused on Christianity in most of his religious poems, while other religious beliefs are implied.

VIII. Recommendation

From the foregoing research work, the following facts on various poetic discourses are recommended: the emphasis on poetic truth rather than the actual thematic perspectives brings high quality work. The poetic language is characterised by figures of speech or images. The following images on comparison and resemblance namely: simile, metaphor, personification, apostrophe, consonance and assonance display the artistic expression in a clear way in the entire work of art of the poet. The integrated thematic aspects should be repeated in a more elevated standard with fresh ideas, excessive ornamentation and stylistics. The discourse competence, which is the ability to combine form of meaning, should be used to achieve unified coherence in communicative functions, themes and interpretation of the text. The central ideas should be elicited by picturesque language and vivid poetic techniques.

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