

## **The Symbolic and Character Portrayal Study in Two IsiZulu Plays: Uqomisa Mina Nje Uqomisa Iliba and Izulu Eladuma Esandlwana**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The objectives of this study are to analyse and interpret symbolism and character portrayal in two selected isiZulu plays; namely Uqomisa Mina Nje Uqomisa Iliba (You court me indeed, you are courting the grave) and Izulu Eladuma Esandlwana (The thunderclap that thundered at ISandlwana). The theoretical, theatrical, interpretive and textual approaches serve as a point of departure for this study and complement each other to fully illustrate the lucid and lively language of drama. The language of drama is genuinely encompassing figures of speech, indigenous expressions, symbolic elements and dramatic dialogue. The characters or dramatis personae and their traits reveal the interrelated incidents. The characters are the flesh of the plot. The stageability of drama looks at how these plays feature as performances. Drama as an art of performance is made possible by an interplay of the performer, audience and theatre. Dialogue enlivens the dramatic actions. The stage is a centre where the characters come to terms with their experiences, actualize their potentialities and explore their environments, minds and imaginations.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Dramatic actions; Dramatic dialogue; Indigenous expressions; interrelated incidents; and Symbolic elements.*

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### **I. Introduction**

Drama is theatrical presentation that is primarily intended to restore an expression of the inner nature of a person as well as to provide an outlet for the creative urge. It is an activity which is opposed to idleness, is socially acceptable and contributes to the moral values of the participants, and welfare of the audience. Drama as literature depicts relaxation, listening and reading. It encompasses the physical activities, co-ordination and social capacities for strengthening relationships between the actors and audience. It tones down the continuous strain and stress of work and daily routine activities. The reaction of the audience towards actors is determined by their physical performances. In drama, people are usually much more frank about themselves and less liable to self-deception than most of us are in real life. The behavior of the characters looks entirely credible. The dramatists are not able write for posterity because their work must be intuitively produced on a stage for vital contemporary significance. To see a play is an exciting and memorable experience. The concentration and intensity of emotion is caused by our actually seeing and hearing the events represented and we can then acknowledge and appreciate dramatic technique to the full.

In drama, people imitate the real life situation where they understand each other, share their views, ideas and opinions at various counter and situation. They react and communicate through words facial expressions, gestures or non-verbal sounds. The dramatic action can be coupled with oral communication consisting of vocal features which are sentence repetitions and non-vocal feature, the gesture which amplify the meaning of words.

Heese and Lawton (1979:1) state that:

*Language is not of course employed exclusively in the communication of facts through his system of symbols, man is also able to communicate thoughts and emotional experiences: and for many centuries he has been able to do this not only through the **spoken** but through the **written** word.*

It is however, important to note that language can be spoken and written. The language is connotative rather than denotative. It is always concerned with the dramatic effectiveness of the things in other than literal ways. They put forth their ideas by the use of analogies which can be presented in different ways. The language of drama is figurative because of the wide use of figures of speech, longwinded baroque and symbolism. The playwright

communicates his thoughts and experiences through the written words. The characters communicate through words and performance. The language of drama gives the full range of human experience, expressing the deliberate ambiguities, tactics of manipulation, deceit and the subtleties of motive. It is capable of recreating the most extreme and violent human emotions. It is precisely through language that drama recreates the great variety of human feelings with precision and intensity.

## II. Research methodology and theoretical underpinning

The study of language in drama must necessarily focus on the dramatic dialogue. The dramatic dialogue presents stage directions which are valuable to the actor, the director and reader. It is one of the sacrosanct elements of the play. The dialogue must delineate the character, advance the plot and explain the motive. The playwright creates artistic form with words. The success of both, dramas depends on the control the dramatists have over their material, including the language they use. The authenticity of the dialogue furthers the plot, creates an appropriate tone and enables the audience to grasp the moral idea of the two plays simultaneously.

The argument about the stylization of the language and its inevitable exclusion of ordinary life seems more impressive to drama Brooks and Heilman (1945:29) say

*The dialogue must both characterize and lead on towards future action; it must be progressive. In addition to striving for this fundamental quality, the dramatist must face other problems of structure and method that arise from his dependence on dialogue.*

Dube et al (1979: 1017) specifically say

*Successful dramatic dialogue is concentrated, not desultory. It employs a pattern of affirmation and denial. The speech between characters proceed by assents and dissents as one speaker echoes or differs with another, with all the harmony or discord between these extremes.*

The general differences between the dramatic and performance texts are set out in this summation:

- While there is usually only one drama text, the number of performances is potentially infinite.
- While the dramatic text is experienced directly by a reader, it is experienced indirectly by a spectator, the performance text serving as intermediary.
- While the dramatic text is experienced verbally and the performance text is experienced audio-visually
- While the dramatic text can be experienced as we like it in small or big portions, forwards or backwards – we experience the performance text as a fixed linear continuum.
- While the dramatic text is open-each prop, character, speech can be imagined in many ways- the performance text is closed: it selected one type of prop, specifies on type of character, settles for one kind of diction.
- While the dramatic text is consecutive, in the sense that are very instance attention is paid only to a few of the on-stage characters, the performance text reveals a complex pattern of simultaneity. Thus, while the silent characters tend to be absent to the recipient of the dramatic text, they are visually present to the recipient of the performance text.

(Tornqvist 1991:5)

In the following discussion we shall delimit our scope by looking at various symbols which are chosen randomly. We shall look at animate and inanimate objects.

### Symbolism as applied to the living phenomena

#### A bird

In Msimang (1979:6) Magemfu says:

*Ingani wayishayela imithetho nemitheshwana ngoba kunguyena ngqungqulu.  
(That is why he pronounced the laws for him because he is the eagle.)*

The eagle is a big strong bird which has a 'good reputation' in the history of the Zulus. Some consider it the 'King' of birds. It is dark with some reddish colour. The extract depicts that Somtsewu plays the superior role above their Majesty, King Cetshwayo, therefore, his deeds annoy the nation. This is a sign of contemptuous disregard and disrespect to the King and the Zulu nation as a whole.

### **Domestic Small Animal**

In Msimang's drama, the dog is used for comparison and representation. We discover the fact when Mehlokazulu communicates to other heads that his actors hinder the physical confrontation between the Blacks and Whites. He figuratively says that:

*Ngifice amachalaha ehahelana ...*

(Msimang 1979:13)

*(I came across the male dogs ardently keen to attack each other...)*

The word 'amachalaha' stands for two nations, that is, Zulus and *iNkisimane*. He metaphorically calls them dogs, not with the purpose of denigration, but in order to accurately portray their ambitious attack. He compares their aspirants with that of dogs. He compares their actions and behaviour but not their physical appearance. Shingana brings a response from the Natal Government to the King:

*Sikhalile ... siyizinja zakho ...*

(Msimang 1979:29)

*(We have complained ...as your dogs ...)*

He dehumanizes himself in front of the King to show respect for him. He refers to themselves as dogs. He belittles themselves by showing how much humble they are. All the heads strive by all means to sustain their King's supremacy. They fight against any person who criticizes the Zulu Kingdom.

### **Domestic big animal**

The playwright uses the bull as a point of comparison and in order to represent ideas. Macala, one of the army commanders, surprisingly asks the limits of the powers that Somtsewu has:

*Ikhona yini kanti inkunzi ebusa izibaya ezimbili?*

(Msimang 1979:7)

*(Is there any bull which bellows in two kraals?)*

An 'inkunzi' is the big domestic animal, which is used in most of the scenes to denote the King or governor. Actually, he questions the instructions that given to the King by Somtsewu who does not belong to Zululand. He figuratively calls Somtsewu the bull because he is the then head of Natal.

### **Wild big animal**

At times the wild big animals are used to liken the bigness of the two living creature which are compared. In Msimang (1979:19-20), an enervate Sihayo tries to explain what Mehlokazulu has done, but he fails because his deed of killing his stepmothers is too pathetic. He says that:

*... iNgonyama ayisale isilikhipha elokuthi angisiwe kwaNkatha ...*

Msimang 1979:19-20)

*(... Let the King openly declare that I must be killed...)*

The word 'iNgonyama' literally means a lion. The playwright likens the King to the lion, the King of beasts. The lion symbolizes greatness, brave and strength. The lion is considered the King of animals; therefore, almost all the animals respect its physical make-up which is strong and powerful. In most cases the lions are always with the great animals which are powerful and fierce. Similarly, the King is always with his heads, the powerful people who occupy the senior positions in the kingdom.

King Cetshwayo addresses his warriors at Landandlovu with the intention of planning how they are going to attack their enemies. Mahlangeni, the bard, praises him as follows:

*Indlovu ethe imuka babeyixokozelela.*

(Msimang 1979:58)

*(An elephant which departs while others hubbub).*

An elephant is a big herbivorous animal. It is a strict vegetarian, living of leaves, barks, fruit, grass and roots. Its flexible trunk is an excellent tool with its finger like tip. The bard likens the King to the elephant. He compares their greatness, strength and power. He figuratively compares the King to an elephant that is an animal which has courage, can endure hardships and withstand an enervate climate. He further calls the King:

*Inyathi kaNdaba ...*

(Msimang 1979:66)

*(The buffalo of Ndaba ...)*

A buffalo is a very big animal which is strong, forceful and powerful. Horned buffalo doze away the whole day under a shady bush or willow comfortably in muddy pools, but it is continuously on the lookout, observing its surroundings. It is always ready to attack fiercely. He compares the strength, force and power of the King with that of the buffalo. Addressing the King in animal terms does not dehumanize and animalize him, but rather exalts him as all the connotations are positive and heighten the language usage and consciously breaks the monotony of addressing him with one word. The use of animals is also the substitution of a mind and pleasant expression or word from an ordinary and prevalent one. It produces oratory and wins for the speaker a reputation for wit.

### **III. Symbolism as applied to the non-living phenomena**

#### **Weapons**

It is, noteworthy that various dangerous weapons are mentioned in two plays and are used as symbols. In Blose (2004:24), King Cetshwayo surprisingly questions the allegation that is levelled against his nation about weapons:

*... umbuso kwaZulu umbuso wenkemba; engabe owesibhamu uhluke ngani kowenkemba.  
(...the Zulu kingdom is of the spear; one wonder how that of the gun differs from that of the spear).*

Both spear and the gun symbolize death. The Zulus rely upon the spear, while the whites rely upon gun. The major function of the two weapons is to kill. The weapons draw the attraction of the audience during the performance. The carrying of the weapons presupposes war. The actor brings into tension and balance the prevailing situation. The dramatic performance involving the weapons is evanescent and unique because it cannot be repeated and recaptured the same way as before.

In Msimang (1979:87) the playwright says:

*Uphinde uzamule umbayimbayi ezibukweni...  
(The cannon yawned repeatedly at the drift ...)*

The cannon symbolize death, destruction or catastrophe. The focus is on the performer who will manipulate the cannon the way he chooses. The word 'uzamule' means the booming of the cannon which shakes the earth. The performer has an unlimited freedom to extemporize. He is called upon, usually with prior notice to bring intellect and imagination to the task of transforming the core-images into fresh and original productions. The symbolic elements help the performer to transmute the images into the work of art.

#### **Thunderstorm**

The thunder image is found in Msimang (1979:81) when Mahlangeni recites as follows:

*Izul' elidume phezu kweSandlwana  
(The thunderstorm that thundered on top of iSandlwana...)*

The battle of iSandlwana is likened to the thunderstorm. King Cetshwayo is figuratively called a Heaven. His deeds are likened to those of a thunderstorm which rumbles and reverberates. His performance is marked by sustained animation. His rhythmic movement of the body, exaggerated gestures and the considerable range of vocal dramatics are so fast in such a way that they are likened to thunderstorm. A thunderstorm symbolizes swiftness and resounding noise. The King is attributed with the inanimate qualities of heavy rain and lightning. The swiftness of the action seems inevitable. Although the thunderstorm cannot actually be shown on the stage, it is present symbolically in nature. The rapidity of the performer's actions is depicted by the use of the body: face, hands, wrists, feet, arms, things and head. If the audience is initially reticent, it cannot escape his spell as he weaves it into his imaginative world with a torrent of words and hypnotizing action. The playwright creates and recreates the fantastic world of the dramatic action.

Thunderstorms depict the unstable which results in the sudden downdrafts, accompanied by electric sparks and thunderclaps which in Msimang's drama, and symbolizes entire destruction; the powerful actions which bring revolution and catastrophe.

#### **The type of characters**

Dube et al (1983:47) say that:

*We can readily identify two main types of characters: the three-dimensional and the one-dimensional.*

The three-dimension character can either be the protagonist or antagonist. Characters are a portrayal of people who make things happen in fiction. The three-dimensional character is a **dynamic, complex, round, developing, major** or a **principal** character, with a full background of his parents who are rich or poor, happy or miserable. His or her portrayal is coupled with that of friends, and explores his talents, skills, hobbies, likes and dislikes. The one-dimensional characters are static and underdeveloped, as compared to the three-dimension characters. The playwright sketches them as **static, underdeveloped, flat, stock, minor, simple** or **stereotyped** characters.

Reaske (1966:43-44) remarks on active and passive characters as follows:

*These passive characters are acted upon by the events of the play; they are usually **static**, or unchanging. Conversely, some characters are active. They perform acts, they have large part in the play, and they usually undergo certain changes as a result of the action of the play. Instead of being static they are considered **dynamic**.*

Cuddon (1984:271) says that:

*A 'flat' character does not change in the course of a story or play; a 'round' one develops and thus alters.*

### **The Protagonist**

Pretorius and Swart (1982:23) say that:

*The protagonist usually represents the positive, conservative element in life ...*

Cuddon (1984:537) sees the protagonist or the first combatant as:

*The first actor in a play; thence the principal actor or character.*

In the drama, Nontombi is a protagonist. Nontombi's presence, as one of the main characters, is contributory to the plot because all major events in the play **centres on** her. Her relationship with her mother reveals her character and personality. Nontombi's character is clearly observed in relation to her parents and Maqanda. She is one of the iNgcugce regiment recruits. She loves her parents as can be seen when she stays with them while she is growing up. She tries to hide that she loves Maqanda, but she failed. Her mother poses a series of questions investigating the type of relationship that binds them. Her investigation of Nontombi is beyond merely being inquisitive, in that she wants to guide her. It took time for Nontombi to speak the truth. Ultimately, she says:

*Noma ngingelimise ngesihloko ngomthetho namasiko esiZulu ngizovuma ngithi sengiyamthanda.*

(Blöse 2004:30)

*(Although I cannot directly agree with the Zulu law and culture, I will say that I love someone).*

MaMthombeni gives a motherly advice to her daughter, Nontombi. She explicitly says that her decision might endanger her life and that it will be difficult for her to surmount the problem that she has created. The best solution, in her view, is to rid her of the problem as quickly as possible. She advises Nontombi to leave Maqanda and carry out the instruction of the King. However, her mother's advice became immaterial to her. It is clear that Nontombi's actions are motivated by her love which she has for Maqanda and the love which he has for herself. Nontombi initially had great respect for her mother, and carried out all the instructions that she gave instantaneously. MaMthombeni fears that Nontombi's actions are not only endangering her life, but Ngqengelele's home as such. Her concerns to strive for peace wilts like a tree. Nontombi failed to reject Maqanda's proposal of love. She accepted his request knowing the tragic outcome that would follow. Ominously foreshadowing the tragedy, she says:

*Uqomisa mina nje, uqomisa iliba.*

(Blöse 2004:14)

*(You court me indeed; you are courting a grave).*

Both Nontombi and Maqanda are the characters of the protagonistic force. They are automatically the characters of the main plot. They prefer to risk their lives rather than break off their relationship. Despite the strong opposition from the antagonistic force, they remain self-confident and self-assured. They forcefully insist that they will rather come to terms with the new situation elsewhere. The stern disapproval of their love forces them to abscond. They believe that life will be smooth after deserting their place of birth. Their love remains illegal to the heads and to iNgcugce regiment but the powerful love of the couple withstands the allegations levelled against it. The negative response of the iNgcugce regiment arouses in the audience a keen anticipation of the King's reaction.

### **The Antagonist**

Reaske (1966:45) says that:

*The opponent of the protagonist is known as an antagonist or, in the event of an opposing force ... the antagonistic force*

Cuddon (1984:44) says the following about the second actor or *deuteragonist*:

*In drama or fiction, the antagonist opposes the hero or protagonist.*

The then Natal Government plays the antagonistic part in the play:

*INkosi ithukuthela iyabila. Kusenokwenzeka ikhiphe isinqumo esinzima sokuthi zonke izintombi zeNgcugce ezala ukugana uDlokwe neNdlondlo azisiwe kwaNkatha.*

(Bloese 2004:15)

*(The King is very angry. There is a possibility that the King may pass a heavy verdict that all girls of the iNgcugce regiment, who disapprove getting married to uDlokwe and iNdlondlo, be killed).*

In most descriptions, where the characters speak about the King, he is not fully revealed, except where the King himself narrates in act two, scene three. The King tells the council about his stance during the chaotic situation in his country. He reminds his nation that what affects him is also affecting the nation. He states that his image is denigrated because of treachery and gossiping that are prevalent among some members of the nation. He remarks that jealousy is one of the most particular and strongest motives that corrupt his nation; therefore, he will eradicate them because they result in both human envy and bitter hatred.

### **The Tritagonist**

Cuddon (1984:724) views tritagonist or third contestant as:

*The third actor in Greek tragedy, probably introduced by Sophocles.*

The tritagonist is the character who stands between the two extremes, the positive and the negative. In the drama, there is no character that can be specifically taken as a tritagonist. There are a number of characters that stand between the two extremes. However, the majority leans towards the King. The contemporary situation has detracted somewhat from the status of the King. The King prefers not to make any haphazard and illogical plans that will be detrimental to the whole nation. The fact of being in the state of uncertainty has made him rely upon the council. Every member of the highest council of the state gives his opinion on the current issue. In the drama, Ngqengelele says that:

*... izinto zoniwa yiwo umusa weZulu...*

*Bekumelwe iNgcugce yanelwe iklwa...*

(Bloese 2004:24)

*(...things are being corrupted by the King's mercy...*

*iNgcugce is supposed to be killed with the spear...)*

The council reacts with "Elethu!" affirming and applauding what Ngqengelele says. The highest council of the state feels that iNgcugce regiment discredits the whole nation, therefore, it deserves death. The council talks as if iNgcugce rejects the King as a paramount, powerful King, and good leader of the nation and his regime.

Ngqengelele's statement regarding iNgcugce's issue makes the King realize the need to revise his strategies. Sofasonke is a dynamic character and is one of the members of the highest council who reacted negatively against the iNgcugce regiment. If this regiment could get a person who would persuade, guide and direct them, things would inevitably become calm, smooth and fair. In the drama, Sofasonke stresses that:

*Mina ngodela ngizifikele kuyona iNgcugce ...*  
(Blose 2004:3)  
*(I shall be satisfied after having arrived at*  
*iNgcugce regiment myself).*

Ntshingwayo declares himself as a one-dimensional character and an emotional patriot. He hears that iNgcugce shows disrespect to the King, but fails to investigate the cause and effect. He maintains that death is the only solution in the drama:

*...uma wonke umuntu ezokwenza into*  
*Ayithandayo ayisekho into esisayiphilele.*  
(Blose 2004: 25)  
*(... if every person does as they please,*  
*There is nothing that we are still living for).*

Ntshingwayo gives a hasty solution without carefully reasoning out the problem. His name means "the one that is thrown away," the implication is that he throws the iNgcugce away by emphasizing the death sentence. There is only one member who rescues the iNgcugce but failed to have supporters; namely, Masiphula. He defensively states his opinion in the drama as follows:

*Ubuwula besifazane mabungasiqhathi neZulu!*  
(Blose 2004:24)  
*(The stupidity of the females must not put us*  
*at loggerheads with the King!)*

Qhathizwe manages to create a tense atmosphere. All the people who attended the meeting become emotional and angry about the iNgcugce regiment's reaction towards the King's decision. Everyone feels that the iNgcugce regiment despises the King and the whole nation when it declares the King's order null and void. The King gives the iNgcugce girl's regiment to Dlokwe and iNdlondlo regiments as *honoris causa* for their victory as well as their loyalty to him. The council failed to control its emotions; thereafter it takes an emotional decision. Qhathizwe leads the council throughout the scene. He instigated all the members of the council to feel that iNgcugce regiment deserves death. Qhathizwe (literally meaning one who makes the nations fight or an anarchist). All members who attended the meeting became fierce and pugnacious. The words: "*Ucu kalulingani ...*" literally, mean, "The bead string does not fit ..." figuratively, they mean "It is unbecoming of us ..." These words aggravate the unstable situation. The iNgcugce regiment states clearly that it will rather marry the game than the Dlokwe and iNdlondlo regiments. The members of the council feel denigrated to hear that the game is preferable to the King's regiments.

### **The Simple Characters**

Most of the simple characters are inactive in any play. The playwright sketches them as stock characters that are flat, static or sometimes stereotyped. Most of these characters are drawn with easily recognizable traits or unchanging surface facts.

Kenney (1983:32) summarizes what many readers object to in simple characters as follows:

*... they are consistent at the price of complexity, and their lack of complexity violates our sense of the human personality.*

We are aware that most of the simple characters perform the important functions in the plays. They help to develop the actions until they reach the climax.

Qedazonke appears to be an ill-behaved character. He is labelled as a talkative, gossipy character throughout the play. He speaks and passes judgement even on matters that are of no concern of him. Qedazonke's name is indicative of his character. The name Qedazonke immediately suggests a very loquacious person. His behaviour is unusual for a man. He takes things for granted when he suggests the following:

*Ngithi mina asinikele khona koMfelandawonye lapho sifike sishise yonke into ebusuku, sibuye sizihlalele phansi lapha...*

(Blose 2004:54)

*(I personally say that let us go to Mfelandawonye's home. When we arrive there, we must burn everything at night, and thereafter come and sit down here....)*

They reject Qedazonke's suggestion as being too emotional and destructive. They feel that Mfelandawonye does not deserve death and that they should not fight against him, but that Maqanda will have to elope with Nontombi. Qedazonke blunders when he admits to Nsizwazishumi, the opponent to Maqanda, that he looks at Nontombi and they crossed the Thukela River. He is bragging of what Maqanda has done and endangering Maqanda's life simulataneously. Qedazonke, as a braggart appears to be the man of no secrets. He discloses Maqanda and Nontombi's departure without considering the implications of his action. Nsizwazishumi cries in Blose's drama:

*Wangenza Maqanda; wangenza Nontombi.*

(Blose 2004:67)

*(You let me down Maqanda; you let me down Nontombi)*

He becomes mad for a while. He feels lonely, insecure and heart-broken. He looks puzzled, frustrated and powerless because of what he hears. Qedazonke's blunders do not end there, he secretly tells Sithombe, Nontombi's friend about the type of relationship that exists between Nontombi and Maqanda. It came to our notice that characters may appear as complex and life-like with many variation and nuances. Such a character is difficult to describe in a few words and many change during the play. This kind of character is called a round character. Characters may, however, represent a single idea or quality and very little change may take place in such a character in the course of a play. Such characters are called flat characters or 'one-dimensional' characters.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The dramatic dialogue sounds convincing to life. The playwrights use the figures of speech, schemes of construction, imagery and symbolism. They avoid anything superfluous in the conversation of their characters and concentrate on senses and sentiments to present meaningful art. The richness of the language is a positive factor in both plays. The figures of speech that predominate are simile, metaphor and hyperbole. The symbolic elements in this work, are two-fold in that they are applied to the living and non-living phenomena. Both plays make use of imagery that revolves around inanimate phenomena like weapons and thunderstorms. Msimang has a particularly wide use of different animals, harmful and harmless, big and small, wild and domestic. These animal are used to symbolize human nature and maintenance of sound human relationships. Their relevance lies largely in their moral implication and in the fact that they run through the two plays with subtle implication and images expressing these concisely and effectively. The following methods of character portrayal: discursive, dramatic, character on other character and contextual are well-applied in the drama. They are well-knitted with the types of three-dimensional and one-dimensional characters.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

More researches on primary and secondary functions of semiotic process and classification of signs are needed to explore symbolism and character delineation in plays. The application of vehicle- tenor and interaction theories can develop the literary taste and advance the style and technique. The symbolic functions achieve some special effect or meaning which is not only ornamental, but integral to all mode of discourse.

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