

Exploring literary binaries in Sifiso Nyathi's novel "The other presence"

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Abstract

This paper analyses the literary binaries presented by the award-winning Namibian writer Sifiso Nyathi's novel "The Other Presence" (2008). The novel is set in the Zambezi region in Namibia. It discusses contemporary issues which affect the Namibian people in the Kwena society. "The Other Presence" presents different groups of people such as Christians and non-Christians, medical doctors and traditional doctors, false pastors and authentic pastors, male egos and female egos. The paper argues that the novel addresses social and political concerns in Namibian society and explores the binarisms between different groups and the ramifications of creating such categories within society. By analysing the themes in the novel from a binary perspective, the paper seeks to explore its deep underlying structure and unfold the social meaning of the specific and human experience in society. The paper argues that the binarisms in the novel reflect the livelihood of the various societies in the Zambezi region in Namibia. It concludes that, all in all, these binaries offer a voice to the voiceless people in society.

Keywords: binary, structuralism

Introduction

In literary studies, binaries can be used to emphasise the message of a particular literary work. Since its publication in 2008, scholarly works on "The Other Presence" (Nyathi, 2008) have focused on the themes, myths and articulating the unsayable (Hangula, 2016; Mlambo & Kandemiri, 2015). However, the novel also uses sensitive binaries to project the contemporary realities in the Kwena community, in the Zambezi region in Namibia. Under the specificity of this binary opposition, one element is valued whereas, the other is devalued (Abram, 2007). According to Abram (2007), binary opposition is an important concept of structuralism, a pair of related terms or concepts that are opposite in meaning, such as poor and rich, male and female, tall and short. One of the two opposites assumes a dominant role over the other, hence, binaries carry value in every sphere in society.

Arguably, the essence of binaries in the society enables one to show the complexities of the underlying social structures. Crucial to this paper are the real concerns and issues affecting people, and their joys, fears and challenges as presented in "The Other Presence". Thus, one can argue that behind all cultural activities, is a deep structure in binary oppositions reflecting the general structure of the human mind. In a bid to unravel these issues, this paper used the binarisms perspective to explore the contradictions and conflicts that exist in the novel "The Other Presence", by analysing it through the binaries.

Understanding Binaries from a Literary Perspective

Whitehead (1993) asserts that the world is binary in the deepest meaning possible as it is both transient and eternal. Ghazali (2011) argues that if darkness and the devil had not appeared,

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we would not have been aware of light since the realisation of deficiency is the first step toward perfection. Smith (1996) defines binary as a scheme in which there are two abstract opposites in a particular language that is strictly defined and set against each other. Binary from a literary perspective is deeply embedded in literature as a language, and paired opposites rely on a relationship with adjacent words within a chain. If one of the paired opposites is removed, the other's precise meaning will be changed. Thus, binaries are the appearance and absence of good or bad in any text or setting.

Khamenei (2006) underscores this thought by saying that a reader has to understand the meaning of one thing by its relation to whatever it is in terms of difference or opposition. For instance, in literature writing good can be perceived through evil. Hawkes (2003) states that the assumed condition in some of binaries are made by the human mind and some later become opposites; hence, they are not ontological. Considering these statements, the example of God and Satan could be brought forth as binaries. From biblical literature, Satan was not created as an adversary of God, he was a high-ranking angel (Goddard, 2000). Also, after his collapse, he did not become the opposite of Christ, but the human mind took him in this direction (Goddard, 2000). From this example of Satan, one understands that binaries are not fixed and that they can shift from one to another. In this regard, one cannot be both a believer in God and an unbeliever. Goddard (2000) further argues that opposites can turn to each other, for instance, God is the one who gives life, then causes death. Death and life make a binary opposition, as one cannot be both alive and dead.

Lacey (2000) alludes that language can be analysed as a formal system of differential elements dependent on each other, and the value of one element relies on the coexistence of other elements (as cited in De Saussure, 1913, p. 69). For example, the value of 'pastors' is dependent on the existence of 'Christians' that are produced by Christianity; this means that the signifier 'the pastor' will lose its value without the existence of 'Christians'. An understanding of the very nature and essence of binaries is essential in this paper as it relates closely to the analysis of the novel, "*The Other Presence*".

Methodology

This paper employed a qualitative, desktop research approach to analyse the novel "*The Other Presence*" (Nyathi, 2008). According to Creswell (2009), a qualitative study is a way of investigating and recognising the nature of the social or human condition of individuals or groups. This befits the purpose of this article which is to provide a concise description of the social concerns presented in Nyathi's novel. The qualitative approach also enables the writer to understand how people make sense of the world and the experiences they have of the world without any bias (Asper & Corte, 2019). The inherent relationship that exists between humans and the environment may not be easily reduced to numbers, thus the qualitative approach was the most appropriate approach for analysing the novel. Hence, an in-depth analysis of the novel was conducted. Furthermore, content analysis was used as the data analysis method. Hence, the literary work for this paper contributes significantly to the Namibian knowledge base on literature.

Findings

In his novel "*The Other Presence*", Nyathi (2008) presents the opening chapters as a series of three episodes that have the same general structure and which reflect the same narrative impulse in the course of confronting various crucial questions. The first episode focuses on religion and supernatural power, the second deals with educational level and, the last with modernity. According to Mlambo and Kandemiri (2015), from each of the three episodes, one can discern a series of categorical oppositions mediated by an intermediary phenomenon or category. For instance, in the first episode, the herbalist is separated from the witchdoctor, and traditional life is separated from modern life (Nyathi, 2008). Hence, it is evident that binaries can be a way of communicating a message to maintain culture and modernity as both seem to be dependent on cultural beliefs. Moreover, Nyathi (2008) highlights that there are

two groups that are opposites and this opposition derives from comparison. This explains the difference between binaries with the same qualities; in other words, binaries with the same features do not necessarily belong to one category. In the novel, this is illustrated through the witchdoctor and herbalist. Although the two share similar qualities, they cannot be classified under the same category because one can be a herbalist and not a witchdoctor. It is in the same vein that everything that happens in society has got a reason and this can be seen through the binaries as presented in the novel. In the novel, the binaries have been highlighted by comparing something connected with good or evil in the Kwena society.

The Binaries between African Tradition Religion and Christianity

Nyathi (2008) employs stock characters to reveal the Christian and non-Christian binaries. Stock characters are stereotyped fictional individuals or types of person in a work of art such as a book, play, or novel which are recognized by the audience due to repeated appearances in a particular literary (Baldrick, 2008). Binaries may occur even in families when elders may recommend their children to believe in a certain church such as the Lutheran Church instead of the Roman Catholic Church (Petsko, 2008). In the novel, the author uses Christianity to distinguish between fake Christians and true Christians. The fake/genuine Christian binary is one of the major concerns raised in "*The Other Presence*".

Furthermore, Christianity is portrayed as a religion that moves and changes with the times. It first arrived in Africa as a means of conquest, but it quickly evolved into a means of colonization. Woodson (1990) in "*The Miseducation of the Negro*" asserts that, "if you control a man's thinking, you do not have to worry about his action" (p. 6). Christianity was used to brainwash and control Africans, preventing them from rebelling against colonialism; thus, Christianity was hijacked and used as a tool to eradicate African traditions, granting colonialists total control over Africans – total conquest (Mlambo & Kandemiri, 2015). The death of a human being provides an opportunity for the 'good reverend' to satisfy some of his desires. Mlambo and Kandemiri (2015) support the view that it indeed demonstrates the criminality which has been hidden behind Christianity out of selfishness and greed. Some Christians pretend to be preaching the word of God, but their motives are selfish. For instance, it was narrated in the novel that Reverend Guiseb does not preach at the funeral; all he asks for is "money, beasts, goats, and even chickens were welcome" (Nyathi, 2008, pp. 51). A good reverend, a man of God, is undoubtedly on a 'Christian mission' to milk and drain fellow Africans of their wealth. Belittling "a man of God, the blessed one," and indeed daring to mock Christianity's vulture-like tendencies, may appear to be heresy. It is unthinkable in some African communities, but Nyathi exposes the rot and self-promotional missions of the wolves in sheepskin, such as Reverend Guiseb, as the Bible refers to them.

The binaries between African traditional religion and Christianity are further revealed in the novel through Namukolo, Chuma's friend. Namukolo's friends try to discredit her as a hypocrite who practices Christianity during the day and visits the Inyanga (traditional healer) at night. Nyathi demonstrates the African religion when Chuma uncovered some truth about Namukolo and says:

You surprised me a lot, my friend Namukolo. It wasn't long ago that you came to my house and asked me for advice on how to stop tokoloshe from depleting your mealie meal. Your skin is constantly showing more and more scars of traditional medicine from the very witchdoctors you condemn, but yet you tell us that you do not believe in their craft. Is your religion making you hate your heritage (Nyathi, 2008, p. 12)?

This shows that the same person who preaches the bible to others also practices the evil religion in the dark. It is evident in the novel when Chuma says, "*I sometimes wonder why these people call themselves Christians and behave as if they own Jesus. Sometimes, you could even hear them say, 'Oh, my Jesus' which in itself denies other people any claim of him*" (Nyathi, 2008, p. 13). They claim ownership of 'Jesus' as if He belongs to them only and not

to others. Nyathi seems to suggest that Namukolo is not a true Christian. However, Namukolo is a brave woman who is not afraid to fight for what she believes to be correct when she argued that:

We Christians do not dismiss the power of herbs. Even the book of Ezekiel, in our holy bible, bears testimony to the strength and legitimacy of the usage of herbs in treating an ailment. Thus, we Christians believe that herbs are useful and because of that, it does not matter whether it is a herbalist, witchdoctor or priest who mixes them to cure the diseases (Nyathi, 2008. p. 13).

Similar cases in the novel include elder Sinvula who portrays a fairly balanced Christian life even though society accused him of using black magic to destroy his brother's family (Nyathi, 2008, p. 12). The same can be seen in Ma Simanga, a non-Christian whose habit with herbs and spirits leads to bad consequences when the bones she had collected backfired and brought all sorts of spiritual challenges to humankind. Another case is3 elder Neo who is presented as an enviable champion of the non-Christians African traditional religion. For example, Neo commanded the Vulture that had fallen into the grave to leave immediately by using supernatural power. Therefore, the author seeks to argue that it is not only the Western religion that can claim to possess power, but the African spiritual world also possesses immense powers.

In a different incident, the mourners were on their way from the hospital to the cemetery to bury Akapelwa who died from an unknown death. At the funeral, Neo commands the whirlwind that threatens to disrupt the mourners and his power is demonstrated without any doubt and he did not claim any personal glory, neither personal gains. Neo shouted, "*What's wrong with the other world today?*" (Nyathi, 2008, p. 87). Nyathi seems to attempt to tell the readers that Neo has the power to communicate with the unknown beings in the spiritual realm who are not visible to the naked eye. For instance, Elder Neo was able to stop the whirlwind and it is pronounced as unusual and the work of the evil one (Nyathi, 2008, p.13). From the Christian lens, this scene in which Elder Neo rebuked the whirlwind, and it obeyed him, has some biblical connotations. It resembles the time when Jesus quietened the storm at sea (Koduah, 2004). Therefore, through such a presentation, Nyathi opposes being complacent and completely dismissive of the binaries in the African mind. The idea of validating the presence of the natural in the African world is also supported by Mlambo and Kandemiri (2015) who argue that "the presence of the supernatural manifests can only be felt by the unusual manifestation that becomes visible to human eyes" (p. 56). For instance, the dead vulture and owl are believed to be traditional omens of evil and they represent a collision of the supernatural and the natural worlds. Evil is classified as something that comes through the revelation of the vulture and the owl, and to a certain extent, these creatures carry a hidden meaning. Elder Neo, with the powers of connecting with the spiritual world, challenges 'the dead like a 'vulture and the owl' and commands the spirit in the creatures by condemning it to the sculls of darkness where it belonged (Nyathi, 2008, p. 103). Characters such as Elder Neo who are bestowed with powers to interact with both the physical and the spiritual worlds are important in African cosmology. This shows that people in the society such as Kwena may regulate the relationship between the natural and spiritual worlds by proving what may be deemed bad and evil, at the same time advocating what may be perceived and valued as good.

In light of the above, Nyathi (2008) socially commits to the existence of binaries to bridge the gap between literature and the social realities as explored in the novel "*The Other Presence*". African people have their traditional ways of doing things and these have been passed on from generation to generation (Nyathi, 2008). In Namibia, for example, Nyathi's text shows that human beings can exploit the supernatural for both good and evil purposes. In the novel, in the Kwena society, for example, some villagers can explain, predict and control some of the natural elements. The analysis of these binaries shows a very thin divide between that which

is good or evil. The overlaps in people's beliefs show how porous and permeable the spiritual and human boundaries are.

The Binaries in Death and Witchcraft

According to Asuguo (2011), "Death is the creation of God, made for the purpose of taking people out from the earth when the time of living is over" (p. 175). From an African perspective, the particularly Namibian perspective, some issues cannot be resolved through prayers alone; people must seek the divine through the African route, and this applies to both Christians and non-Christians, believers and non-believers. This demonstrates the power of literature that has exposed issues that most people would not have stopped to think about. Literature teaches the people about their history, culture, and ethos, as well as how they came to be who they are today. Literature can show how people may change their way of life and live a better life for themselves and future generations. For example, there are men and women of different ages, social backgrounds, and demeanours among the stock characters in the novel. The novel's stylistic feature that lends it verisimilitude is the truth of people's realities. In some African perspectives, people form a strong community that shares core values while preserving local village traditions. In Achebe's novel "*Arrow of God*" (1974), for example, the high priest in the community was a half deity and half man who struggled to discern what is human will and what is divine will (Achebe, 1974). This conflict has become more significant as new challenges, such as British authority and Christian religion, bring into question the community's hierarchies and beliefs. This brings the power of binaries within the community. Furthermore, it seems, that people in some African societies in general, and Namibia in particular, find death difficult to talk about and understand, as portrayed in the novel. In the African belief systems, no death occurs innocently (Nyathi, 2008, p. 111). It suggests that behind every death, there is some kind of peculiar work, either a warlock or a spell. Even if a western clinic had diagnosed a patient with HIV, the cause of the death of that person would have to be questioned. Mlambo and Kandemiri (2015) argue that death is everywhere, and there is no country without a grave but even so, it becomes a concern when someone dies (p. 56).

In most African societies it appears that people hardly ever die a "natural death"; rather they are killed by witches who are typically family members (Umoh, 2012). In the novel, "*The Other Presence*", Ma Simanga loses her entire family within a short period and this leaves her with a lot of questions to the extent that she goes as far as Tanzania in search of answers. In the end, Ma Simanga's brother-in-law, Sinvula, was accused of causing the deaths in her family. It was believed that Sinvula was jealous of her family. However, elder Dube and Neo know about the dreadful disease which is annihilating the society members. They are afraid of telling the truth and revealing their true feelings and thoughts. The truth was that elder Sinvula was not the cause of Akapelwa's death. Consequently, to clear his name, he also decided to search for the cause of death in the family. It was Thomas, an educated young man, who broke the tradition of silence about AIDS-related deaths in Kwena society, and he encouraged people to stop blaming witchcraft and other mysterious means as the cause of deaths. He said that the most probable cause of death is the one explained by Dr Castro, which was HIV/AIDS and not what the society are accusing elder Sinvula.

The question here is, "why do people in society accuse others of witchcraft when they know that they died of other diseases?" The answer is simple: Most African societies believe that any death that occurs has been caused by someone within the family. Sossou (2002, p. 203) points out that, in many societies in Africa, the birth of a child is seen as an opportunity for joy, while death is seen as a great and unredeemed tragedy even when it happens in extreme old age. It will be impossible to discuss the issue of death in some African communities, Namibia included, without taking into account the question of witchcraft especially when the death in question is of a young person. For that reason, people go overboard in a bid to find an explanation as to why the person had died as seen with Ma Simanga in the novel. Apart from natural death, witchcraft is also seen as a cause of death in some communities. Eldam (2003)

notes that “it is believed that the art of witchcraft is passed on from generation to generation” (p. 58). As a result, witchcraft can be seen operating in the same way as the Chieftainship, which is handed down from generation to generation through inheritance. In this case, it can be possible that magic powers are used for self-enrichment, harming other people, and may even kill other people in society.

On the contrary, Umoh (2012) says:

I have attended a number of funerals for both young and old people including suicide funerals for teenagers when I lived in both the United States and Western Europe. However, I have never seen or heard of a dispute or even a quarrel between relatives or friends accusing each when death occurs (p. 3).

Umoh’s experience demonstrates that some attitudes in some African societies about death and its cause are unique and that some values need to be questioned and modified. Semanya and Letsosa (2012, p. 1) note that most African cultures interpret witchcraft as witches who inflict harm on others, such as killing them. As a result, someone accused of practising witchcraft within the group will be disowned or punished by the community members. This is evident in many parts of the countries which make up the African continent, including Namibia, as presented in the novel “*The Other Presence*” through elder Sinvula. It is important to note, however, that not everyone accused of witchcraft is actually guilty of these crimes. The majority of deaths in African societies are still connected to witchcraft and considered a significant contributor to people in these African countries (Umoh, 2012).

Moreover, even in this day and age of the deadly pandemic of COVID-19, HIV/ AIDS and Cancer, people may still connect death to witchcraft. It should be noted that there are different approaches used to deal with HIV/AIDS in some African societies. These literary lenses bring about some novel perspectives to literary studies and in some ways, they address the ‘HIV/AIDS pandemic. Some African literary critics like Mpe (2001) and Westerhoff (2005) have bemoaned the pandemic in different ways. African novelists such as Mpe (2001) used letters in their writings like a needle that stitch literary thoughts on HIV/AIDS, whereas, he attempts to connect to readers and inform them of the experience and challenges of the affected and infected people. The addressee conveys the importance and value of his work in combating the HIV/AIDS pandemic through these letters. An epistle is central to what the author wants to convey to the reader in all of these works. The world of creative work unfolds through the letter to give thought to the challenges of HIV and AIDS.

According to Umoh (2012, p. 2), African countries regard long life as a gift from heaven, and a lack of it as a curse from supernatural forces, ancestors, or an earthly enemy. This may also be one of the reasons why certain people in these cultures find it difficult to embrace untimely death, as depicted in “*The Other Presence*”. The novel intimates that in the Kwena community in Namibia, death is often viewed through the lens of witchcraft as shown in the novel “*The Other Presence*”. This highlights the need for people in many African societies to be informed about the “real” causes of death, which include diseases like HIV and AIDS as well as simple incidents like driving while intoxicated. It can thus be argued that “*The Other Presence*” not only conscientise readers about the nature and causes of death but encourages people to be more cautious and mindful that not all deaths are caused by someone’s wrongdoing. Therefore, it should be understood that death is an inevitability and cannot be avoided.

Traditional and Modern Societies Binary

The novel “*The Other Presence*” highlights the transformation and social changes in Kwena, from a traditional to modern society. These social changes are illustrated through Thomas, a young, educated and modern young man who has gone to America for studies. Thomas is a character to be admired and hated at the same time. This is because he represents both change and the rift between modern and traditional values. It can be argued that the novel

warns society to be careful about the form of education that one assimilates, whether it is education for progress or education for destruction (Mlambo & Kandemiri, 2015, p. 60). This is seen in Thomas on his return home. One can argue that this assimilates Western values as seen from his inappropriate dressing at a funeral:

Thomas has brought something different to the culture. His loose-fitting jeans hung under the top of his buttocks. One could see perfectly well that the conventional way to tie the belt around the waist was a thing of the past. Thoma's pants were now so low that the valley between his buttocks would alarm an ignorant passer-by (Nyathi, 2008, pp. 21-22).

Thomas' modern dressing code has brought something new while the whole community was still stuck with the traditional dressing code. This is a clear indication that Thomas has lost grip of his cultural footing, and is now a misfit and a cultural renegade fallen from grace (Mlambo & Kandemiri, 2005, p. 60). Furthermore, Thomas knows about the seriousness of the pandemic and although he wants people to talk about it, his confrontational approach without respect for the elders does not work in a community like Kwena village.

Social changes are also being presented through Kachana. Nyathi (2008) highlights the shortcomings of modernity as it changes people's lives for the worse. Kachana uses skin lightening creams to transform her skin from dark-skinned to fairer. The culture of lightening and bleaching of the skin by Africans is a racial issue that relates to the downgrade of black women and their physical appearance (Mlambo & Kandemiri, 2015, p. 61). The other social change seen in Kachana is her social life as noted:

Kachana was not very popular with some women of tradition. She drank like a man and led a life that was very different from many women in the village. There were times she competed with men in bottle stores in helping the bartenders until the closing time. She had no children of her own, which made her independent and versatile in what she did. Despite her neat appearance, her excessive usage of western chemicals to change her skin from pitch black to a pale tone cost her dearly (Nyathi, 2008, p. 4).

Another behavioural change is shown when Kachana came close to the deceased compound where mourners were seated. She acted in an untraditional manner by throwing herself on the ground and rolling into a thorn bush with loud cries, and this shows disrespect to the mourners (Nyathi, 2008, p. 27). The other feature seen in Kachana is her response to men when she says, *"Don't woman me, Nico! I have a name. So zip up your stinky mouth and behave like the man you're supposed to be"* (Nyathi, 2008, p. 28). This is a very strange and unacceptable response from any woman in Kwena society.

Elder Sinvula can also be seen in the novel *"The Other Presence"* as the wind of change. Although Elder Sinvula was hurt by the death of his nephew, he was hurt more by the way people accused him of being responsible for the death. Instead of mourning his nephew, he was more concerned about finding the truth of what caused his nephew's death and also proving his innocence to the whole community which had rendered him an outcast in his own village. He was relegated by his elderly friends Neo and Dube; both elderly men of the village refused to walk with elder Sinvula because they feared being levelled with similar accusations. Dube expresses that a simple walk with Sinvula would be tantamount to people thinking that they work together for his activities of the night (Nyathi, 2008, p. 19). Elder Sinvula is a good man with a big heart; hence, he forced changes in the society with the liberation war spirit of no surrender. Furthermore, Sinvula was determined to find out the truth from the hospital which was very unusual for any member of Kwena society. Through, Elder Sinvula, Dr Castro was invited to attend the burial and shared some truth about the other presence. This is the nature of the modern change that Sinvula brings to the Kwena community.

Conclusion

This paper explored the binaries used by Nyathi (2008) to relay his message and highlight social concerns and contemporary realities in the novel *"The Other Presence"*. Some of the binaries examined in this paper include Christian/non-Christian, medical doctors/ traditional doctors, false pastors/ authentic pastors, male egos and female egos. Using these binaries, the paper also revealed that, in the Kwena community, people are accused of causing death using witchcraft; however, medical tests have proven differently. The analysis of the different people associated with either Christianity or non-Christianity revealed that some people in the society use supernatural power to dictate the situation whilst others use the bible to manipulate people for personal aggrandisement. In addition, the environment and the spiritual world binary showed that some non-Christians can communicate with non-living creatures. The revelation of the binaries through education for development to benefit the society and education for destruction (learned), tradition beliefs and modernity change present the true reflection of the activities taking place in the society such as Kwena. The presence of the traditional spiritual world is feared and it is also practised by some Christians. In traditionally controlled societies, literature has become a means for people to express their egos. In benevolent societies where all spheres are African traditional beliefs, literature might be the only way to communicate their situations. Finally, this paper has demonstrated that it is difficult to effect change in a society that is too traditional and has insufficient educational knowledge to comprehend the modern world.

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