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Costumes as an Expression of Character: A Study of Selected Short Stories

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ABSTRACT

Short stories are narrative works that have a limited cast of characters and focus on a single event. Most African writers construct their stories using the following three aspects of the narrative structure: setting, plot, and character. One could counter that despite the prominence of these features; costume remains a rather underrepresented area of inquiry in literature. Its intricacies are sometimes neither explained nor used to reflect the roles and behaviours of characters in the story. This endeavour, like a few others, takes a unique and captivating approach to examining the significance of costume in character development. It draws on literary theory to analyse a collection of short stories written in Sepedi and isiZulu. The aim is to determine whether there are any notable differences in how costume is used in these languages and to what extent it conveys meaning in the text. The paper adopted a qualitative methodology and integrated documentation as a stand-alone data collection strategy. The results show that, while authors have similar writing styles, they differ in their use of costume to convey symbolic cultural meanings, gender disparities, and religious practices. These findings show that costume plays an intrinsic communicative role in stirring readers' emotions and helping them envisage characters' behaviour and social realities in the text. This work is notable because it presents a novel approach that could add depth and knowledge to literary analysis in African literature.

Keywords: Bilingual Collection; Costume; Fiction; Literary Theory; Mythology; Traditional Attire

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1. Introduction

Short stories are creative pieces of literary works. Chinyowa claims that they provide readers with an account of the author's experiences, including traditions, convictions, or any other topic the author feels is worth discussing^[1]. In short stories, each character is given a name that resonates with the way they speak, behave, or view the world^[2]. Costumes, like the names and appearances of the characters, are a powerful storytelling device in literature.

Adinku states that costumes can be anything^[3]. It could be a scarf, a shirt, an umbrella, a watch, or even a hairpiece that a character wears while performing a specific role. If it is carefully reflected, it gives a clear impression of how they relate to what is being expressed in the text. Kirby agrees that through costume, particularly its colour and texture, readers can learn crucial information about their cultural background, achievements in life and how they see the world^[4].

Interestingly, costume is not only confined to literary works. In theatre, it produces an illusion in the audience's mind. Adinku states that when a character appears on a stage, the audience may form a judgement about them based on what they are wearing^[3]. In other words, it can help audiences envision whether the character is a hero or a villain, a good or terrible person, and what might happen to them as the story progresses.

This means that when developing a story, authors ought to consider the choice of attire—vintage or modern, ragged or flashy—to ensure that it reflects the characteristics of each character and the message the story aims to convey. Utoh-Ezeajugh agrees that an appropriate selection of clothes allows the reader to make sense of the characters' social conditions, behaviour, and cultural background that are not expressed plainly in the text, which is the motivation for this research^[5].

In Bapedi culture, men typically wore skirts and sandals (*diramphašane*). They would carry a knop Kerrie and wear an armband (as illustrated in **Figure 1**). References to knop Kerrie, armbands, and shields can signify anger, protection or even joy in African mythology. This is somewhat a similar case in isiZulu culture. Women would wear beads around their necks, wrists, and foreheads (as shown in **Figure 2** below) to demonstrate their respect for culture. Nguru and Maina underscore that the beads have special value and purpose in African cultures^[6]. Such dress indicates an in-

dividual's autistic preferences, cultural convictions, and socioeconomic class. These cultural facets allow the reader to make an impression of how the characters appear, behave and their social status in the community.



Figure 1. Assimilation of Bapedi tribe.

Source: <https://www.alamy.com/>.



Figure 2. IsiZulu culture and tradition.

Source: <https://www.alamy.com/>.

This study examines how costume shapes character development in two short story books: “*Tša Malapa*” and “*Uthingo Lwenkosazana*”. These books were written in two different indigenous languages: Sepedi and isiZulu”. “*Tša Malapa*” is a Sepedi short story anthology written by A. Motimele and published by Maskew Miller Longman in 1997. It contains about nine short stories, two of which, “*Ngwana wa Motho*” and “*Letšibolo*”, were selected for analysis. In contrast, “*Uthingo Lwenkosazana*” is an isiZulu short story book written by N. Ntuli in 1978. The short stories “*Iphasika*” and “*Izivakashi*” were also selected for study in this research.

The study sought to address the following research objectives: a) whether writers utilise costume as a literary device in character development, and b) whether there are any noticeable differences in how costume is used in the identified languages.

The rationale for analysing these books stems from the fact that they are among the most renowned African literary works of all time. Importantly, they are focused on imparting moral values and significant cultural doctrines to the community. This research is important because it sheds light on how meaning could be derived using novel approaches in the analysis of literature. The paper is expected to advance knowledge in the disciplines of general literature, art, and drama, especially where African languages are involved.

2. Literature Review

Hart defines a literature review as a summary of the concepts and ideas that others have made on a particular topic under investigation^[7]. The literature included in this study aims to inform readers about the latest research on the subject and to serve as a basis for the discussions in the study. The discussions made here are based on the concepts of character, costume, texture, cultural identity, religion, and characteristics of costume colour in short stories.

Characters in a literary work are people whom the author imbues with moral, mental, and emotional qualities. Marggarf posits that characters are the drivers of action in a story—their appearance, conduct, and relationships help to guide the storyline forward^[8]. A character can be either an antagonist (one who does evil things in the story) or protagonist (one who does good things in the story). Matras submits that the analysis of character requires an understanding of the intricate relationship between fiction and reality, which requires competent reading and experience in order to separate fictitious characters from imaginative characters in the literature works^[9].

2.1. Costume

According to Sina^[10], costume is an effective instrument that serves a significant purpose in storytelling and go beyond how they appearance. It is a complex feature of visual storytelling that brings characters to life and enriches the story. Costumes bring the character to life. According

to Delligatti^[11], they help in the expression of human, monster, and night creature actions, among others. They provide readers with information about the personality of a character and help them visualise characters and their roles.

Costume creates distinctiveness and offers hints about cultural identity of an individual^[12]. Readers can readily establish a person's career or position by observing their attire, such as a nurse, soldier, or police officer. Simply said, a costume may relate to a distinct personal style with which others might identify. While jeans and a T-shirt may be the usual attire for a particular social group, someone in business may prefer to wear a formal outfit with a tie^[13].

2.2. Texture

The time of day and its events dictate the kind and texture of the costume. For the morning lesson, a student may wear a clean shirt, trousers and jersey that have been tailored to the specific school's requirements^[14]. Certain events, such as holidays, may call for dressing differently for the day. People may choose to wear casual, smart casual or resort attire, depending on the occasion.

Munich raised an important issue, that texture (of a costume) should be taken into account when developing a character in a story^[15]. In day-to-day life, texture conveys much about a person's financial status and how they view the world^[16]. Monijesu pointed out that materials made of cotton and torn clothing could indicate deprivation and poverty, whereas silk and decoration indicate a family's wealth and prosperity^[17].

2.3. Cultural Identity

According to Joseph^[18], there are three ways that cultural identity can be expressed: first, through the classifications and categories that people use to identify with others and with themselves; second, through the defined ways of speaking, dressing, behaviour and practices that they show to others; and third, through the interpretations that other people make of those indices". In any other ethnic group, attire could serve as an extension of society's cultural expression^[19]. It allows people to keep traditions, express themselves, and form cultural bonds. Utoh-Ezeajugh makes a fascinating claim that in Nigeria, each tribe is identified by the use of costumes and the meaning people place on

clothing and cultural artefacts such as traditional fabrics and outfit designs^[5].

2.4. Religion

Religions cannot be treated in isolation from dress rules and beliefs. According to Keenan^[14], people wear religious attire for various purposes: some people wear them to demonstrate their values, while others wear them for ritual purposes. Delligatti further states that “Catholic priests attend church wearing an *alb*, a *stole*, and a *chasuble*. Jews wear *yarmulkes* as a sign of devotion^[11]. Shinto and Buddhist monks wear *Jōe* during rites”. Most religious costumes are considered sacrosanct. According to Keenan^[14], in traditional churches where males are thought to oversee the principles of faith, their costumes are considered sacred through the prescribed dress code. In the Catholic Church, in particular, authority and position are frequently symbolised by their attire^[14].

2.5. Colour

Keenan observed that the colours used in the costume might convey crucial semiotic connotations^[14]. For example, red is usually associated with love, happiness, and danger, whereas black may represent seriousness or misfortune. According to Wanyama and Shitubi^[20], colour is a significant and powerful means of interaction that is linked to political, socioeconomic, cultural, and religious factors. Writers and designers can use various colours to create informed selections that ensure the book or a play appeal to its readers and target audience.

Sheng stated that attire is indicative of an individual’s body language^[21]. The researcher observed that many people prefer positive remarks. Young people today want to make a statement with their attire because of differences in their identities. The discussions above are significant as they provide an opportunity to address the role of costume in African literary works.

3. Theoretical Framework

Different theories are used depending on their relevance and significance in the study. In this paper, a literary theory is used as the foundation for the discussions in this paper. Mahesh refers to literary theory as a useful interpretative

aspect for literature that lends credence to different readings of any literature work^[22]. It serves as a tool for readers to evaluate and comprehend literary works.

Mahesh defined literary theory as a particular form of literary criticism in which specific academic or philosophical approaches are followed systematically while analysing literary texts^[22]. In other words, it could be used to enhance the readers’ understanding of the type and quality of the text, as well as the content and the message it seeks to convey to the readers. In this work, the literary theory is adopted to show how costume creates meaning in the selected short stories. In addition, the theory serves as the basis for the analysis to answer the research questions posed in the introduction of the study.

4. Methods

The research focuses on the significance of clothes in conveying meaning in two short stories. The study employed a qualitative approach as the data were textual rather than numerical. Cresswell stated that qualitative analysis explores linguistic data to generate statements about visible aspects of message and what it conveys^[23].

Purposive sampling was employed to choose a bilingual collection of two short story books published in Sepedi and isiZulu. These books were selected primarily for their uniqueness and significance in conveying moral lessons while also fostering social order and cultural traditional values in society. The data for the study were obtained through document analysis. Document analysis is commonly used along with other approaches; however, it was utilised in this case as a standalone method.

The researchers ensured that bias in data selection is kept to a minimum. The researchers chose previously published stories. This meant they had no influence over how the stories were constructed, which could have influenced the data analysis^[24]. The data gathered were analysed and discussed using a thematic analysis method. Ravitch and Carl define thematic analysis as a research strategy that identifies and interprets patterns in a dataset^[25].

5. Interpretation and Discussion

In the first part of the analyses, a paragraph from a Sepedi short story was presented. An English translation of this

passage was also provided. This is the case in all the short stories that were examined. The discussions were focused on the following social conditions: a) the characters' social status, b) their behaviour, and c) tradition. The Sepedi short story "Ngwana wa Motho" was presented first, followed by the isiZulu short story "Iphasika". The remaining short stories are presented and discussed in the second section of the analysis.

Literary writers, such as Kennedy and Gioia state that costumes illustrate a character's circumstances in a work of fiction^[26]. Evidence of this claim can be found in Motimele's book "Tša Malapa". Motimele used the following line to demonstrate Papiki's social circumstances in the short story "Ngwana wa Motho":

Baithuti ka moka ba be ba feletše ka diaparo tša bona tša sekolo. Papiki le yena o be a sa fapane le bona ka selo. Efela o be a apere tša theko ya godimo. (Motimele, 1997, p. 62).

The excerpt above denotes: all students were wearing their school uniforms. Papiki was also not different; he was wearing his as well. However, his uniform was more expensive.

The author above describes the characters in the book using an "expository technique." The expository style describes characters based on how they appear in a specific context, expressing the author's views about that character. For example, although, Papiki is in grade 10 and is expected to wear an ordinary school uniform like any other student, this is not the case in this scenario. Papiki wore a more expensive, higher-quality school uniform, which demonstrates his socioeconomic background.

The same is true in the short stories "Iphasika". In this story, the writer shows that Kholiwe belongs to a Christian family. Her parents expect her to dress according to their Christian norms and standards. They also expect her to wear a new long dress because she will be representing them. The author says:

Alikhiphe ibhulukwe lakhe elide elimpunga. Lumuthi heqe kancane uvalo. Uyakhumbula ukuthi lezi yizingubo abangazibonanga abazali bakhe. Wazithengela eyedwa wazifihla ekwazini kwakhe. Uyacabanga ukuthi abazali bakhe bangathini bambone esefake lamabhu-

lukwe esimanje kanti abawafuni nokuwabona. (Ntuli, 1978, p. 91)

The excerpt above denotes: She took out her brown trousers. The fear struck her a bit. She reminisced that her parents did not see these clothes—she bought them alone and hid them. She is thinking of how her parents would react when they see her wearing the trouser as they do not approve of them.

Two intriguing viewpoints are presented in the statements above. Kholiwe's parents do not believe trousers are appropriate for Christian women, thus they discourage her from wearing them. This demonstrates that in certain societies and cultures, a person's mannerisms and standards are reflected in the type of clothes they wear. However, this was not the case with Papiki's parents. The author demonstrates that Papiki's father lavished him with expensive attire so he could stand out from the other schoolchildren, which is an undesirable practice, particularly in African society. Following that, the author uses the narrative approach of costume to show the characters' behaviour, as well as their psychological makeup. Motimele, for example, wrote:

"A apara tša go ja bogale". O rile go phadimisha seeta sa letlalo la makgwakgwa, a gogela borokgo godimo gore makousu a le o ka rego ke lebesa la kgomo ya mmofu a šale a le nyanyeng. O rile go itekola, a itshela ka setimalefatla sa theko ya godimo, gomme a swara Cellular ka seatla a ya ka ofising. (Motimele, 1997, p. 62).

The excerpt above denotes: "He dressed in a patronising manner." Once his rough leather shoes were polished, he gently lifted the trousers to reveal white socks that resembled dairy cow's milk. He looked at himself, doused himself with a pricey cologne, picked up a cell phone, and headed to the office.

The author dramatised a fictional action with clothing items. In the expression "A apara tša go ja bogale," the author used hyperbole to create an impression that the character was wearing a costume that signalled arrogance and scuffle-readiness. The passage shows that Papiki, the character, comes from a decent socioeconomic background. The

texture of his clothes bares traces of his arrogant behaviour and disdain for the teachers, whom he believes to have less status.

On the other hand, the author Ntuli distinguishes the character according to her function and other crucial elements of the attire. The author uses evocative language to portray a feeling of moral concern and admiration for the character's choice of attire. The lines below indicate that the character Kholiwe is from a decent Christian family. Her thoughtfulness in the choice of attire shows her ethical disposition and respect for her parents, whom she feels would be upset if they discovered how inappropriately she dressed (in their absence) while on vacation. The writer wrote:

Uyakhumbula ukuthi lezi yizingubo abangazibonanga abazali bakhe. Wazithengela eyedwa wazifihla ekwazini kwakhe. Uyacabanga ukuthi abazali bakhe bangathini bambone esefake lamabhulukwe esimanje kanti abawafuni nokuwabona.

The excerpt above denotes: She recalls that these garments were not seen by her parents. She purchased them by herself and concealed them. She considers how her parents, who disapprove of these fashionable trousers, would respond if they saw her wearing them.

It could be said, based on the above statement that Kholiwe's parents do not approve of trousers as they believe that these trousers are not suitable for Christian women. Kholiwe is very much aware of that, hence she feels guilt as she wears them. This proves that in some societies and cultures, trousers and how one dresses reflect his/her personality. As a result, Kholiwe is not comfortable with wearing trousers; however, as she wants to fit into city life, she goes against her family's beliefs.

In this section, the two short stories: "Letšibolo" and "Izivakashi" are discussed. The discussion focuses on the characters' mental attitude and social standing, which may be influenced by the social environment in a narrative. The environment can be divided into rural, urban, coastal, or mountainous settings. The following line in the short story "Letšibolo" illustrates how the environment affects the character's mental attitude:

Mohlako o dira gore o ute lehufa gore o

kgone go iphediša. Ntlo ya bona e be e sa le mokhukhu. Mothaka yo moraleng dipereko di be di sa mo tsogele.

The excerpt above denotes: Poverty can drive people to suppress their true nature to survive. They lived in a shanty dwelling, and Moraleng was unable to provide for his family.

The description of the environment indicates that the Pheladi lived in a low-income residential community. Pheladi's living conditions—poverty, shanty, and ragged clothes—caused her to develop a tolerance for others so that they could empathise with her. The author further reflects the notion of poverty by introducing a "secondary character," a character who has a distinct identity but whose circumstances and actions complement those of Pheladi, the main character. The writer wrote:

Moraleng o ile a tšea mantagala a gagwe, ao a itheketšego ona ka bohloki bja gagwe, a ik-gara ka ona. Dieta o ile a tšea diputsu tša moepo a gohlometša dinao ka gare ga tšona. (Motimele, 1997).

The excerpt above denotes: Moraleng wore the shabby clothes he had purchased in his destitute state. In terms of footwear, he placed his feet in the torn mine boots.

In the two extracts above, the author reflects the social circumstances of the characters in the text by using explanatory and dramatic character development techniques. At the heart of these excerpts is the author's use of costume to give readers a clear picture of the characters' true lives, which are characterised by unbearable conditions in the story. The analyses suggest that clothes in these bilingual literary works have a comparable function. In the short story "Izivakashi", Ntuli utilised an outfitting technique to illustrate the characters' financial situation. According to the author, Khumfela is unemployed, which makes his life difficult. His sole source of income is repairing cars. The author wrote that:

Uphuma nje uyazibona ukuthi lezi zingubo ngathi ngezokwetshelekwa. Ungathi kwembathiswa uthi uqobo. Bese ekhumbula ukuthi akazibophanga izicathulo. Nomchilwana lona kaMaDludla usuqaqekile, uKhumfela ibhulukwe uselokhu eliphakamise ngezandla zom-

bili. (Ntuli, 1978, p. 114)

The excerpt above denotes: As he walks out, he realises that the outfit appears to be borrowed. It looks as though it has been dressed onto a stick. He then realises that he had not fastened his shoes. The string tied by MaDludla is unfastened, and Khumfela continues to hold up the trousers with both hands.

The above expression indicates that the character is not financially stable. A well-established individual will dress appropriately and wear a belt to appear decent, especially if he is about to meet a friend whom he last saw a while ago. The author was inventive with the use of sarcasm, which drew attention to the character's attire. It depicted the characters' true state, actions, and aspirations, allowing readers to understand the events described in the story.

The researchers hoped to assess a) the extent to which costume contributes to expressing meaning in short stories, and b) whether there are any noticeable differences in how costume is employed in the Sepedi and isiZulu languages. Based on the assessment, it can be said that literary theory has helped us become acquainted with the author's storyline. It enables readers to visualise and interpret events without losing sight of the main point being conveyed.

6. Conclusions

Based on the discussions above, it can be said that costume is an integral part of literature in the two languages under study. There are similarities in how it is used in these languages. The study shows how clothing acts as a powerful narrative device that highlights personal identities, belief systems, and socio-economic factors. Costumes serve not only as cultural artifacts but also as essential tools for conveying intricate themes in storytelling. They are instrumental in highlighting critical issues such as social inequality, behaviors and education standard of a character.

These results are consistent with those of Nyambura, Waweru, Matheka, and Nyamache who discovered that the formation of meaning is significantly influenced by the colours and styles of clothing^[27]. For instance, the Maa-sai and Samburu use different colours, each of which has a specific meaning related to their daily life and even the ceremonies they participate in. Understanding the different

kinds of costumes, including their texture, colour, and quality, is important because it helps one better comprehend the dynamics of characters—that is, their behaviour, role, and the message they wish to portray in a story.

In some cases, society perceives characters who wear stylish clothes and live a flashy lifestyle as arrogant and defiant when compared to those from disadvantaged backgrounds. It may be said that by carefully selecting costumes, colours, styles, and accessories, the writer helps readers envision the period, geographical setting, and type of community in which the novel was written.

The authors of the two short stories chosen did an excellent job of revealing characters' identities, cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and intentions throughout the narrative, allowing readers to instantly connect with them and their roles on a more personal level. Furthermore, the study found that attire in indigenous short stories goes beyond just describing a character. However, it also functions as a vital narrative tool, enhancing character development and conveying a more meaningful message about the character and their environment. They show that costume has an inherent communicative role that stir the readers' emotions and assist them in visualising the characters' behaviours social reality in the text. This paper is noteworthy because it proposes a fresh approach to literary analysis in African literature, potentially adding depth and understanding of literary works.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally to the conception, design, data collection, analysis, and writing of this study. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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