

Suspense Technique as reflected in Sekgaila J Chokoe's Selected Short Stories: A Literary Appreciation

James Seanego

Department of Language Education
University of Limpopo, Republic of South Africa
Email: james.seanego@ul.ac.za

Abstract

This article critically analyses suspense technique as reflected in Sekgaila Chokoe's short literary stories. Suspense serves as an important technique in penning down a literary work. With it, readers' emotions always move along with the textual story. They enjoy more when their emotions regarding the outcomes of the story are uncertain. This article thus selected two short stories in S.J. Chokoe's *Ke Bophelo* collection viz. "Ke Bophelo" (It is life) and "Ya ka Mphoše" (Here is my gift) to examine the reflections of suspense in them. The study of suspense in Northern Sotho literature, one of South Africa's official languages, has received less attention so far. Nevertheless, the mini study of this nature cannot overcome such huge negligence as it confines itself to only two short stories. This study employs the qualitative approach. The two short stories were purposively sampled out of thirteen due to their relevance to the study. Data collected through critical reading of the short stories were thematically analysed. The article concludes by reflecting on how Chokoe's literary grabs readers' attention through his figurative language.

Keywords: Suspense, Literature, Readers, Story, Short Story, Emotions.

Introduction

The following statement by Scott Mariani marks the genesis of this article:

Don't be afraid to throw everything into discussion. Let them build up their false hopes, and just when they're not expecting it, pull the rug out from under them (2007:105).

From the above, Mariani is highlighting the importance of placing readers in a suspense mood in a literary work. This theorist in a nutshell highlights that readers' emotions should be played with. They may have their wrong anticipations during the reading process. To this end, suspense as a literary term will be explained and thereafter test how it was applied in the selected short stories.

Suspense in a literary and textual sense is a technique wherein the author technically arouses uncertain predictions and expectations of the reader as the plot of the story unfolds; be it in a short story, novel, drama, poetry (narrative) and folkloric narratives. With suspense technique, a reader creates his own world in which he predicts and expects what will happen to a particular character or situation. In the same boat, Abrams and Harpham (2009:266) explain suspense as:

A lack of certainty on the part of a concerned reader about what is going to happen, especially to characters whom the reader has established a bond of sympathy.

That is, in accord to the latter scholars, the reader has no clue on what will happen with the overcome of a literary text. Cheong and Young (2006) hold the same view when they define suspense as the feeling of excitement or anxiety that audience members feel when they are waiting for something to happen and are uncertain about a significant outcome. On the other hand, Bennett and Royle (2004:197) hold a contrary view when they say that readers know what will happen, but the matter is when. One argues their opinion, since being certain of what is to transpire will reduce the reader's desire to continue with the reading. Mariani (2007:105) adds to say that taking your reader down too many straight paths, where they can see a long way ahead, will soon result in their finding your story predictable and dull. The three scholars, Abrams & Harpham (2009), Cheong & Young (2006) and Mariani (2007) share the same sentiment, that readers must be held uncertain, while Bennett and Royle (2004) share a different view, that readers are certain. For the purpose of this paper, I sum up the above views by maintaining that readers are better held in uncertainty, so as to awake the feeling of excitement or anxiety during the reading process. Furthermore, if readers know the story's outcome then suspense may decrease (Hoeken and van Vliet, 2000:278).

In this work, plot is considered as the relevant literary element through which suspense technique can be achieved. On this note, Mojalefa (1996:78) rightfully resolves that plot assists in the author finding his intentions of the short story. In the selected two short stories, Chokoe arranges simple series of events, assisting him with the success of suspense.

Analysis of Suspense in the Selected Short Stories

“Ke Bophelo” (*It is life*)

This is the first short story in Chokoe’s collection. Its title is tantamount to the title of the whole collection itself. It sounds Chokoe has something interesting or usual about the nature of life to tell his readers in this story. Thus, Serudu (1993:25) observes the following about authorship:

When an author (addresser) initiates a communication transaction, he has invariably something serious about life to communicate to his reader. He wants to share his views with his fellow men. He also, presumably, wants to make known his stand concerning certain issues in life.

Mojalefa (1996:75) adds to Serudu’s view by stating that a short story should contain an important aspect relating to human life. From the title “Ke Bophelo” (*It is life*), readers hungrily desire to learn what the author wants to tell and teach them about the nature of life. Of course, there must be something special about the nature of life. Kekana (2015:123) adds to this by maintaining that the title reveals to readers what will happen in the story. She further holds that a title is associated well with what is happening in the story (2015:142). Readers, therefore, expect to read about the realities of life in *Ke bophelo*. Of the same opinion about title seems to be Mariani (2007:42), who asserts that the title of the thriller should be catchy, punchy and not too long- two or three words is the optimum.

Iwata (2008), in his abstract, draws that suspense can be regarded as a *progressive* emotion, and is mostly experienced while reading and has the reader involved with the story. Easing Iwata’s opinion, suspense technique occurs when the reader emotionally moves with the story. Uidhir (2011:161) in the same lane employs the concept ‘Suspense Realism’, which means that suspense is a real and genuine emotion. That is to say, a reader sympathises with one of the important characters in the story. In our case, Chokoe is successful in achieving that mood, for a reader moves with the protagonist Kwanyana. Of utmost interest in Chokoe’s short stories is his use of figurative language which arises the experience of suspense within the readers. The first words from Kwanyana in the introduction of the story makes the reader experience suspense instantly:

Temana yona ke ile ka e gaša, fela ga ke tsebe ge mabelea metše (Chokoe, 1995:1).

(Genuinely I have sown the seeds to the garden, but I am not sure if grains have germinated).

Kwanyana literally admits that he has slept with a girl, but not sure if he has impregnated her. Readers already desire to find out whether Kwanyana has truly impregnated a girl.

In the Northern Sotho culture, like in most cultures, it is not a taboo for a father and son to talk about love-life affairs. In this respect, we have the proverb which goes “*Ngwana wa mošemane ke thaka ya tatagwe*”, which insinuates that a father and son are more like age-mates. Thus, a son should feel free to share his worries with his father, rather than mother. It is at this stage where an interesting game starts when Kwanyana consults his father Tlaka about love-life:

Tate, ke nnete gore re kgolwe gore e nwele re lebelela dingatheng. Bjale le reng ka ye e rilego go tsena ka meetseng, ge e re e a nwa tša manaka tša e thula tša e hlaba ya tšhaba? A le yona e nwele? (Chokoe, 1995:1).

(Father, it is true that if its hooves are damp then it has drunk? If so, what are you saying about the one which is trying to drink but gets stabbed with horns by others and step aside as a result? Has such one drunk too?)

Kwanyana is suspicious about Thele’s pregnancy; that there might be another man who has impregnated her before his eyes. It is confirmed that Thele is pregnant, but the big question is: who impregnated her? Readers are in this stage involving their predictions too. We read that Kwanyana and Thele met during the wedding of Kwanyana’s brother, where he dragged her into darkness and both disappeared. Readers become convinced that indeed Kwanyana is the doer of such actions. Readers’ predictions are confirmed months later when Thele bore a baby boy:

O kgotsofetše Kwanyana, mabele le ge a se aipona ge aagaša, a itlhatseta go ba a gagwe (Chokoe, 1995:2).

(Kwanyana is satisfied. Although he is not sure of sowing the grains, they seem to be his).

The baby son is having identical features to Kwanyana, hence that satisfies him. Old women in African cultures are known to have vast knowledge and abilities in identifying babies who belong to their families. Kwanyana’s mother is holding that baby boy and expresses to him that:

Ngwanaka, ge o be o itlhothlora ka ye peu ya gago o be o naganneng? Goba o be o sa tsebe gore ge o lema o lemela go mediša? Nke o bone ditsebjanatša gagwe! Nkwana yona! Ngwana yo e no ba rakgoloago go felelela. O ka se mo nyake, nke o mmone ge a thoma go myemyela! (Chokoe, 1995:2).

(My child, what were you thinking when denying this seed of yours? Or you did not know that you were ploughing to produce? Just see his small ears! What about the small nose! This child is just your whole grandfather. You cannot suspect him, just see him when starting to smile!)

From the old granny's words, readers finally conclude that the baby son is indeed Kwanyana's blood. Surprisingly, the arrival of Tsheta Kela awakes questions in readers' minds. The narrator describes him as identical to Kwanyana. Kela is observed to play Deus Ex Machina part in this stage of the plot. He has crucial part to play. He comes as an unexpected character to turn the plot of the narrative. For that, the journey of suspense in readers' emotions continue until the story reaches its climax. When Thele is listening to funeral reports on radio, she unexpectedly hears the passing of Tshetla. She shouts:

Ke... Ke... go thwe... Tshe... Tsheta. Go thwe Tsheta o... o gatilwe ke se... se... Sefatanaga. Jo nna jo! Ke gore ke nnete o ile? Jo ngwanaka jo! Ke gore o napile o tshiwana? Tatago o ile ngwanaka! (Chokoe, 1995:5).

(It is... it is... said... Tshe... Tsheta. It is said Tsheta is trampled by a car. Jo myself jo! Is it true he is gone? Jo my child jo! In this way you are a paternal orphan? Your father is gone, my child!)

The term *Tshiwana* in Northern Sotho semantically refers to a child who lost either one parent and comparably *Tshiololo* refers to a child who lost both parents. It is here that readers recall Kwanyana's suspicion regarding Thele's pregnancy. They come to learn that it was not Kwanyana who impregnated Thele. They unexpectedly learn that Kela was the biological father to Kopano, the said woman's child.

The closure of this short story is interesting. The author has revealed the truth at the relevant time of the plot. It is at this stage where we employ Bennett and Royle's (2004:197) opinion, that the matter of 'when' is of necessary. Readers have all the way been lying to themselves, asserting that Kwanyana has impregnated Thele. Chokoe has therefore, applied the suspense technique successfully in this story.

"Ya ka Mphoše" (Here is my gift)

This short story is critically observed to be one of those which represents suspense technique well in Chokoe's collection. Through its title, readers expect to see a gift being presented to another character. It is through these anticipations of 'unknown' gift that makes the short story to be successful. Readers ask themselves questions:

(1) *What kind of gift will be handed over?*

(2) *To whom the gift will be given to?*

The more such questions arise from the readers' minds, the more successfully the suspense technique occurs. On the other, this title brings curiosity to readers. Hoeken and van Vliet (2000:279) opine that curiosity may be evoked by certainty about the outcome. In our case, readers are certain that a gift will eventually be presented, but they are curious about "what kind of gift and who will be gifted".

The short story is based on love-life affairs between Temo and Sebotse. Initially Sebotse does not believe in Temo's promise that he will love her forever. She suspects that Temo might be a womaniser, which later proves to be true. After impregnating Sebotse, Temo chases her away and proceeds to date Mmile. Readers start questioning themselves about Sebotse's disappearance.

The story takes a suspicious turn during Temo and Mmile's wedding. When old men and women are busy presenting their gifts and advising the bride (Mmile), Temo's facial expression shortly changes. The narrator ornately describes the situation:

Ao! Go reng bjale ke bona mahlo a Temo a bibila e ke otsenwa ke letshogo? Hlogo yona e reng e thoma go tshotshomasethitho? Kgane o swaregile gomme o tshaba go emelela? (Chokoe, 1995:16).

(Oh! Why do I see Temo's eyes uncomfortable as if he is afraid? Why his head starts sweating? Or maybe he is afraid to go and release nature?)

From the narrator's above words, readers' emotions start moving along, asking themselves what will happen to Temo in his well-organised wedding?

Kgatla (2000:205) brings to light that the conclusion of short story carries something new that the writer wants to reveal. Readers surprisingly meet Sebotse on the queue of gift-givers, hence Temo seems frightened and unsettled. Readers almost forgot about Sebotse. She is coming towards the sunrise of this story to present her gift. Sebotse peacefully presents her gift with these words:

'Go lena ka bobedi ke re ya ka mphoše!' A realo mosetsana wa batho, a tshotshollelaleseana la dikgweditše e ka bagotšennetafoleng. (Chokoe, 1995:16).

('To you two, I say here is my gift!', said a young girl who unfolded a four months toddler on the table).

Temo ran away from Sebotse's pregnancy during their relationship. Now Sebotse is bringing that toddler (who is Temo's blood) as her gift to his wedding with Mmile. Readers' questions at the initial stage of the story are now answered:

What kind of gift will be handed over?

Answer: Toddler.

To whom the gift will be given to?

Answer: Temo.

Mariani's view that "a thriller novel should generally end on an upbeat note" (2007:110) is interestingly employed here. Thus, the author uses an interesting resolution which had long hung readers' emotions while reading, asking themselves about Sebotse and Temo's separation. Could Temo and Sebotse's relationship end in that simple way? Readers would not experience suspense if they knew what kind of gift will be given and to who. Further, suspense would not arise if readers knew where the separation of Temo and Sebotse would end. In that sense, this short story contains two experiences of suspense: that of a gift and that of lovers' end. The tendencies of men running away from their pregnant women is clearly dealt with here.

Conclusion

The involvement of readers' emotions in aliterary work seems to be of paramount importance. Readers may find a work excluding their emotions as boring and not interesting. Through emotions, readers can predict and expect the future happenings of the story, though being uncertain. Their emotions should be played with. It is in this respect that the present researcher finds Chokoe's short stories as one of good representatives of suspense in the Northern Sotho literature.

Through the two discussed short stories, the author's alter ego was to share some important life realities, which apparently grabs many readers' attention. In *Ke Bophelo*, Chokoe portrays that the child is only known by his or her mother, hence the Northern Sotho saying goes: *Ngwana o tsebja ke mmagwe*. This is reflected through how Kwanyana was betrayed about Kopano. It can only be the mother who knows the child's biological father. In *Ya ka Mphoše*, Chokoe cautions men who leave their women after impregnating them. He finds it to be a very disturbing and irresponsible behaviour. This is shown through Temo, who disappeared from Sebotse after impregnating her. Even so, such stories are very interesting to read because they depict life realities which readers are much familiar with. Texts of such nature enjoy large readership, for a notable reason that readers enjoy romance-related narratives.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Manare Donation Matabola, for voluntarily editing some parts of this paper.

References

- Abram, H.M., & Harpham, G.G. (2009). *A Glossary of literary terms*. (9th ed). Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Bennett, A., & Royle, N. (2004). *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*. (3rd ed). Britain: Pearson Education Limited.
- Cheong, Y.G., & Young, R.M. (2006). A Computational Model of Narrative Generation for Suspense. American Association for Artificial Intelligence, 1-8.
- Chokoe, S.J. (1995). *Ke Bophelo*. Sandton: Heinemann Publishers.
- Hoeken, H., & van Vliet, M. (2000). Suspense, Curiosity, and Surprise: How discourse structure influences the affective and cognitive processing of a story. *Poetics*, 26: 277-286.
- Kekana, M.I. (2015). *Dikanegelo tša Bafsa tša Sepedi*. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis. Pretoria: University of Pretoria.
- Kgatla, P.M. (2000). *Kgolo, Tšwelopelele Katlego ya Kanegelokopana ya Sepedi: (1951-1999)* Unpublished PhD Thesis. Pretoria: University of Pretoria.
- Iwata, Y. (2008). *Creating Suspense and Surprise in short literary fiction: A stylistic and Narratological Approach*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. University of Birmingham.
- Mariani, S. (2007). *How to Write a Thriller*. UK: How to Books.
- Mojalefa, M.J. (1996). *Re Anegele*. Cape Town: Juta & Co, Ltd.
- Uidhir, C.M. (2011). The Paradox of Suspense Realism. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 69 (2): 161-171.
- Serudu, M.S. (1993). *The novels of O.K Matsepe*. Published PhD Thesis. Pretoria: JL van Schaik.