



Unveiling intrigue: A comparative analysis of detective stories in Sepedi and Afrikaans, *Nnete Fela* and *Ikarus/Prooi*

Joanne Lombard^{1*}, Matemane Lekganyane²

^{1*}²Language Unit, University of Pretoria, South Africa, Language Unit, University of Pretoria, South Africa, Joanne.lombard@up.ac.za, Matemane.lekganyane@up.ac.za

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ABSTRACT

Comparative literature studies promotes multilingual education in several ways because when students in language departments engage with texts written in different languages, they develop proficiency in multiple languages, enhance their linguistic skills and get to know the cultural nuances embedded within each language. In South Africa, the development of comparative literature studies in English, African languages and Afrikaans is not linear or directly comparable across languages, given the complexities of language, culture, and academic contexts. In the spirit of renewal, many scholars have compared literary works from different South African languages and cultures. This study proposes a comparison of a Sepedi detective story and an Afrikaans detective series by Deon Meyer. It considers suspense and mystery as literary-theoretical concepts and moves on to the reader's engagement with the mystery, the protagonist and their journey. The comparison renders differences and similarities between the Sepedi and Afrikaans literary texts. *Nnete Fela*'s Ariel Meso and Bennie Griessel in *Ikarus* and *Prooi* are found to be contrasting character archetypes. Ariel and Bennie have contrasting fortunes, with Ariel being a lucky person all round, and Bennie suffering one misfortune after another. Ariel is successful in love and personal relationships, while Bennie's life is generally in turmoil. Both investigators are shown to be moral anchors in their respective narratives, but they are contrasting character archetypes, they have contrasting fortunes, and experience different degrees of success in love and personal relationships.

Keywords: *Nnete Fela*, *Ikarus*, *Prooi*, detective story, comparative analysis, multilingualism

1 Introduction

Comparative literature studies promotes multilingual education in several ways because when students in language departments engage with texts written in different languages, they develop proficiency in multiple languages, enhance their linguistic skills and get to know that which Tötösy de Zepetnek (1998:30) calls the cultural nuances embedded within each language. Through its interdisciplinary approach (Tötösy de Zepetnek 1998:15), comparative literature provides students with a broader perspective on multilingualism and its implications. Literature written in minority languages can be given prominence, thus contributing to the preservation and promotion of linguistic diversity.

In South Africa, the development of comparative literature studies in English, African languages and Afrikaans is not linear or directly comparable across languages, given the complexities of language, culture, and academic contexts. For example, comparative literature courses were introduced in the 1980s at the University of the Western Cape to uncover the ideological basis of the curriculum and promote changes reflecting the pursuit of democracy and equality (van Niekerk & van Wyk 2022:4), a development which continued through the transition period to democracy (early 1990s until around 2000, according to Frenkel & MacKenzie 2010), with scholars proposing inventive approaches to teaching South African literature in schools and at higher education institutions, and theorising the features of a new literary history (Wade 1996:3). From the 2000s until the present publications have been revised, for example, a history of Afrikaans literature was expanded to include contributions by overseas scholars and younger scholars, bringing fresh perspectives to the study

(van Coller 2015), and previous theories, interpretations, and methodologies are critiqued, such as the examination of the exploitative transformation of African oral literature into Afrikaans (children's) literature (van Niekerk 2018:80).

2 Literature review

In this spirit of renewal, many scholars have compared literary works from different South African languages and cultures to investigate, for example, the biographical nature of an Afrikaans poem and two Xhosa praise poems (Van Niekerk 2007), and urbanisation experiences in English and Zulu literature respectively (van Niekerk 2013:39). Some studies have been found lacking in diversity, though, eliciting a call for more group research on South African literatures (van Niekerk 2016:270).

A comparison of texts from two different languages and cultures in South Africa will help to answer Leon de Kock's question (De Kock 2005) about the fundamental nature of South African literature. This study, therefore, proposes a comparison of a Sepedi detective story and an Afrikaans detective series. The Sepedi detective story, *Nnete fela*, by MA Kekana (1989) is a prescribed book for Sepedi literature studies at university and has, among others, been the subject of close textual analysis by JZ Machiu (1994), and analysed for character typology (Lekganyane & Mojalefa 2007). The detective series in Afrikaans by Deon Meyer consists of *Infanta* (2005), *Dertien uur* (2008), *Sewe dae* (2011), *Kobra* (2013), *Ikarus* (2014), *Die vrou in die blou mantel* (2017), *Prooi* (2018), and *Donkerdrif* (2020). Meyer, the country's most popular, widely translated, best-selling crime writer, is a skilled, compassionate storyteller whose conviction that every novel element must serve the story itself ensures loyal readers (Amid 2015). The books have been studied as part of the fast-growing category of crime fiction in South African literary studies (Naidu 2013), among others for their social consciousness (Powers 2015) and the treatment of suspense (van Heerden 2023). The books are recommended by the Department of Higher Education and read at university level.

3 Theoretical background

In this section the discussion will indicate that suspense arises from the reader's affective response to a protagonist facing a credible threat, drawing on theories by Vorderer et al. (1996), Dove (1989), Carroll (1996), and Zillmann (1996). Similarly, the discussion on mystery indicates that suspense in detective stories arises from the conflict between the protagonist and antagonist, which has a mysterious cause that is revealed at the end, as described by Turco (1999:59) and Boileau and Narçejac (1964:8).

3.1 Suspense

Van Heerden (2023) explores suspense as a literary-theoretical concept, focusing on how it manifests in popular fiction. Drawing on seminal works by Vorderer et al. (1996) and Dove (1989), the author provides definitions and theories to conceptualise the textual prerequisites for creating suspense. According to Carroll (1996) and Zillmann (1996), suspense arises from the reader's affective response to a beloved protagonist facing a credible threat, mediated by subjective certainty about the likelihood of an undesirable outcome. Studies of detective stories involve, among others, theories of reader involvement, empathic distress, and affective perspective-taking (Vorderer, 1996; Mikos, 1996; Zillmann, 1996).

Most critics define suspense as occurring when a happy outcome is postponed or when answers are temporarily withheld from the reader. However, Dove believes that it is not so much delay that causes suspense, but rather the extent to which the writer succeeds in making readers care about such a postponed conclusion.

Dove's (1989) process criticism emphasises the importance of reader readiness and the interplay between the 'Voice of the Novel' and the 'Voice of Cognition'. These concepts are introduced to explain how suspense is generated through the interplay between these two sometimes contradictory voices that constantly engage in a metatextual conversation with the reader. The 'Voice of the Novel' represents the text itself (Dove, 1989:21). It is the voice that creates tension through the workings of the plot, atmospheric effects, and the combination of resolution and surprise (Dove, 1989:23). On the other hand, the 'Voice of Cognition' reminds the reader of the axioms of the genre (Dove, 1989:21). This voice is shaped by the reader's familiarity with the genre, and the more genre fiction a person reads, the clearer the Voice of Cognition will resound in their mind (Dove, 1989:21).

Dove (1989:23) argues that the interaction between these two voices generates suspense on three levels: (i) the tension produced by the Voice of the Novel through plot, atmospheric effects, and the combination of resolution and surprise, (ii) the tension created by the Voice of Cognition, which is similar to the experience of re-reading a non-formula story, with feelings of recall, recognition, and the perception of signals as signals, and (iii) the tension between the two voices, which opens up a new dimension of interpretation. Dove thus provides a framework for understanding how suspense is created and maintained through the dynamic interplay between the text itself and the reader's understanding of genre conventions.

3.2 Mystery

Turco (1999:59), Boileau and Narçejac (1964:8), Shapiro (1979:553), and Lazarus and Smith (1983:86) have attempted to describe the concept of mystery in detective stories. Mystery focuses on the suspense and tension that arises from the conflict between the protagonist and antagonist, which has a mysterious cause that is revealed at the end of the story (Turco, 1999:59; Boileau & Narçejac, 1964:8). The main character, who is an amateur or professional investigator or detective, reconstructs how and why the crime was committed and finally arrests the criminal, thus revealing the mystery (Shapiro, 1979:553; Lazarus & Smith, 1983:86). Groenewald (1993b:30) proposes five elements as focal points in examining the mystery: the investigator/detective, the criminal/murderer, the victim/murdered, the evidence, and the investigation.

4 Methodology

The method followed is a qualitative research method using close textual analysis. Qualitative research is a method of inquiry that focuses on understanding human behaviour and experiences through in-depth, non-numerical data such as interviews, observations, and textual analysis.

5 Investigators/detectives in Sepedi and Afrikaans fiction

5.1 Introduction

Machiu (1994:8) explains that “puzzle stories, mystery stories, crime stories and stories of deduction and analysis have existed since the earliest times - and the detective story is closely related to them all”. Delay is a cornerstone of the suspense process. There is thus a direct link between the investigator/detective, the narrative pace and the uncovering of the mystery.

An energetic, optimistic, and lucky investigator enhances the concept of mystery in a detective novel by adding layers of excitement, positivity, and unexpected developments. In a detective story, such an investigator’s energy often leads to more action-oriented scenes, increasing tension and excitement. This can involve daring chases, intense interrogations, and proactive clue-hunting, making the unraveling of the mystery more thrilling. Their characteristics ensure a compelling narrative that keeps readers invested in both the character and the unfolding mystery, creating a harmonious blend of action, ingenuity, and ‘lucky breaks’. Furthermore, the investigator/detective’s journey through the mystery often mirrors their personal growth, making the resolution of the mystery satisfying on multiple levels. While luck can assist in the resolution of the mystery, it often complements the detective’s skills. This balance ensures that the detective remains competent and credible, rather than relying solely on chance.

In contrast, having a flawed, antihero detective as the protagonist in a detective novel can contribute to the sense of mystery in other ways. A flawed detective may behave in unpredictable ways which can add to the mystery of the story, as readers are unsure how the detective will handle certain situations or if their personal struggles will interfere with the investigation. An antihero detective who bends the rules to pursue justice creates a sense of moral ambiguity which can heighten the mystery, as readers may question the detective’s motives and wonder if their actions are truly justified. A detective who is vulnerable and struggles with personal demons can make the mystery feel more real and high-stakes. Readers may worry about the detective’s well-being and ability to solve the case, adding to the suspense and mystery of the story. A flawed detective who empathises with both victims and criminals furthermore adds complexity to the mystery. As readers see the detective grapple with understanding the motivations behind the crimes, they may also start to question the nature of the mystery itself and the individuals involved, and become more invested in their character development. This investment can deepen the reader’s engagement with the mystery, as they become more emotionally connected to the protagonist and their journey.

A detective short story titled *Serapeng sa Badimo* [“At the graveyard/garden of the ancestors”] by Matlala (1969) serves as a useful example of how a South African author has treated mystery. In this story, the author obscures the investigator’s true identity, presenting him as a fraudulent diviner named Maoke. By portraying Maoke as an antagonist and concealing his role as the actual investigator until the end, the author creates mystery and heightens the readers’ interest in the story (Mojalefa & Magapa 2007:128). This short story incorporates elements of traditional African beliefs (the diviner) into the detective genre.

5.2 The investigators/detectives in *Nnete Fela* and *Ikarus/Prooi*

Although Ariel Meso in *Nnete Fela* is an amateur investigator, and Bennie Griessel is a detective by career, both fulfil the same role in the respective stories. Regarding the investigation itself, van Heerden (2023:337) argues that Bennie Griessel’s investigation in *Prooi* resembles a police novel with the formula of the hard-boiled detective story as defined by John Cawelti (1976:146): a case that appears simple on the surface leads to a string of complications that gradually uncover a nest of criminality. This results in a pattern of complication-breakthrough-complication. With each complication, the likelihood of success is called into question, and the detectives must constantly resort to legwork, slowing down the narrative pace accordingly (van Heerden 2023:337).

5.2.1 Bennie Griessel and Ariel Meso as moral anchors in their respective narratives

The detective Bennie Griessel is a well-known figure in Meyer's oeuvre (van Heerden 2023:336), and is known to readers as a law-abiding, honourable character, even though he sometimes bends the rules in pursuit of justice. As a result, readers of books in the series side with Bennie from the outset. In the novel, *Prooi*, the author places sufficient emphasis on the heroes' virtues and the villains' flaws to ensure that the necessary affective dispositions take hold in the reader (van Heerden 2023:336), the author elicits a positive emotional response and alignment from the reader. This extends to a sense of solidarity with the detective: in *Prooi* he takes a moral stand against a corrupt system (van Heerden 2023:336), and is portrayed as having a sense of camaraderie with his colleagues. He also empathises not only with the victims of crime in all its terrible forms but also understands the motivations and actions of those who disrupt social order. As an altruist, he fears the suffering and hardship of others as much as he fears death itself.

The investigator in *Nnete Fela*, Ariel Meso, is equally portrayed as a law-abiding character and this is evident in that he initiated going to the police about the stolen script, and to report the syndicate to the police (Kekana 1989). He is considered to be a one-dimensional character as he is portrayed as adhering to civil norms throughout the story (Lekganyane & Mojalefa 2007:110).

5.2.2 A determined Ariel Meso and a flawed Bennie Griessel as contrasting character archetypes

In *Nnete Fela*, Ariel Meso is very persuasive, energetic and passionate about his work, he is a 'good' person (Lekganyane & Mojalefa 2007:110) who will fight until he gets what he wants. This is evident in his persistence to convince the girl Bubbles to tell him what he wanted to know; Ariel forced Bubbles to reveal the secret and she eventually told Ariel everything and they reported syndicate to the police (Kekana 1989). Finally, Bubbles and Ariel also won the victory and they went to fetch Karabo to live in their father's house.

In contrast, Bennie Griessel in the Afrikaans novel, is "worse off than most of the many downtrodden and damaged male protagonists of contemporary crime fiction" (Gregersdotter 2018:72), and in all the novels, is portrayed as an anti-hero, an underdog, and a flawed character (Amid 2015), struggling with his own vulnerability as a recovering alcoholic (van Heerden 2023: 336).

5.2.3 The contrasting fortunes of Ariel Meso and Bennie Griessel

Ariel Meso is a lucky person all round, he survived a number of attempts on his life and finally survives at the cost of the criminal (Kekana 1989). Bennie Griessel, on the other hand, frequently relapses and turns to alcohol to cope with first, the challenges of his demanding profession as a law enforcement officer (Amid 2015) but, despite disciplinary hearings, maintains a superior case-solution rate compared to his colleagues, ensuring his standing with superiors (Gregersdotter 2018:73). Second, his drinking is an attempt to cope with post-traumatic stress disorder, and third, with his strong sense of altruism (Amid 2015).

5.2.4 Ariel Meso's success vs. Bennie Griessel's turmoil in love and personal relationships

In *Nnete Fela*, Ariel is not only involved in the conflict with the syndicate, he is also in conflict with Kwena Mabusha, which is caused by a love triangle (Kekana 1989). This shows another characteristic of Ariel's life, namely that, in keeping with his one-dimensional character (Lekganyane & Mojalefa 2007:110), the romantic aspect of his life, too, works out positively. Bubbles was in love with the son of one of the syndicate members, but she developed sympathy for Ariel, and they formed a romantic relationship. This of course led to Kwena wanting to eliminate Ariel – for stealing his girlfriend (Kekana 1989).

Bennie Griessel, on the other hand, is not succeeding at romantic relationships. His work strains his relationships with his girlfriend, ex-wife, and children (Amid 2015). Despite being a dedicated detective, Griessel's personal struggles and loss of colleagues have taken a toll on him. In the novel *Ikarus*, Meyer dares to have Griessel relapse into drinking for more than half of the story, rendering him a shadow of his sharp, best self. This relapse, given his children's past confrontation with his alcoholism, is not entirely convincing (Amid 2015). In the end, Griessel's greatest adversary is not a cunning killer or a sinister criminal plot, but his own self-hatred, which he seldom manages to overcome (Gregersdotter 2018:74).

Findings

The comparison rendered differences and similarities between the Sepedi and Afrikaans literary texts. Both investigators have been shown to be moral anchors in their respective narratives, but they are contrasting character archetypes, they have contrasting fortunes, and experience different degrees of success in love and personal relationships. The comparison has further shown that the Deon Meyer novels featuring Bennie Griessel combine elements of the police procedural and the hard-boiled detective story, while *Nnete Fela* incorporates elements of the amateur investigator; thereby demonstrating the innovative blending of genres within South African fiction.

Conclusion

Comparative literature studies promote multilingual education by enhancing linguistic skills, preserving linguistic diversity, and offering a broader perspective on multilingualism. Comparing literary works from different South African languages and cultures addresses fundamental questions about South African literature and highlights the need for diverse group research. This comparison has focused on works in Afrikaans and Sepedi, highlighting the linguistic and cultural diversity within South African literature. Theories of suspense and mystery in detective stories emphasise the importance of reader engagement, protagonist-antagonist conflict, and the dynamic interplay between textual elements and genre conventions. The study has suggested that the Afrikaans and Sepedi works employ narrative techniques that create mystery and suspense. Suspense in detective stories arises from the reader's emotional response to credible threats faced by the protagonist and the interplay between the narrative and genre conventions. Examples of this are obscuring the criminals' identities in *Nnete Fela*, and the pattern of complication-breakthrough-complication in the Bennie Griessel series, highlighting the importance of crafting engaging narratives in South African fiction. Mystery in detective stories centers on the suspenseful conflict between the protagonist and antagonist, with the resolution revealing the cause of the conflict and the arrest of the criminal. The characteristics of energetic and flawed detectives enhance the mystery by creating action, tension, moral ambiguity, and emotional engagement with the protagonist's journey. Overall, the comparative study showcases the richness, diversity, and complexity of South African fiction and reflects the unique social, cultural, and linguistic landscape of the country.

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