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A Stylistic Analysis of Flashback, Point of View and Figures of Speech in Chris Abani's *GraceLand* and *Song for Night*.

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Abstract

Chris Abani's two main works that deal with the cause of children in post colonial Africa are rich in style and form. By applying a stylistic analysis to those works, I found interesting the way the author mixed the usage of Flashback, point of view and figures of speech among others. In song for Night, the author used the flashback to describe My Lucky's remembrance and souvenir of his days in the mining site where the horror of war, violence, killing and suffering characterized his everyday events. If Abani chose to write Song for Night in first person point of view, it is to make the reader in the center of the story. Every reader considers himself or herself as the protagonist. The feeling of the reader is a kind of sympathy that Abani predicted. The books are characterized, like all African fictions, with the most important figures of speech which are found in everyday lives of African traditions, mainly: metaphor, irony, paradox, oxymoron, comparison, simile and more.

Keywords: *Stylistics, Flashback, Ponto of view and Figures of Speech*.

1. Flashback

It is not possible to understand the *raison d'être* of some events without finding explanation in other events, which previously took place in the past. The author therefore gives flashback in order to illuminate the reader's mind and to restore the link in events.

Then, a flashback is a device that allows the writer to present events that happened before the time of current narrative or the current events in the fiction. The flashback techniques include memories, dreams, and stories of the past told by characters to fill in the reader about a character, a place or a background to a conflict. It may be a part of a film that goes back in time to show what happened earlier in the story. It has the purpose of enlightening the part of the story, to understand the next episode of the story. In other word Flash back is a reference to the past in relationship with what is being related presently.

In Song for Night, this passage presents the use of flashback by the author:

> ***It was** a Wednesday. How **I remember** that detail is unclear given that nearly all **my memories** are mixed up, as though I have taken a fall and jumbled the **images**: probably a result of concussion brought on by the explosion. Wednesday, **late afternoon**: and the sky heavy with dark clouds.*
> ***(Song for Night, 33)***

2. Point of View

In a Handbook for the study of fiction by Lewis, we are told that the point of view is the position from which the events and characters are seen. We may determine the point of view by defining the viewer through the eyes actions and characters are seen.

Narrative point of view or narrative perspective describes the position of the narrator, that is, the character of the storyteller, in relation to the story being told. It can be thought of as a camera mounted on the narrator's shoulder that can also look back inside the narrator's mind.

With the *first-person* point of view, a story is revealed through a narrator who is also explicitly a character within his or her own story. In a first person narrative, the narrator can create a close relationship between the reader and the writer. Therefore, the narrator reveals the plot by referring to this viewpoint character with forms of "I" (that is, the narrator is a person who openly acknowledges his or her own existence) or, when part of a larger group, "we". Frequently, the narrator is the protagonist, whose inner thoughts are expressed to the audience, even if not to any of the other characters.

In song for Night, the passage bellow confirms the use of first person point of view by Chris Abani.

> ***I*** *have been in a pack with the other* ***mine*** *diffusers. Even then,* ***we*** *all relied on Ijeoma to guide* ***us****. She always knew the right thing to do, and the right time to do it. God knows* ***I*** *miss her, love her. Loved her. But* ***I*** *can't think about that now.* ***I*** *must move.* ***I*** *glance around me and sift my memory for ideas, guide points.* ***I*** *look up, thinking perhaps the stars will guide me, but there are hardly any and* ***I*** *have forgotten the names of the constellations and their relationships anyway. The only thing* ***I*** *can remember is the phrase, follow the big drinking gourd home.* ***I*** *try to make out the big dip of its shape, but clouds and treetops are occluding everything. Honing my fear to an edge,* ***I*** *step off, sinking into the depths of the forest. (****Song for Night, 23).***

A conscious narrator, as a human participant of past events, is an incomplete witness by definition, unable to fully see and comprehend events in their entirety as they unfurl, not necessarily objective in their inner thoughts or sharing them fully, and furthermore may be pursuing some hidden agenda. Forms include temporary first-person narration as a story within a story, wherein a narrator or character observing the telling of a story by another is reproduced in full, temporarily and without interruption shifting narration to the speaker. The first-person narrator can also be the focal character.

Rare are fictional books written in third person point of view. In The *Thing Around Your Neck*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's mastery of narration proved the use of second person of view possibility in whole Short story.

Abani's use of second person point of view is seen when two characters dialogue about something. Like it is in these lines:

> *"****You*** *are lucky I was trained in West Point, otherwise I would just blow* ***your*** *brains out for challenging me. But I am a civilized man.* ***You*** *want to see the manual? It is here"—he tapped his forehead—"that way it can never be lost, nor we. We can never be lost as long as we follow the manual. The manual is like the rules of etiquette for war. Follow the protocols I shall show* ***you*** *from it and* ***you*** *will survive. As for seeing it, the only way that can happen is if* ***you*** *split my head open. Do* ***you*** *want to split my head open?" Ijeoma shook her head.*
> *"Good. If* ***you*** *don't want me to split* ***your*** *head open,* ***you*** *should follow orders!"*

The *second-person* point of view is a point of view where the audience is made a character. This is done with the use of the pronouns "you", "your", and "yours." The narrator is trying to address the audience, not necessarily directly, but rather to administer more of a connection.

In the *third-person* narrative mode, characters are referred to by the narrator as "he", "she", or "they", but never as "I" or "we" (first-person), or "you" (second-person). This makes it clear that the narrator is an unspecified entity or uninvolved person who conveys the story and is not a character of any kind within the story, or at least is not referred to as such.

Abani used third person point of view in the following lines:

> ***She*** *had been a neighbor in a nearby tenement when* ***Elvis*** *and* ***Sunday*** *arrived in Lagos, and although* ***his*** *father was fleeing bankruptcy and a loss at the polls, Comfort somehow thought* ***he*** *had prospects;* ***he*** *was, after all, educated and had been a Board of Education superintendent.* ***She*** *began to woo* ***him****, and at the time, Elvis. Back then* ***she*** *allowed* ***Elvis*** *to call* ***her*** *Aunt*
> *Comfort instead of ma'am, and* ***she*** *cooked elaborate dinners for* ***him*** *and* ***his*** *father. Then, a few short months after this romance started,* ***she*** *simply moved in with* ***them****, bringing* ***her*** *three children, two boys and the youngest, a girl.* ***Elvis*** *didn't understand why, as* ***she*** *had the bigger place, while* ***he*** *and* ***his*** *father had a small two-bedroom apartment.* ***He*** *figured it would perhaps have been a blow to* ***his*** *father's ego to have to move into a woman's place. It seemed to Elvis that* ***she*** *just appeared in their home.* ***He*** *went to school and when* ***he*** *got home,* ***she*** *and* ***her*** *children were there. No explanation was ever offered* ***him****, and no one consulted* ***him****. But then, why would they?* ***He*** *was only a child. (GraceLand, 39)*

Traditionally, third-person narration is the most commonly used narrative mode in literature. It does not require that the narrator's existence be explained or developed as a particular character, as with a first-person narrator. It thus allows a story to be told without detailing any information about the teller (narrator) of the story. Instead, a third-person narrator is often simply some disembodied "commentary" or "voice", rather than a fully developed character. Sometimes, third-person narration is called the "he/she" perspective.

Another kind of point of view is dramatic point of view. We speak of dramatic point of view when the author uses dialogues to tell the story.
The passages below uses dramatic point of view:

> *"Do you live here?"*
> *"Yes, here in Bridge City."*
> *"I guess that's why you became a beggar."*
> *"Someone does not become a beggar; we are made beggars."*
> *"Is there no work you can do?"*
> *"I beg. Dat is my work."*
> *"But where is your pride?"*
> *"I cannot afford it," Caesar said, laughing.*
> *(GraceLand,27).*

3. Figures of Speech

In European languages, figures of speech are generally classified in five major categories: (1) figures of resemblance or relationship, (2) figures of emphasis or understatement, (3) figures of sound, (4) verbal games and gymnastics, and (5) errors.

The first category comprises **simile**; **metaphor**; **kenning** (a concise compound or figurative phrase replacing a common noun, especially in Old Germanic, Old Norse, and Old English poetry), conceit (usually a simile or metaphor that forms an extremely ingenious or fanciful parallel between apparently dissimilar or incongruous objects or situations ; **parallelism** (wherein phrases, sentences, and paragraphs are arranged so that they balance one element with another of equal importance and similar wording), personification; metonymy; synecdoche; and **euphemism** (using a mild word or group of words instead of one that is unpleasant or offensive).

The second category entails figures of emphasis or understatement. Examples include **hyperbole**; **litotes**; **rhetorical question**; **antithesis** (strongly contrasting ideas placed in sharp juxtaposition), as in the saying "Art is long, and Time is fleeting"; **climax** (achieved by the arrangement of units of meaning— words, phrases, clauses, or sentences—in an ascending order of importance), **bathos** (an unsuccessful attempt to portray **pathos** in art, sometimes intentionally by authors for comedic effect and sometimes unintentionally).

Other figures of emphasis or understatement comprise **paradox** (an apparently self-contradictory statement in order to arrest attention and provoke fresh thought); **oxymoron** (a word or group of words that is self-contradicting), and **irony** (wherein the real meaning of a statement is concealed or contradicted).
The third category consists of figures of sound, e.g., **alliteration** (the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words or stressed syllables), and other devices of sound entail **onomatopoeia** and **anaphora**.

The fourth category comprises verbal games and gymnastics. These include **pun** (a humorous use of a word in such a way as to suggest different meanings or applications, or a play on words); and **anagram** (the transposing of the letters of a word or group of words to produce other words that possess meaning, preferably bearing some logical relation to the original).

The fifth category consists of errors, including **malapropism** (verbal blunder in which one word is replaced by another similar in sound but different in meaning); **periphrasis** (a roundabout or indirect manner of writing or speaking); **spoonerism** (a reversal of the initial letters or syllables of two or more words). Figures involving a change in sense, such as **metaphor**, **simile**s, and irony, are called **tropes**.

3.1 Metaphor

For Rakes and Marudur (2012), metaphor is an implied simile. It does not, like the simile, state that one thing is like another or acts as another, but takes that for granted and proceeds as if two things were one. It is a figure of speech, which compares two things by identifying one with the other. Metaphor is popular in primitive speech, in music, in the speech of the unlearned and learned, in that of children, in the profession argot of theatre, in short and in everyday life occupations.
The opening lines of *Song for Night* presents a metaphor and paradox speech that has been quoted by most scholars and critics:

> ***What you hear is not my voice***.
> *I have not spoken in three years: not since I left boot camp. It has been three years of a senseless war, and though the reasons for it are clear, and though we will continue to fight until we are ordered to stop—and probably for a while after that—none of us can remember the hate that led us here.* ***We are simply fighting to survive the war****. It is a strange place to be at fifteen, bereft of hope and very nearly of your humanity. But that is where I am nonetheless. I joined up at twelve. We all wanted to join then: to fight. There was a clear enemy, and having lost loved ones to them, we all wanted revenge (Song for Night, 17).*

Abani's description of protagonist is dull and metaphoric. He made him speak by denying that the voice he spoke was not his. The understanding of My Lucky's vocal cords cutting and his inability to speak is expressed and clarified within the novel, but this doesn't deny the character's own defense. This contradiction, paradox and metaphor explain the conflict between the author and the character.

In *GraceLand*, the book opens with this metaphor:

> *This is the* ***kola nut****. This seed* ***is a star****. This star* ***is life****. This star* ***is us****. The Igbo hold the kola nut to* ***be sacred****, offering it at every* ***gathering*** *and to every* ***visitor****, as a* ***blessing****, as refreshment or to seal a covenant. The prayer that precedes the breaking and sharing of the nut is:* ***He who brings kola, brings life****. (GraceLand, 7)*

Metaphor of *Kola nut* is more frequent in African literature. Kola nut represent many things in African culture. It is the symbol of power, love, unity, agreement, life and people.

3.2 Interrogation

Rakes and Marudur (2012) define interrogation as the asking of something of a question not for the sake of getting an answer, but to put a point more effectively. Also known as rhetorical question, interrogation asks a question merely for the sake of rhetorical effect. In other word interrogation question asked without need to be answered.
In Graceland, the following interrogation needs to be mentioned:

> *While he waited, Elvis stared into the muddy puddles imagining what life, if any, was trying to crawl its way out. His face, reflected back at him, seemed to belong to a stranger, floating there like a ghostly head in a comic book. His hair was closely cropped, almost shaved clean. His eyebrows were two perfect arcs, as though they had been shaped in a salon. His dark eyes looked tired, the whites flecked with red. He parted his full lips and tried a smile on his reflection, and his reflection snarled back. Shit, he thought, I look like shit. As he sloshed to the bus stop, one thought repeated in his mind:*
> ***What do I have to do with all this?*** *(GraceLand, 9)*

Abani describes the moment in which the character worked on his physical appearance, after washing, cleaning his hair, face; eyebrows in a salon. The mixture of past and present appeared inside him. The joy of being handsome and the sadness of his past pushed him to ask himself this question above without expecting the answer either from him or from another person.

3.3 Enumeration

A figure of speech which consists of mentioning within the same line or paragraph, many things, different names or objects. In addition, enumeration is the fact of adding other ideas in the same line.

> *That had been three weeks ago, and hardly a day went by without Elvis wondering if* ***Redemption*** *had survived the* ***Colonel's men****, and if so, where he was. In a few weeks he had lost everyone in Lagos who meant anything to him—****his father****, the* ***King****,* ***Redemption****, even* ***Comfort****. He was occasionally tempted to ask* ***Madam Caro*** *for* ***Comfort****'s address, but always decided against it. (GraceLand, 214)*

Elvis mentioned within the same paragraph all people whom he missed, he loved; he wanted to have them with him, but found himself alone. This love enumeration introduces the post war horrors and woes in the memory of the protagonist.

3.4 Hyperbole

From Greek: "transposed" or "inverted", it is a transposition or inversion of usual word order. The device is often used in poetry, as in line 13 from Canto II of Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1712–14): "Bright as the sun, her eyes the gazers strike."

> ***Bridge City was a dangerous place****, and when darkness fell, it was easy to be very much alone in the crowds that milled everywhere.* ***Hundreds of oil lamps flickered unsteadily on tables, trays, mats spread on the ground and any other surface*** *the hawkers who flocked to Bridge City at night could find to display their wares. Yet even all that light could not penetrate* ***the deeper shadows*** *that hung like presences everywhere. (GraceLand, 213).*

3.5 Anaphora

Anaphora is a sound figure of speech mostly used in poetry and song in which the repetition of same sound in different lines is commonly used.

> ***Perhaps*** *I should change my name to Unlucky.*
> ***Perhaps*** *this is karma.*
> ***Perhaps*** *this is how we learn love. (Song for Night, 34)*

3.6 Comparison

A literary device concerns to comparing one thing to another, or a thing to a group of things, or one group to another. It includes metaphor and simile concerning the degree of the sentence.
The extract bellow uses comparison:

> *What they couldn't know was that* ***in the silence of our heads***, ***the screams of those dying around us were louder than if they still had their voices***. *(Song for Night, 29)*

3.7 Personification

Is a figure of speech in which human characteristics are attributed to an abstract quality, animal, or inanimate object.
In the following lines, Abani used personification:

> *Filtering the dark into gray shadows, fingers still reading the Braille on my arm,* ***I try to force my eyes to adjust****, but my night vision is not very good. The forest isn't familiar territory despite years of jungle and war, and the silence is disconcerting particularly because for the past three years I haven't been alone at night. (Song for Night, 22).*

3.8 Simile

Is a figure of speech involving a comparison between two unlike entities. In the simile, unlike the metaphor, the resemblance is explicitly indicated by the words "like" or "as." The common heritage of similes in everyday speech usually reflects simple comparisons based on the natural world or familiar domestic objects, as in "He eats like a bird," "He is as smart as a whip," or "He is as slow as molasses." In some cases the original aptness of the comparison is lost, as in the expression "dead as a doornail."
In Song for Night, Abani used much comparison to express the confusion in the mind and speech of My Lucky. In the following lines, one example is provided:

> ***Every star is a soul***, ***every soul is a destiny meant to be lived out****. They fill the night sky, revealing* ***like*** *a diviner's spread the destiny of those gifted in reading their drift, their endless shift,* ***like*** *a desert, revealing and burying the way alternately. (Song for Night, 61)*

This comparison, paradox and metaphor sentence is concluded by a simile made possible by the inversion of the sentence.

3.9 Paradox

Is apparently self-contradictory statement, the underlying meaning of which is revealed only by careful scrutiny. The purpose of a paradox is to arrest attention and provoke fresh thought. When a paradox is compressed into two words as in "loud silence," "lonely crowd," or "living death," it is called an oxymoron.

> *In the opening of Song for Night, Abani used this Paradox speech: "****What you hear is not my voice****" to characterize the protagonist condition after the civil war's horror in postcolonial Africa.*

4. Conclusion

This paper has focused on three elements of style: Flashback, Point of view and Figures of speech. The use of them by Chris Abani is not hazardous. Firstly, his choice of flash back is to explain and make clear the understanding of the present event by referring to what was said or happened before. Besides first person point of view in *Song for Night* and third person point of view in *GraceLand*, the two books are also linked by their common use of Dramatic Point of View in conversations and Second Person Point of View while speakers address the speech to their interlocutor. The choice of figures of speech is

related to the situation every character was facing. Thus, the two books are dominated by metaphor and many other comparisons.

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