A stylo-rhetoric critique of rhetorical questions in N.G. Sibiya’s selected essays in *Amalangabi*

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**ABSTRACT**

This article deals with rhetorical questions as a literary device in N.G. Sibiya’s selected essays in *Amalangabi* (1993). Rhetorical questions are employed for different purposes in literature, and this discourse intends to discover the rhetorical purpose they serve in Sibiya’s essays specifically. The study is motivated by the discovery that, even though rhetorical questions are used artistically in N.G. Sibiya’s essays, there seems to be no work, so far, that has been done to examine this. Since the study observes the rhetoric or stylistic use of rhetorical questions, literary stylistics is adopted as a theory to theoretically ground the analysis. Textual analysis, as a qualitative research technique, is also adopted because data is primarily collected, organised, and interpreted from Sibiya’s two essays (Amalimi and Izibongo). The analysis of data will highlight how Sibiya employs rhetorical questions for different stylistic effects in his essays. This includes their emphasis and persuasive effects. It also includes their role as a channel to express strong emotions, their ability to draw readers to the problem and promote critical discussions, and their ability to challenge common assumptions and beliefs.

Introduction

The concept ‘stylo-rhetoric’ is made up of two words: the word ‘stylo-‘ (from style) and the noun ‘rhetoric’, which is relatively defined as the effective and persuasive art of writing (MacMillan English Dictionary, 2002). This concept is proposed here to denote the idea that style is viewed from a rhetorical effect point of view. The concept of ‘stylo-rhetoric critique’, in relation to rhetorical questions, is thus used in this paper to imply that rhetorical questions are analysed according to their stylistic rhetoric significance, and Sibiya’s ‘Amalimi’ and ‘Izibongo’, in the volume *Amalangabi* (1993), are the selected essays subject to critique.

According to Wood (1981: 230), a rhetorical question is a question asked for stylistic effect. It does not require an answer. Pretorius, in Tjatji (2001: 78), similarly defines a rhetorical question as a question where the answer is obvious or self-evident. This means there are no required efforts needed for the question to be answered. Guth, in Serudu (1987: 276), supports this by saying: “A rhetorical question has a built-in answer. It seems to leave the decision to the reader, but it is worded in such a way that only one answer is possible”. These definitions reveal the nature of a rhetorical question. It can be defined as a question that does not require any answer. The answer is normally known by the writer and reader. The purpose is not for the question to be answered but for stylistic effect. The writer aims to achieve something by using a rhetorical question, especially emphasising an idea or fact. Readers are essentially not expected to make some effort to find the answer.

Sibiya’s essays, in *Amalangabi* (1993), have not been given the amount of scholarly attention they deserve. There are a few studies that have focused on these essays, generally. The notable one, for instance, is by Mtmume & Dlamini (2022) who observe different forms of word repetition in Sibiya’s essays. They explore how anaphora, epistrophe, and conduplicatio are used for emphasis and rhythmic effects in the analysed essays. To the best of the researcher’s knowledge, this is the only study, so far, that has been done on Sibiya’s essays in *Amalangabi*.
Even though there are few studies that have examined Sibiya’s essays in general, there are other studies, in the African indigenous languages of South Africa, that have observed rhetorical questions in essays and poetry. For instance, Zukula (2017) examines rhetorical questions as one of the figures of speech in D.B.K. Mhilongo’s isiZulu essays in Amazembe. Thwala (2000), on the other hand, studies C.T. Msimang’s isiZulu poetry and discusses rhetorical questions as one of the several aspects. The same is done by Serudu (1987), who critiques O.K. Matsepe’s Northern Sotho novels. Here, the scholar also considers rhetorical questions as one of the rhetoric aspects in the selected novels.

The use of rhetorical questions in literary works is also observed by Qwabe (2015) who analyses and highlights elements of resistance in J.C. Dlamini’s isiZulu poems written during the apartheid period. Rhetorical questions are used even here as one of the techniques the poet employs in the writing of his poems. Similarly, Mxwali (2022) analyses rhetorical questions, metaphor and simile in selected isiZulu poetry found in the following poetry volumes: Zidla Inkotha, Induka Ebandla, Isibusoiso Sezinyembezi, Izimbali Zesiwo, and Izimbongi Izolo Nanamuhlu. With regards to rhetorical questions, the scholar discusses epiplexis, erotesis and anthypophora as different types of rhetorical questions. The above-mentioned studies observe rhetorical questions in essays, poetry, and the novel genre respectively.

The highlighted works above are some of the identified studies that focus on rhetorical questions in some literary works of the African indigenous languages of South Africa. From this relative and brief review, it is evident enough that, so far, there is no study that has analysed the use of rhetorical questions in Sibiya’s essays specifically.

Every work of literature is a product of literary devices and elements. Sithole (2017:1) holds the view that the success of fictional writing is dependent upon the author’s use of literary devices. This is also true with non-fictional genres such as essays. Literary devices enhance any author’s work presentation, whether in fictional or non-fictional form. They beautify a work of art (Chanh, 2021: 115). Commenting on the significance of literary aspects, Lutrin and Pincus (2002: 95) state: “On surface, a book tells a story. However, on further analysis, one reaches a deeper level of understanding and appreciation. Every reader gains something personal and subjective from reading experience”. This view highlights how literary devices contribute to unpacking the true meaning of literature when examined. Literary devices are essential and examining them carefully enables readers to have a better understanding of the author’s intended message. They are a foundation that enables readers to understand and respond to any literary work (Martinez & Harmon, 2012: 323). When employed well, literary devices enable readers to appreciate, interpret, and analyse a literary work (Termizi et al., 2017: 13).

This article focuses on rhetorical questions as a literary device in N.G. Sibiya’s essays in Amalangabi (1993). It aims to evaluate how rhetorical questions are stylistically used for rhetoric effects in the essays ‘Amalimi’ and ‘Izibongo’. The study is motivated by the fact that, even though Sibiya uses rhetorical questions in an artistic manner in his essays, there is no study to date that has observed this aspect of his works. The genre of essays, in general, has not received the amount of attention it deserves in the isiZulu language. This research paper thus finds its scientific contribution of knowledge in this sense, as it seeks to add to the limited existing body of literature on the genre of essays. The study adopts textual analysis as qualitative research technique and literary stylistics as a theoretical lens.

**Research & Methodology**

The qualitative research method is adopted in this study. Anderson (2010: 1) maintains that this method focusses on the collection and interpretation of data in a non-numerical way. It is concerned with the meaning, experience and processes people attach to things (Aspers & Corte, 2019: 146). It is also concerned with answering questions that contribute to the understanding of meaning, for the purpose of exploring the social world (Fossey et al., 2002: 717). Qualitative research method seeks to explicate why things are the way they are. In literature, this method would devote itself to the interpretation of the content to explain the reason why and how things are the way they are (Sibiya, 2022: 14).

Qualitative research methods employ different techniques in attempt to explain things. Textual analysis, for instance, is one of these techniques since this method involves the process of analysing texts to interpret meaning (Jackson et al., 2007: 24). It is one of the many qualitative methods used to evaluate textual data (Forman & Damschroder, 2008: 40). While other techniques such as interviews, observations, etc., focus on extracting data empirically, textual analysis collects and interprets data from the content found in texts. The present study adopts this technique since data is extracted primarily from essays in Amalangabi, a volume consisting of short stories and essays. Essentially, data is systematically organised, collected, and interpreted from the selected essays to determine the stylistic and rhetoric effects of rhetorical questions.

**Theoretical framework**

‘Theory’ is a familiar concept in academic discourse. It is familiar because there is no research that can be done without a theory. Theory guides research and contributes to sound interpretation of data and findings. It also links the research problem, methodology, and the review of literature in research. Theories are necessary in research because they are a valuable tool in the quest to provide credibility in research works.
Defining the concept of ‘theory’, Kivunja (2018: 45) explains that it encompasses a set of ideas that are intended to explicate or make predictions about phenomena. He further states that a theory is applied in specific domains so that its principles can illuminate what is happening, and for what cause. A similar stance is maintained by Abend (2008: 178), who explains that theories are intended to give an account of a social phenomenon. Steward et al. (2011: 222) aver that theory is not references, data, list of variables, diagrams, or predictions. These aspects may be allowed to support theory, but they are not theory. They are merely used in the process to build up ideas to explain why things are the way they are, and that then becomes theory.

From the above scholarly insights, in the definition of theory, the words “explicate”, “predict”, and “phenomena” seem to feature most. This explains that theories have a sole aim and that is to explain and predict occurrences or phenomena. In this instance, phenomena are relative. For literary scholars, the phenomenon referred to is literature. The concept ‘literary theory’ was thus coined for this reason. It was an attempt to contextualise theories to literature. There are several reasons to justify why different disciplines use theories. In literature, they are used to interpret literary texts. Literary theories are essentially tools employed to explain and make predictions about a specific aspect of literature (Auger, 2010: 311). Literary stylistics is one of the literary theories employed for such purposes.

The study of language usage in texts is known as stylistics. The concept stylistics is derived from the concept of style. Stylistics is a term used to refer to the study of style, with reference to the use of language in an artistic manner. Alluding to this view and commenting on stylistics, Burke (2014: 1) avers:

Stylistics is the study and analysis of texts; it is in particular the study and analysis of literary texts. The origins of stylistics go back to the poetics, and especially to the rhetoric, of the ancient classical world. In ancient rhetoric it is principally the third of the five canons which is of importance to stylistics. The anciet Greeks called this third canon ‘Lexis’, and the Romans referred to it as ‘elocutio’. We know it today as style.

The scholarly view above highlights that stylistics is concerned with the analysis and interpretation of literary texts to determine aspects of style. Baldick (2001: 247) explains that stylistics aims to unpack the literary and linguistic choices found in a literary and non-literary text. Similarly, Bashiruddin (2018: 121) maintains that stylistics is a literary approach discourse from a linguistic orientation. Stylistics is the study of style, and since style can be studied from different perspectives, stylistics also has different approaches (Wales, 2011: 399). They can range from literary criticism, linguistics, structuralism, semiotics, etc. In this study, stylistics is viewed mainly from the literary criticism perspective since the focus is on observing the artistic effects of rhetorical questions, and not necessarily their form, for instance.

It is evident from the scholarly insights above that stylistics is a framework that is centered on uncovering what constitutes style in literary discourse. A literary stylistician would thus be an individual who is interested in understanding how language is manipulated for artistic purposes in literary discourse. Since the study at hand focuses on the artistic use of rhetorical questions, stylistics is perceived as a suitable theoretical lens. This approach will assist in theoretically grounding the analysis effectively.

**Summaries of selected essays in Amalangabi**

The section below provides the synopsis of N.G. Sibiya’s ‘Amalimi’ and ‘Izibongo’. This is done for the purpose of providing context to the two essays. It is an attempt to lay a foundation for the next section, which will focus on the analysis of rhetorical questions in the two essays under investigation.

**Amalimi**

This essay is about stutters. It starts with the author’s reflections on the advantages and disadvantages he personally encountered from childhood as a stuttering person. He goes on to show his concerns about the marginalisation people with stutters suffer from. Sibiya argues that stuttering people are not given equal opportunities to access vacancies such as broadcasting. They suffer even in their workplaces as they are regarded as unable to occupy certain positions. Sibiya’s concern is also about the stereotypes levelled against people with stutters. For example, he points out that stuttering people are deemed as disabled and unable to do descent tasks such as teaching and singing.

**Izibongo**

This essay is about the importance of praise names. Sibiya argues that praise names are part of African people’s identity. To support his claim, he makes reference to Dingane’s, and Shaka’s praise names. He also makes reference to soccer teams with praise names such as Orlando Pirates and AmaZulu football clubs. The author states that praise names reveal the nature and history of Africans. He argues that Dingane and Shaka’s praise names reveal their nature and history. In attempt to support the view that praise names are an African identity, Sibiya argues that historical prominent non-African figures such as Jan van Riebeeck, Gandhi, Hitler, and Napoleon Bonaparte have done a lot in their lives, and yet they do not have praise names. The author condemns some of the non-African names people have adopted and argues that good praise names cannot be produced from them. He gives the following three names as examples: Ace, Shoes, and Tiger.
The analysis of rhetorical questions in N.G. Sibiya’s selected essays

Sibiya uses rhetorical questions in an artistic manner in his essays. The first examples of these questions are taken from the essay ‘Amalimi’. This is considered from the excerpt below:

*Pho kungabambani, kuvimbeni ukuba izingane zikazwe uma usumi phambi kwazo? Ungahlulwa yini ukungingiza, uphendule imibuzo yazo njengoba kuye kwenzeke engxoxwe ni ejaywelelile?*

Empeleku kuvimbeni ekutheni iziphathimandla zenzu futhi zibantu isikhathi esthwe xaza othisha abanaamalimi? (p.3)

(But what can withhold, withstand school learners from hearing you when you are standing in front of them? What can stop you from answering their questions while you stutter, just like in any conversation?)

The rhetorical questions above are a response to the comments and ideas people have about stuttering teachers. Readers and society at large are invited from giving stuttering teachers reasonable time?)

To give a brief background of this extract from the essay, Sibiya is commenting on the misconception people have about the possibility of having a stuttering teacher. He is reflecting on his personal experiences. He explains that people disapprove whenever he talks about being a teacher. They question how he is going to teach since he is stuttering. The rhetorical questions above are a response to the comments and ideas people have about a stuttering teacher.

Rhetorical questions can be used for emphasis purposes. The first rhetorical question in the above extract serves this purpose. Sibiya is emphasising that learners will have no problem understanding a stuttering teacher in asking: *Pho kungabambani, kuvimbeni ukuba izingane zikazwe uma usumi phambi kwazo?* (But what can withhold, withstand school learners from hearing you when you are standing in front of them?). The question shows that Sibiya already knows the answer and does not expect the answer from readers. The rhetorical question is an emphasis that stuttering teachers can teach just like any other teacher.

Another purpose of a rhetorical question is that it can be used as a tool to express strong feelings. The rhetorical question above also expresses Sibiya’s feelings; it expresses his frustration and state of being surprised. He is struggling to understand why people think a stuttering teacher would struggle to teach. The perception that learners would have problems in understanding a stuttering teacher is a surprise to him. He seems to be frustrated by this. This is revealed in the words he says just before he poses that first rhetorical question:

*Yikho nje uma ngisoxa indaba yokuthi ngizimisele ukuba nguthisha ngomuso kuye kube nokumangala kwabantini: Uyofundisa kanjani unamanalimi?*

Uyimhudane engachazi eumbuso onjengalona. Ukhombisa izinga lokusebenza kancane kwemiqondo yabantu abaningi. Umuntu osuke ebuba lo mbede wombuzo uye akholwe ngukuthi njengoba nisoxa nje nisuka nizwana, nibuzana, niphendulana. (p.3)

(That is why, when I explain the idea that I want to be a teacher in future, a lot of people get amazed and ask: How are you going to teach as you are stuttering?)

This kind of a question is nonsense and inexplicable. It shows that a lot of people use their minds a little. A person who asks this ridiculous question forgets that when people are speaking, they hear and answer one another.)

The words Sibiya uses show his surprise and frustration. They illustrate his emotions. With the bold words in the second sentence, Sibiya argues that by asking how a stuttering person can teach, people are revealing their lower level of thinking. In the third sentence, as shown in the bold part, he argues that a person who asks such a question asks a ridiculous question. These words express emotions. They show that the author is not happy with how people think. The rhetorical question: *Pho kungabambani, kuvimbeni ukuba izingane zikazwe uma usumi phambi kwazo?* (But what can withhold, withstand school learners from hearing you when you stand in front of them?) comes right after these words. The author’s feelings of surprise and frustration are embedded in this rhetorical question. Sibiya shares his feelings with readers through this question and readers have an idea of how he feels.

A rhetorical question can also be used to challenge assumptions, beliefs or ideas that might exist in the reader’s mind. The second rhetorical question: *Ungahlulwa yini ukungingiza, uphendule imibuzo yazo njengoba kuye kwenzeke engxoxwe ni ejaywelelile?* (What can stop you from answering their questions while stuttering, just like in any conversation?) serves this purpose. Sibiya’s question highlights how he personally sees a generally wrong belief, assumption, and idea that stuttering teachers cannot survive in the classroom. The author uses this rhetorical question to challenge these beliefs, assumptions, and ideas. He believes that if stuttering people can converse with people in general, they can also answer learners’ questions in the classroom. This question reveals how much he believes in stuttering teachers’ potential to do well. The rhetorical question is therefore employed as an attempt to alter the general preconceived ideas that might exist in the readers’ minds about stuttering teachers. Readers and society at large are invited to the discussion. The rhetorical question queries their assumptions, beliefs, and ideas.

The rhetorical question above does not only challenge readers’ assumptions, beliefs, and ideas, it also emphasises that there is nothing that can withhold a stuttering teacher from communicating effectively with learners in the classroom. Sibiya’s state of being amazed is also revealed from this very same rhetorical question. He seems to be amazed that people think a stuttering teacher would not be able to communicate effectively with learners.
It should also be noted that a rhetorical question can also be employed to promote discussions that would inspire new thoughts, ideas, and debates. This is true when considering the third rhetorical question in the extract from the essay. The author asks: *Empeleni kuvimbeni ekutheni izikhathimandla zemfundo zibanike isikhathi esithe xasa othisha abanamalini?* (Frankly, what stops education authorities from giving stuttering teachers reasonable time to accommodate them in the classroom?). Sibiya uses this rhetorical question to introduce a new thought or idea. The question reveals how he suggests that the education system can accommodate stuttering teachers by adding more time in the classroom than to disregard them. He is making a point and a new suggestion with the question. Sibiya uses this rhetorical question to present his idea to the readers.

The rhetorical question above has a potential to also spark a debate even with the South African education system, especially when looking at the fact that South Africa is a democratic country where equality is presumably prioritised. The ideals of the notion of democracy are put to test by this rhetorical question. It is used to highlight an issue that needs to be critically observed. This is in line with Thwala’s (2000: 179) assertion: "The aim of this question is to highlight certain facts for further attention and thorough scrutiny". The emphasis effect of a rhetorical question is also evident in the same rhetorical question. Sibiya emphasises that there is nothing that can stop education authorities from giving stuttering teachers additional time in the classroom, so as to accommodate them.

A rhetorical question can also be used to draw readers to the problem the writer is also trying to solve, and this is evident in the same essay above. Sibiya uses the third rhetorical question above to draw readers to the problem as well. The problem he identifies is what he believes is a misconception from people that stuttering individuals are not suitable for the teaching profession. Abioye (2009: 4) states that a rhetorical question also encourages readers to reflect and think. This is the case here; the third rhetorical question also draws readers to the problem with the intention of making them to think and reflect about what the education authorities may do to accommodate teachers who are stuttering.

Sibiya’s employment of rhetorical questions is also found in the essay ‘Izibongo.’ In this essay, the author writes about African praise names. He argues that good praise names cannot be produced from the modern non-African names Africans have adopted. A rhetorical question is into effect to question these modern names in the example below:


> (Even with soccer players there are no longer any who have beautiful praise names with rhythm. There are more of the likes of Ace, Tiger, and Shoes. These names do not explain anything. They don’t mean anything. What does Shakes really mean?)

This is another example that shows Sibiya’s employment of a rhetorical question for emphasis purposes. In the example above, he argues that African names are better than the current ones that Africans have adopted. Sibiya argues that good praise names were better produced from African names such as those of Shaka and Dingane and by asking: *kusho ukuthini nje ukuthi Shakes?* (What does Shakes actually mean?), he emphasises the point that currently some names do not have meaning within the African context as good praise names cannot be produced from them. Sibiya uses the rhetorical question to reiterate and emphasise his point.

There are also instances where Sibiya uses rhetorical questions to persuade and convince. This is to be shown through the example below:


> (I have never heard the praise names of Napoleon Bonaparte. I have never heard the praise names of Jan van Riebeeck. Does Gandhi have praise names? Look at Hitler, after so many things he did in his life, he did not have praise names that explain all he did. It is unlike Shaka. It is unlike Dingane.)

The rhetorical question from the extract above serves to persuade and convince. The context of this passage shows that the author compares prominent figures from around the world with local ones. It is well known to readers that Gandhi does not have praise names. The aim of the author is not to get an answer from this rhetorical question. It is rather to create a persuasive effect as Balldick (2001: 218) says that a rhetorical question is:

> A question asked for the sake of persuasive effect rather than a genuine request for information, the speaker implying that the answer is too obvious to require a reply.

The purpose of this rhetorical question is to persuade and convince the reader that non-African names do not have praise names. This rhetorical question does not require an answer. Sibiya is persuading readers by emphasising that Gandhi does not have praise names. His comment about Napoleon Bonaparte, Jan van Riebeeck and Hitler supports the idea that non-African figures do not have praise names. On the other hand, it is widely known that Shaka and Dingane have praise names. For example, one of Shaka’s praise names is “*Usishaka kasiShayeki*” (Nyembezi, 1958: 19). *Isishaka* is a stomach disease that women used to suffer from to the extent that they would look pregnant. When Shaka’s mother was pregnant with Shaka, it was believed that she was suffering from this
disease. It was for this reason that he was named Shaka. The praise name “Usishaka kashishayeki” thus expresses the idea that Shaka survived rejection from his paternal family as a result of his mother’s pregnancy unmarried to king Senzangakhona (Nyembezi, 1958: 28).

One of Dingane’s praise names is “Wald’uPiti kumabhunu” (Nyembezi, 1958:48) and it results from his act of killing Piet Retief. These praise names support Sibiya’s point that Shaka and Dingane have praise names explaining events that took place in their lives, unlike Hitler, Gandhi, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Jan van Riebeeck.

**Conclusion**

The paper has discussed the use of rhetorical questions in Sibiya’s essays. It analysed how Sibiya employs rhetorical questions for stylistic and rhetoric effect. Examples of the use of rhetorical questions were taken from two of Sibiya’s essays: ‘Amalimi’ and ‘Izibongo’. It was discovered that the author successfully employs rhetorical questions to fulfill different purposes. To name them, he employs them to express his surprise and frustration, to challenge assumptions, beliefs, and ideas, to promote discussions that inspires new ideas and debates, to draw readers to the problem that he is trying to solve, to encourage thinking and reflection, to emphasise a point, and to persuade and convince. The author uses rhetorical questions to artistically convey meaning and express his ideas as well. Some of the rhetorical questions also played a role in encouraging readers to take part in the discussions the author proposes. They make readers to reflect and think deep. Above all, they help make Sibiya’s essays to be interesting and meaningful. There is richness in his writings as a result.

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