The Significance of Ndebele Historical Fiction

By Samukele Hadebe, African Languages & Literature,
University of Zimbabwe. samukeleh@yahoo.co.uk

Introduction

The very first two Ndebele novels published in 1956 and 1957 respectively are historical fiction. In the first Ndebele poetry anthology, *Imbongi Zalamhla Layizolo* about a third of its poems is praise-poetry of historical figures. Ten out of the 25 Ndebele books selected by the Zimbabwe International Book Fair’s Best 75 Books Project (2004) are historical fiction. This prevalence of historical fiction in Ndebele be it novels, poetry or drama deserves critical attention. The reasons are: firstly, Ndebele history has been written largely by non-Ndebele historians and this documented history is often at variance with oral history that the majority want to believe in. Also, the historical events that are exploited in fiction are controversial in Ndebele history and some are even shunned or tabooed as topics for public discussion. It is, therefore, important to find out how creative writers deal with some of the debatable issues in Ndebele history.

The creative work is not expected or even supposed to be consistently factual like history. As creative writers are not historians, no one expects them to be factual and faithful to evidence. Nonetheless, the creative writers’ versions of historical events are popularized more than documented history. Unlike the historian, the artist has the license to twist facts deliberately and even create new characters in order to achieve the desired goals. It is the distortions, omissions and additions made by the creative writer that are interesting to the literary critic. It is these modifications and distortions that usually reflect the author’s intentions in writing that piece of work. The fiction writer consciously appeals to the reader’s emotions and chooses which events to highlight and which not to. It would seem many Ndebele people identify with the version from fiction rather than that in documented history, which, anyway was written by non-Ndebele people. In this paper I attempt to explain the prevalence of historical themes in Ndebele literature and why the creative writer may be perceived by some to have more appeal than the historian.
Delimiting Ndebele literature

It is not easy to define and delimit what is and what is not Ndebele literature. This dilemma is not peculiar to Ndebele literature alone but is shared by others too. For example, it has been argued with no consensus, as to whether literature written in English, French, Portuguese and the like constitute African literature? If literature in European languages by Africans is African literature, then it may be argued that works on Africa by Europeans should constitute African literature as well. This has created endless debate that is well documented on African literature and its criticism.

There are novels about the Ndebele written by non-Ndebele Zimbabweans, for instance, *On Trial for My Country* by Stanlake Samkange. In my opinion, this is one of the best historical novels whose theme is based on the fall of the pre-colonial Ndebele state. The Ndebele writers have not been keen in writing in English but there are exceptions, for example, some Ndebele-speaking writers contributed to *Short Writings from Bulawayo*. It is, however, debatable whether these works constitute Ndebele literature.

However, for our presentation here, we are discussing only those works originally written in Ndebele, and we may add, written by Ndebele-speaking writers.

A Brief History on the origins of the Ndebele

According to Swanepoel ‘The historicity of the work must be judged in relation to fictitious and mythological phenomena which are superimposed on the historical’. He further states that ‘questions may be asked about the historical quality or authenticity of such work’. A review of Ndebele historical fiction necessitates the understanding of that history on which it is based on. Below is a sketchy outline of the history of the Ndebele as given in history texts.

The Ndebele are a Bantu people found mainly in the western parts of Zimbabwe. Their language belongs to the Nguni sub-group of the Bantu language family. The history of
the Ndebele people dates back to 1820, when the people who are today known as the Ndebele, broke away from the then powerful Zulu kingdom (in present day KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa). The original group that left Zululand was initially called the Khumalo as their leader Mzilikazi was from the Khumalo clan. When and why the group was later renamed Ndebele is a subject that has been debated without convincing conclusions, partly because the subject is full of half-truths and myths.

Mzilikazi and his group moved northwards from Zululand into Sotho territory (the present day Gauteng province of South Africa). Mzilikazi assimilated a number of Sotho people either through persuasion or coercion, or better still, by employing both means. What can be ascertained now is that the Sotho people soon outnumbered the original Khumalos who were of Nguni descent.

In 1837 Mzilikazi’s group, by then referred to as the Ndebele, entered what is today Zimbabwe and settled in the western parts of the country that are today referred to as the Matabeleland provinces (Rasmussen 1978, Omer-Cooper 1966). It should be noted that this was the period of nation-building for the Ndebele and they achieved that through incorporating the various groups they came into contact with and were able to subdue. It is in Zimbabwe that the Ndebele people assimilated by far the largest number. These included mainly the Shona groups, especially the Kalanga and other related groups like the Nyubi, Nambya, and to some extent the Tonga. Most of these people were previously under the Rozwi empire that had been destroyed by Nguni groups under Zwangendaba, Nxaba and a woman leader Nyamazana. ‘The Rozwi empire which had been established over the Karanga inhabitants of the old Mwene Mutapa (sic) kingdom had been shattered by the invasions of Zwangendaba and Nxaba’ (Ranger). The Rozwi rulers were known as the Mambo (Shona for king) and hence in Ndebele they were referred to either as AbakaMambo (Mambo’s people) or AbeLozwi (the Rozwi).

The name Ndebele, therefore, did not refer to a single ethnic group but to a multi-ethnic nation. Ranger writes that, ‘Before 1893, I have argued, the Ndebele state was manifestly a ‘machine for multi-ethnic assimilation of peoples…There were not [any] ethnic
“Ndebele” but rather a conglomeration of peoples who were members of the Ndebele state…’

Within the newly founded Ndebele nation, which was then a kingdom, the Sotho outnumbered the Nguni while AbeLozwi far outnumbered both the Nguni and the Sotho. It seems that the problem of identity within the nation was already felt at that early stage, especially insofar as the distribution of political positions was concerned. The original Nguni group referred to itself as the AbeZansi, meaning ‘those from the south’, while the Sotho group was known as AbeNhla, meaning ‘those from the north’ and lastly the rest of the majority were AbeLozwi. It is the existence of this large component of the Ndebele people that was not of Nguni origin that has been used by colonial and post-colonial historians to perpetuate myths about Ndebele social organisation.

This researcher once wrote that ‘Most of whatever is officially known about the Ndebele people; it could be their history, their arts or their politics, are vague impressions by non-Ndebele writers’. This is so because the history of the Ndebele people remains largely distorted because the Ndebele themselves either lack the interest or see no value in rewriting their history. Non-Ndebele historians and anthropologists, especially in colonial times are famous for myths and negative portrayal of the Ndebele history. One over-emphasized myth about the pre-colonial Ndebele society is the alleged existence of a caste system. According to Lindgren ‘In pre-colonial times, marriage between castes was strictly forbidden, and the marriage of a low-caste man to a high-caste woman was punishable by death. The Zanzi (sic) were aristocrats, who held positions as chiefs; the Lozwi were commoners, who performed the manual labour….Lozwi could not eat together with Zanzi or Enhla, and they was (sic) expected to have a subservient manner towards them.’

These claims cannot be substantiated from oral history or praise poetry. If we are to believe that Mzilikazi left Zululand with a few soldiers whose numbers must have diminished rapidly due to the numerous wars he must have fought on his way to Zimbabwe, then, it defies logic for such a group whose very survival was at stake to avoid inter-clan marriage. In any case, the same historians claim that part of Mzilikazi’s numerous wars were meant to replenish his group with women to bear more children.


Three Fictionalized Historical events in Ndebele

There are three main events in Ndebele history that have attracted the interest of both historians and creative writers alike. First, it is the formation of the Ndebele state after Mzilikazi left Zululand, secondly is the succession to Mzilikazi and finally the downfall of the Ndebele state and the fate of it’s last king Lobhengula. Different historians in both colonial and post-colonial eras have given conflicting versions of these three major events.

The creative writers have also fictionalized these historical events. For example, the very first Ndebele novel *Umvukela WamaNdebele* by Ndabaningi Sithole draws its theme from the fall of the Ndebele state and the resultant war, so is the drama text *ULobhengula kaMzilikazi kaMatshobane* by G.N.S Khumalo. The second Ndebele novel to be published, *UMthwakazi* by Peter S. Mahlangu focuses on the formation of the Ndebele nation. *UMbiko kaMadlenya* by Mayford Sibanda dwells on the succession problem. The succession problem stemmed from the mistake of installing Nkulumane as king before the death of his father Mzilikazi. The popular drama text *Icala Lezinduna* Simon J. Nondo and the novel *Laphuma Elinye Lingakatshoni* by Bernard D. Ndlovu are based on this incidence too.

The Social Organisation of the Ndebele as a theme

A mention of the Ndebele social organisation was made on the brief history of the Ndebele above. Historians, especially in colonial Zimbabwe repeated the theme of the existence of a caste system within pre-colonial Ndebele society. This is repeated by almost all the colonial historians giving undue prominence to the social organisation of the Ndebele. In fact, it became clear eventually why the social organisation of the Ndebele was of interest to colonialist. It was used as the pretext for the military subjugation of the Ndebele. The imperialist war against the Ndebele was justified as liberation for the oppressed ‘low caste slaves’.
In response to this recycled theme in colonial history, Ndebele creative writers have written extensively on the theme of the social organisation of the Ndebele nation pitting the so-called ‘amahole’ and ‘abeZansi’. Some of the notable works that exploit this theme include *Umako kaMadlenya* and *Akusimlandu wami*\(^{18}\). In explaining the eventual defeat of the war hero Mbiko by Lobhengula who was generally despised for his lack of any impressive fighting record, the writer explains from the ethnic dimension of the conflict. Mbiko was not only a decorated war-hero but he and his whole Zwangendaba regiment were exclusively Nguni. The Zwangendaba men were battle-hardened fighters who were feared and envied by other regiments. However, that military strength was overpowered by the will of the majority who were non-Nguni. Although the latter were not as experienced in warfare as Mbiko’s men, they won and Lobhengula consolidated himself as king.

James P. Ndebele in *Akusimlandu wami* shows the negative impact of discriminating people on the basis of ethnic origins within Ndebele society. Although this is not a historical novel, it is important for us here because its theme derives from problems associated with discrimination based on one’s ethnic origins. One character, Tshuma in *Akusimlandu Wami*\(^{19}\) says:

> Yiyona kanye inkolo engilayo leyo. Masehlukane ngemvelo, ngamasiko, langayo imisebenzi esiyanayo (That is what I believe in. Let us differ in origins, culture and the type of jobs we do).

Ndebele has extended his condemnation of this divisive ethnic discrimination beyond the Nguni versus non-Nguni people within the Ndebele to include the discrimination of people of Malawian origins by Zimbabweans in general. He also writes about the destructive nature of this ethnic chauvinism between the Ndebele and the Shona in his latest novel *Uthando Alulamgogo*\(^{20}\). In this novel the author depicts the challenges of cross-cultural marriages (Shona-Ndebele) and he generates debate on the viability of such marriages.
In a number of Ndebele creative works one finds snippets of this ethnic issue. Actually, by using certain surnames for characters in a novel or drama, sensibilities on ethnic origins are raised. For example, in Geshom Khiyaza’s *Ukuthunjwa kukaSukuzukuduma*\(^\text{21}\) the name of one character Sinyoro is enough to tell readers that this person could not have been a Ndebele. The use of the ‘r’ and considering the setting of the story in pre-colonial society shows that the author intended to show that this character belonged to another tribe. Actually the substitution of the /r/ with /l/ sound had until recently been the shibboleth for the Ndebele.

How pervasive this discrimination was at social level is difficult to ascertain, however, at political level it is an established fact that chiefs were drawn mainly from Nguni people while the rest could only be sub-chiefs. This trend was perpetuated if not exacerbated by colonial rulers and the government of independent Zimbabwe has not done anything to restore chieftainships to the non-Nguni people in Matabeleland.

**The Narratives**

Mahlangu in *Umthwakazi* gives what he portrays as the whole picture of the formation and structure of the Ndebele nation. He narrates the circumstances that led to the breakaway of Mzilikazi from Shaka’s Zulu resulting in the emergence of a new nation *Umthwakazi* (Ndebele nation). Mahlangu keeps the cause of the breakaway in the same fictitious way that popular history has made us believe. It is claimed that the cause of the rift between Shaka and Mzilikazi was over a certain breed of cattle that Mzilikazi preferred to keep for himself rather than hand them over to Shaka as was expected. Mahlangu writes that:

\[
\text{Izinkomo ezasusa uthuli kwakuzinkomo ezimbili ezilubhidi…(the cattle that led to the conflict were two vari-coloured…)}^{22}
\]

Neither historians nor creative writers explain the significance to pre-colonial Ndebele people of that type of cattle. Mahlangu like other writers namely, Sithole, Nondo,
Sibanda and Khumalo writes very positively about Mzilikazi’s wisdom, bravery, character, good leadership, intelligence, as well as his undoubted love for all his people. The same positive aspects are not always found in works on Lobhengula. It is understandable that Mzilikazi as founder and first king of the Ndebele received so much admiration and adoration from his people since then up to the present generation. He still remains to many Ndebele people the greatest hero ever. Mahlangu writes:

Ekuyiphetheni kwethu indaba kaMzilikazi kudingeka ukuthi sinanzelele ubuqhawe bukaMzilikazi, ngoba yena waye lomsebenzi omkhulu wokwakha isizwe njalo lokuhlahla indlela kwakungumsebenzi wokwenziwa lishawe lamaqhawe, leli iqhawe kwakunguye uMzilikazi kaMatshobana. (In concluding our story about Mzilikazi we have to acknowledge Mzilikazi’s heroism, because he had a very important task of nation-building. Also the burden of being a path-finder can only be borne by great heroes, and this great hero was Mzilikazi son of Matshobana).

Umthwakazi gives the social, political and military organisation of the Ndebele pre-colonial state. It is written in a tone that seems to suggest that the writer was concerned with not only saying the Ndebele had a history but a proud one. It relives a very happy glorious past where the Ndebele were at their best.

While Umthwakazi celebrates the birth of the Ndebele nation, Umvukela wamaNdebele focuses on the fall of the Ndebele state and the war that followed. The latter novel also gives a narration of the rise of the Ndebele nation and the prosperity of the people under their own rulers. In Umvukela wamaNdebele, Sithole gives an account of the causes of the Ndebele Uprising of 1896.

It is interesting to note that at the time Sithole’s novel came out, the recorded history then did not see the Ndebele as having fought for their independence but as having been motivated by hunger and loss of cattle due to the outbreak of rinderpest disease. Sithole’s novel could therefore be seen then as giving broader historical interpretation of the causes of the war than historians of that period. Sithole uses his own fictitious characters as well as historical characters to weave together the events of that period.
As already mentioned before, the formation of the Ndebele nation, the succession crisis and the fall of the Ndebele state are the three topical issues in history as well as in fiction. The themes are woven around the lives of Mzilikazi (formation of nation), Lobhengula (fall of the nation) and Nkulumane (succession crisis). Sibanda’s *Umbiko kaMadlenya* is on the succession crises that led to a civil war. The story of the novel is based on the unfortunate events that took place at the early years of the Ndebele nation. The then ‘migrant kingdom’ as the Ndebele people then were described by the historian Rasmussen, had to split into two groups on entering present day Zimbabwe. The group that went with Mzilikazi lost contact with the main group led by Gundwane and it was then believed that Mzilikazi was dead. His son Nkulumane was installed king in his place. But on his return and re-union with his people, Mzilikazi did not take that matter lightly. It is known as a historical fact that some chiefs were perceived as rebellious and treasonous and were put to death.

What has not been established by recorded history is the fate of Nkulumane. It would seem that for political expediency, Mzilikazi made his people believe that Nkulumane had been sent back to Zululand and would return to take the throne after his father’s death. The story of the novel *Umbiko kaMadlenya* starts almost a year after the death of Mzilikazi when a new king had to be installed. The whereabouts of Nkulumane complicated the succession issue. Some people did not want to have a repeat of the mistake by Gundwane and his fellow chiefs who installed Nkulumane without credible evidence that Mzilikazi was dead. Mzilikazi had punished these by death. There was genuine fear that if Lobhengula assumed the throne, should Nkulumane return a similar retribution would take place. The main character is Mbiko one of the distinguished heroes and he claimed to be on the side of Nkulumane. Actually, he had personal ambitions to be king himself but used the Nkulumane affair as a political ploy.

In the drama text *Icalala Lezinduna*, the author wants to draw the readers/audience to the moral dilemma surrounding the trial and execution of Gundwane. He rightfully portrays Gundwane as a patriotic and loyal servant of the king. When he was convinced that Mzilikazi was no more, he did what he sincerely believed was the only way of saving the
nation from disintegration. This was by installing Mzilikazi’s own son as king. However, Mzilikazi did not see it that way. He perceived Gundwane’s behaviour as treacherous and disloyal while he saw Nkulumane as a foolish son. In *Laphuma Elinye Lingakatshoni*, Mzilikazi is purported to have said:

> Gundwane uxhwalise igundwane elidla iselwa zomuntu lingaziphwe. Uzangibona umfokazana kaMayengwana… Ngangisithi uNkulumane yindoda kanti ngazala idela elehluleka ukuzicabangela. (Gundwane has bad manners, he is like a mouse that eats someone’s grain without permission. I will deal with this worthless son of Mayengwana …[as for Nkulumane] I used to pride myself that my son Nkulumane was a wise man, but now I realize that he is such a fool who cannot think for himself). \(^{24}\)

The writer leaves the reader questioning the moral justification of the execution of Gundwane. The problems and challenges that faced the Ndebele people of that period were complex and even today we have not solved those riddles. The formation of the nation was beset with its challenges so was succession and the eventual downfall of the Ndebele state.

**The significance of historical themes**

Writing on the role of historical themes in Ndebele literature, Jesta Masuku says: ‘The presentation of history in fiction form is an attractive and more effective technique of bringing that history closer to people’\(^{25}\). True to the observation by Masuku, those historical events and figures that have been fictionalized are better known by the general public than those that are not. There are statements, for example, that are attributed to certain historical figures which are in actual fact fictitious creations by authors.

For the Ndebele writers, historical themes are partly a response against the negative stereotypes created and perpetuated by both non-Ndebele historians and fiction writers. In both fiction and history written by colonial writers portrayed the pre-colonial Ndebele people as having been savage. These writers painted a bad picture of the Ndebele in order to justify the invasion and ultimate destruction of the Ndebele state in spite of the many peace efforts that Lobhengula had done to avoid war with the British. Writers like Sithole
and Mahlangu tried with some degree of success to portray the pre-colonial Ndebele state very positively. Sithole actually exploited the myth held by some Ndebele people that they were not defeated by the whites because a proper defeat should have meant the arrest and probably followed by the execution of their king. The Ndebele writers aim to reverse the negative stereotypes created and perpetuated by colonial writers. According to Obiechina: ‘The African writer has to correct the false impressions of African life contained in foreign writing on Africa.’

The historical themes in fiction could be seen therefore as fighting back by Ndebele writers. It could be likened to a psychological war where the writers try to rekindle a sense of pride in the past of the Ndebele. Maybe that motivation and sense of duty to their culture and history unconsciously trap writers into pre-occupation with the mythical romantic past at the expense of other pressing issues that could be addressed by writers. One such accusation comes from Nkabinde:

In the end, this sub-nationalism, so pervasive by purpose, was given literary expression in the works of poets and novelists. The vigorous rebuilding of tribal identity, the nostalgic cry for black pride in what is totally African, was in fact, ironically, consonant with racist thinking.

It is debatable whether early works by Ndebele writers could have drawn themes from elsewhere other than from traditional Ndebele culture and history. For that reason, maybe Nkabinde’s criticism is rather harsh considering that it comes at about thirty to forty years after some of the publications and is made during a different political dispensation, that is, post-independence era.

Notwithstanding the criticism leveled against historical fiction, their value to their respective cultures cannot be ignored. According to Lindfors:

Historical novels are visionary myths rather than historical chronicles…and only by properly understanding the past and present will Africans collectively be able to tackle the problems of the future.

The observation by Lindfors can be extended to Ndebele writers of historical fiction.
Conclusion

It would seem that historical fiction still appeals to the Ndebele readership, considering that relatively recent publications like *Izigigaba Zempi Yenkululeko* (1991), *Uyangisinda Lumhlaba* (1992), *Sivela Kude* (1993) and *Laphuma Elinye Lingakatshoni* (1999) are all historical fiction. Our focus was on selected works that specifically draw from Ndebele history although there are a number of other historical novels already cited that do not necessarily draw from the Ndebele history. We have attempted to show those aspects of Ndebele history that have been fictionalized and also tried to explain why. We have also revealed some of the reasons that make Ndebele fiction more appealing than documented history. Finally, we can assume that historical fiction will continue to have more appeal as long as the generality of the Ndebele people perceive that their history is distorted and marginalized. Historical fiction seems to quench that thirst for recognition and acknowledgement.

Ndebele writers of historical fiction have succeeded in keeping alive the oral history and legends on the Ndebele. They have tried to respond to the negative portrayal of the Ndebele past by highlighting the challenges that could have driven some of the actions in the Ndebele traditional past. In doing this, they have contributed in shaping and focusing the aspirations and ideals of the Ndebele-speaking people of Zimbabwe.

Endnotes

5. Ibid., 23

19. Ibid, 66

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


