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The power of similes: Exploring the unique voice of the author in *Ukhozi Olumaphiko*

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Similes have been widely studied in stylistics and literary studies, yet the place of similes in classical rhetoric is contested, and their role in shaping an IsiXhosa literary voice remains under-researched. This study examines similes in Ncedile Saule's *Ukhozi Olumaphiko* [*The Great Eagle*] (1996), an award-winning IsiXhosa thriller from South Africa's early democratic era, noted for its thematic complexity, stylistic density and rarity in IsiXhosa prose fiction. It addresses three questions: (1) How do similes contribute to the authorial stylistic voice in *Ukhozi Olumaphiko*? (2) How do they support the psychological and expressive portrayal of characters, especially Mfazwe? (3) How do they index and articulate cultural and individual identity? The study employs a literary-stylistic framework, especially expressive and psychological stylistics, integrated with critical discourse analysis (CDA), combining CDA with a descriptive quantitative analysis of 52 purposively selected similes from the 131 found in the novel.

Contribution: The findings show that similes operate as central stylistic and discursive resources rather than decorative ornaments. They intensify narrative meaning, affect and cultural resonance; construct a distinctive authorial voice through vivid imagery, culturally grounded analogies and recurrent expressive patterns; mediate the representation of Mfazwe's psychological states, heightening emotional complexity and reader empathy; and signal cultural and individual identity by drawing on indigenous knowledge, lived experience and situated social realities. Similes thus shape the novel's stylistic architecture, influencing narrative progression, characterisation and meaning in IsiXhosa fiction, reinforcing themes and authorial intention, enhancing reader engagement and consolidating Saule's literary identity.

Keywords: similes; literary stylistics; critical discourse analysis; *Ukhozi Olumaphiko*; author's voice.

Introduction

IsiXhosa literature, grounded in oral tradition and an expanding written corpus, is a rich source of cultural knowledge, artistic expression and linguistic creativity. Like in many African traditions, its narratives draw on shared values, indigenous knowledge, oral performance and collective storytelling, which provide a common aesthetic and thematic base. This tradition has strongly shaped IsiXhosa prose fiction and continues to influence contemporary authors. Within this shared framework, individual writers develop distinctive voices through style, themes and creative use of language.

The present study builds on related research on the stylistic features of *Ukhozi Olumaphiko*. In the previous study, 'Unpacking the Power of Style: An Analysis of Stylistic Sentences in the Novel Ukhozi Olumaphiko', the focus was on periodic, cumulative, and balanced stylistic sentences and their contribution to the development of themes, textual meanings, suspense, and narrative features. The present study has a distinct focus, examining the use of similes and their contribution to the construction and foregrounding of the author's unique voice in the novel. Thus, although both studies examine stylistic features in *Ukhozi Olumaphiko*, they investigate different linguistic and literary features and address different aspects of the author's style.

Research on African-language literature shows that authorial identity often emerges through narrative technique, figurative language, lexical choice and culturally grounded imagery. In IsiXhosa narratives, similes are central to this process, enabling authors to depict experience, emotion and social reality in distinctive ways. Drawing on shared cultural resources, writers also forge individual styles that distinguish their work. Similes are not mere ornaments but fulfil cognitive, aesthetic and

communicative functions, making their identification crucial for understanding an author's stylistic profile (Chanh 2021; Görmez & Tunç 2021; Mpouli & Ganascia 2015).

Through imaginative comparisons, similes create vivid imagery, intensify emotion and enrich narrative expression (Alexander 2023; Bingham 2026; Bozhena 2023; Lee 2025; Zhang et al. 2020). Widely recognised as powerful tools for expressing an author's worldview, creativity and artistic identity, similes make abstract or ordinary experiences more concrete and meaningful (Lee 2025; Zhang et al. 2020). From a cognitive-poetic perspective, they reveal how authors conceptualise reality, exposing patterns of thought, perception and imagination, and thus providing a key lens on authorial style (Lestari 2020; Stockwell 2020; Tunç 2021). Yet, despite increased research on simile structure and function, little attention has been given to the role of similes in shaping distinctive authorial voices in IsiXhosa. This study addresses that gap by examining how similes contribute to Ncedile Saule's stylistic identity in *Ukhozi Olumaphiko* and how they mediate between individual creativity and shared cultural expression.

Cognitive poetics shows how similes reflect mental processes of perception, imagination and meaning-making and reveal the conceptual associations through which authors interpret and represent reality, while figurative language more broadly illuminates their stylistic choices and creative worldviews (Lestari 2020; Stockwell 2020; Tunç 2021). These ideas are especially relevant to Ncedile Saule, a leading contemporary IsiXhosa writer known for linguistic richness, cultural rootedness and inventive figurative language. Grounded in IsiXhosa cultural knowledge, social experience and oral traditions, Saule's style provides a strong basis for examining how figurative language shapes authorial voice. Yet, despite extensive research on similes, few studies show how they construct distinctive authorial voices in IsiXhosa texts. This study addresses that gap by analysing similes in *Ukhozi Olumaphiko* to show how they shape Saule's stylistic identity and how figurative language mediates between shared cultural traditions and individual creativity.

Similes are particularly important in the construction of literary voice because they extend beyond ornamentation to perform cognitive, aesthetic and communicative functions (Ofori et al. 2021; Otiso 2022; Cuenca & Romano 2022). Through imaginative comparisons, similes create vivid imagery, enhance emotional resonance and provide insight into an author's worldview and stylistic identity (Adekola 2024; Bozhena 2023; Lee 2025; Kadry 2023). Mpouli and Ganascia (2015) and Hoshimoto (2024) further note that identifying simile constructions is essential for understanding an author's stylistic profile.

From the perspective of cognitive poetics, similes reveal how authors conceptualise and represent reality, making them a useful lens through which authorial style may be examined (Lestari, 2020; Stockwell 2020; Tunç 2021). This perspective is particularly relevant to the study of Ncedile Saule, whose literary works are recognised for their rich use of figurative language and strong cultural grounding.

Despite growing scholarship on similes in literary texts, limited attention has been given to their contribution to authorial voice in IsiXhosa literature. This study addresses that gap by examining how similes in *Ukhozi Olumaphiko* contribute to Saule's distinctive stylistic identity and literary expression.

Ncedile Saule is a prolific and widely recognised contributor to IsiXhosa literature, having authored more than 15 novels, short stories and radio dramas. His broader oeuvre has received both popular and academic attention, with several works included in university curricula and examined in postgraduate research. Notably, his novel *Unyana Womntu* (*The Son of Man*) was adapted into a television drama by the South African Broadcasting Corporation, demonstrating the broader cultural impact of his writing. The novel under examination in this study, *Ukhozi Olumaphiko* (published in 1996), received an M-Net Literary Award in 1997 and was subsequently studied in schools from approximately 2007 to 2016. The novel is written in the thriller genre, which is relatively uncommon in IsiXhosa prose fiction, in which literary production has more frequently emphasised social realism, moral narratives and historical themes. Published during the early democratic period in South Africa, the novel reflects a time of social transition and cultural re-imagination.

The thriller genre provides a narrative environment characterised by suspense, danger, pursuit and heightened tension. This study does not claim that the novel's similes are determined by genre alone. Rather, the similes are considered evidence of Saule's linguistic creativity, literary craftsmanship and mastery of IsiXhosa expressive resources. The thriller mode, however, enhances their effectiveness by creating moments in which figurative comparisons intensify atmosphere, psychological conflict, urgency and emotional force. The historical, literary and generic significance of *Ukhozi Olumaphiko* makes it a compelling text for analysis. This novel offers an opportunity to examine the stylistic power of similes.

About the voice of the author, there are varying definitions and descriptions of the voice in a text. Voice is a multifaceted concept encompassing both individual and social dimensions. A textual voice is intuitively individual in that it represents one's unique features expressed in the written mode (Tardy 2012). Mhilli (2023) notes that recent studies have demonstrated a correlation between writing quality and authorial voice. Concerning the authorial voice, Stock and Eik-Nes (2016) argue that voice and identity are used interchangeably.

On the contrary, Zhao (2019) draws a dividing line between authorial identity and authorial voice, suggesting that a writer's identity includes extra-textual features not necessarily included in the text, whereas authorial voice

pertains to the text. From these scholarly perspectives on the authorial voice, it becomes evident that there are contrasting views. While some scholars argue that authorial voice is inalienable from broader narrative structures or allied cultural discourses, others view it as a mutable construct shaped more by reader interpretation than by stylistic devices alone. These perspectives have undoubtedly enriched the conversation around voice and authorship. However, this study takes a different approach by focusing on how similes function as deliberate stylistic choices that shape a distinctive authorial voice.

Rather than treating figurative language as a transparent reflection of the author's private psychology, the study examines how similes construct tone, narrative perspective and expressive identity within the text. It also recognises that authorial voice emerges within broader historical, cultural and publishing contexts that shape IsiXhosa literary production. Using the IsiXhosa novel *Ukhozi Olumaphiko* as a case study, the article explores how similes articulate a distinctive literary voice in African-language literature while also representing the emotional and psychological worlds of its characters, particularly Mfazwe. Using the IsiXhosa novel *Ukhozi Olumaphiko* as a case study, this article examines how similes contribute to the construction of a distinctive literary voice.

Understanding the role of similes in *Ukhozi Olumaphiko* is important because these figures of speech reveal psychological complexity and cultural specificity, reflecting the author's individual style and thematic concerns (Sukarini 2022). In the text of *Ukhozi Olumaphiko*, the author has used 131 similes that reflect cultural values, traditional folklore, lived experiences, spirituality and social contexts influenced by the novel for different narrative purposes. Furthermore, similes of different types, as classified by Konyrov (2007), further enhance intrigue and reader engagement. Exploring similes through the lens of literary stylistics, specifically psychological and expressive stylistics, provides a robust framework for analysing how language choices shape meaning and voice. This theoretical approach foregrounds the cognitive and emotional dimensions of literary language, enabling the subtle ways in which similes contribute to the author's distinctive narrative presence to be uncovered. This study therefore aims to investigate the power of similes in shaping the author's unique literary voice in *Ukhozi Olumaphiko*. The objectives of this research are threefold: firstly, to analyse how similes contribute to the psychological and expressive dimensions of the authorial voice; secondly, to examine the thematic and stylistic functions of similes within the novel; and thirdly, to illuminate how similes reflect broader cultural and individual identities within the text. To guide this inquiry, the study addresses the following research questions:

- How do similes function to shape the author's distinct literary voice in the text of the novel *Ukhozi Olumaphiko*?
- In what ways do similes contribute to the psychological depth and expressive quality of the text of the novel *Ukhozi Olumaphiko*?
- How do the similes in the text of the novel *Ukhozi Olumaphiko* reflect cultural and individual identity?

Theoretical and analytical framework

This study argues that similes are best understood as figurative, cognitively meaningful and culturally embedded linguistic resources. It situates this claim within an integrated framework combining literary stylistics, cognitive linguistics and critical discourse analysis (CDA), enabling interpretation of similes not only as stylistic devices but also as carriers of cultural and cognitive meaning.

Within stylistic scholarship, similes are widely recognised as figurative expressions that contribute to meaning-making, emotional intensity and narrative style (Deignan & Oxley 2022; Semino 2017; Stockwell 2020). From a cognitive linguistic perspective, similes are understood as conceptual tools that structure and interpret experience, rather than merely decorative comparisons (Kuzu 2023; Lee 2025; Mansur & Rengur 2023). However, the figurative status of the simile has not been historically uncontested. Classical rhetorical traditions often positioned the simile closer to literal comparison and secondary to metaphor in hierarchical accounts of figurative language. This position is critically discussed by Bethlehem (1996), who argues that the figurative dimension of the simile should not be assumed but must be analytically demonstrated. This study acknowledges this tension but aligns with contemporary stylistic and cognitive approaches, which treat simile as fully figurative in actual language use while still recognising its historical–theoretical complexity.

In IsiXhosa linguistic and literary scholarship, similes are similarly understood as expressive and culturally embedded forms of language (Pahl 1983; Satyo 1996). They function across oral and written traditions as resources for intensification, illustration and cultural meaning-making.

Psychological stylistics is adopted in this study in a restricted and text-focused sense. It does not refer to the author's private psychology. Rather, it is used to examine how linguistic choices, particularly similes, contribute to meaning-making, perception and stylistic expression within the narrative. In this way, figurative language is approached as a cognitive and interpretive resource through which experience is represented and communicated (Roncero et al. 2021; Yiğen 2019). By synthesising these perspectives, the study positions similes as figurative, cognitive and culturally grounded resources that shape interpretation, narrative experience and authorial voice in *Ukhozi Olumaphiko*.

Research methods and design

This study employs a primarily qualitative research design grounded in CDA, supplemented by a minimal, descriptive, quantitative content analysis (Delve n.d.). This combined approach enables a structured yet interpretive examination of similes in *Ukhozi Olumaphiko*.

Critical discourse analysis serves as the primary analytical framework. It is used to examine how language functions within broader social and ideological contexts (Fairclough 1995). In this study, CDA is applied to identify and interpret similes as linguistic features within the text, while also considering how they are embedded in cultural and discursive patterns. This approach enables a systematic analysis of textual meaning without isolating language from its social context (Sahputra 2021; Sheyholislami 2001; Ulinnuha, Udasmoro & Wijaya 2013).

In addition to CDA, a descriptive quantitative content analysis was used to provide an overview of the dataset. A purposive sample of 52 similes was selected from a total of 131 identified in the novel. These similes were categorised according to type (metaphorical, synonymous, antonymic, epithetic, gradation and hyperbolic) and according to their source of inspiration, including cultural background, nature, personal experience, language and social context.

The quantitative component serves a descriptive function by outlining the distribution of simile types and categories. It does not aim to test hypotheses but rather to support the qualitative analysis by providing an organised view of the dataset.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Findings

This section delineates the findings from the systematic analysis of similes employed in the text of *Ukhozi Olumaphiko*. The results are presented in Table 1, in which similes are classified according to their types, categorical origins and their respective contributions to the psychological depth, cultural representation and distinctive authorial voice within the novel. This analysis elucidates the integral role of similes as stylistic devices that enhance the narrative's emotive expressiveness, cultural resonance and literary uniqueness. (Erica 2021; Gartner & Blaschka 2019; Mohamed 2020). The similes are organised in response to the three research questions. They (similes) were examined in terms of types, inspirational source (coded into five categories) and literary purpose such as psychological depth and expressive quality and distinct literary style or authorial voice as recorded in Table 1.

Simile types: The similes are categorised into six types: metaphorical similes that convey layered meanings, hyperbolic similes with exaggerated comparison to intensify emotional or dramatic effects, synonymous similes that create vivid imagery, epithetic similes that are used to describe features and behaviours in a colourful way, antonymic similes that depict contrast and irony, and gradation similes that increase emotional and narrative tension. According to Table 1, the observation is that the most frequently used type of simile is synonymous similes, showing that the author prefers to use direct, vivid and culturally resonant comparisons that the readers can easily relate to.

Category codes (inspirational sources): Each simile is coded by its source of inspiration, such as 1-cultural background, 2-Nature, 3-Personal and/or collective experiences, 4-Language & expression, and 5-Social context. The observation, as depicted in Table 1, is that code 3 (experience-inspired) similes are the most prevalent, reflecting the novel's deep engagement with psychological and emotional experiences in response to oppression or hardship. Code 1 (culture-inspired) and code 2 (nature-inspired) similes are also common, showing that the text of the novel *Ukhozi Olumaphiko* is rooted in indigenous knowledge and environmental awareness. Lastly, codes 4 and 5 are less frequent, but they are significant too, as they indicate that the novel critiques societal structures and uses resourceful language.

Psychological depth and expressive quality: This column assesses how similes enhance emotional realism and insight. Many similes evoke tension, fear, grief or humour through vivid imagery.

Reflection on culture and identity: Some similes reflect the culture of amaXhosa, culture, rituals and social roles, such as humility in the simile, '*okomntu oza kubulisa*' [like someone about to do greetings] (p. 13).

Authorial voice (distinct literary style): This column identifies how similes shape the novel's stylistic voice. The author consistently uses metaphoric, rich and emotionally charged language. Humour, irony and lyricism emerge as defining features of the voice. In all, the similes contribute strongly to a distinct, culturally rooted narrative voice.

How similes' function to shape the author's distinct literary voice in the text of the novel *Ukhozi Olumaphiko*: The similes in the text of the novel *Ukhozi Olumaphiko* play a pivotal role in shaping the authorial voice through the consistent use of synonymous, metaphorical and epithetic similes that infuse the narrative with vivid mental imagery, lyricism and rhythm. This showcases the author's literary voice, which is characterised by cultural depth and expressive resonance. Similes like '*Wawubageca ngokungathi yirhengqe inqunqa iindiza*' [cutting them down like a sickle cutting dry maize stalks] (p. 58), '*Yathi yakumana isithi swenyeswenye ngapha ngathi linxila liphepha izicith*i'[when moved like a drunkard avoiding grass-covered mounds] (p. 11), '*Ngathi yinkomo enxakamayo*' [like a restless mooing cow] (p. 122) and '*Yahexa kwangoko yangathi inesathuthwane' inesathuthwane*' [It swerved like it had epilepsy.] (p. 102) demonstrate the author's artistry in manipulating the language and blending colloquial language with emotionally loaded comparisons. Many similes are drawn from cultural linguistic resources (codes 1 & 4), reflecting a literary voice that is both rooted in culture and highly

TABLE 1: Coding of simile types, categories and their interpreted impact and significance in *Ukhozi Olumaphiko*.

Simile (with page reference)	Type	Category codes	Interpretive psychological reading of character experience	Interpreted cultural and social grounding (not assumed)	Construction of authorial voice (as interpreted stylistically)
'*Inkathunkathu entamo ibomvu ngathi yihagu ephaliweyo*' [dry-skinned with a red neck like that of a scraped pig] (p. 2)	Metaphorical	3, 5	Intensifies emotional and perceptual tension through strongly sensory imagery, shaping character positioning.	Based on IsiXhosa oral insult traditions using animal imagery to encode social judgement and identity.	Aligns written narration with oral expressive intensity through dense metaphorical comparison.
'*Okwengxowa yomsuzo*' [like a sack of fart] (p. 7)	Hyperbolic	2, 5	Exaggerates discomfort and emotional oppression through bodily humour.	Draws on IsiXhosa expressive humour, in which bodily imagery signals ridicule or marginality.	Uses shock humour to sustain a provocative and emotionally charged narrative tone.
'*Yathi yakumana isithi swenyeswenye ngapha ngathi linxila liphepha izicithi*' [when it moved like a drunkard avoiding grass-covered mounds] (p. 11)	Synonymous	3, 4	Constructs psychological instability and physical disorientation.	Grounded in everyday IsiXhosa metaphors of intoxication as loss of control.	Blends realism with culturally embedded figurative language.
'*Ndathi tucu ngecala okwenkomo equnjelweyo*' [I sat with the side of a bum like a bloated cow.] (p. 12)	Synonymous	2, 3	Suggests humiliation and diminished agency.	Draws on animal-based evaluative metaphors in IsiXhosa oral discourse.	Uses visceral imagery to intensify social critique.
'*Ngeziya nyawo zakhe ngathi ngamaqhekeza esonka sombona*' [with those feet like pieces of mielie bread] (p. 13)	Metaphorical	1, 3	Evokes vulnerability and hardship.	Maize imagery reflects material survival in IsiXhosa life worlds.	Grounds characterisation in everyday material culture.
'*Iinwele uziyekile zalihlathi ngathi ziza kumka nomoya*' [hair like a forest blown by wind] (p. 13)	Metaphorical	1, 2, 3	Suggests emotional instability through natural imagery.	Forest and/or wind symbolism reflects change and unpredictability in oral tradition.	Produces lyrical, poetic realism.
'*Utyhale isifuba ngathi uza kuculisa*' [chest out like someone about to conduct a choir] (p. 13)	Synonymous	3	Suggests confidence and performative bodily stance.	Rooted in cultural performance traditions (choir leadership).	Draws on performative culture for narrative immediacy.
'*Uthobe amehlo okomntu oza kubulisa*' [eyes lowered like someone about to do greetings] (p. 13)	Epithetic	1	Signals humility and respect.	Reflects IsiXhosa greeting etiquette.	Embeds culturally specific non-verbal communication.
'*Iqanda elikroqiweyo lithe nca epleyitini ngathi liyazimela*' [fried egg like it is hiding] (p. 17)	Synonymous	3, 4	Adds humour and reflective projection onto objects.	Domestic imagery used for humour and everyday commentary.	Creates subtle humour through mundane imagery.
'*Iintsizana ezimbini zesoseji ngathi ziingqatha zekati*' [two pieces of sausage-like cat droppings] (p. 17)	Epithetic	3, 4	Creates humour through disgust and exaggeration.	Reflects IsiXhosa humorous exaggeration in everyday speech.	Uses shock imagery for colloquial realism.
'*Ingqondo yam jikeleza okwenja ileqa umsila wayo*' [My mind was spinning like a dog chasing its tail.] (p. 18)	Synonymous	2, 3	Expresses psychological confusion.	Animal behaviour used metaphorically in oral culture.	Fuses cognition and animal imagery.
'*Impumlo yakho isoloko isemoyeni okweyenja*' [Your nose must always be like a dog's in the air.] (p. 19)	Hyperbolic	2, 3	Suggests surveillance and suspicion.	Reflects social critique of intrusive behaviour.	Intensifies social tension through exaggeration.
'*Seyithe chu ngoku okomtshakazi enqumla inkundla*' [walking slowly like a bride crossing a courtyard] (p. 19)	Synonymous	1, 3	Suggests ritualised emotional movement.	Marriage rituals carry symbolic social meaning.	Embeds ceremonial rhythm in narration.
'*Lidwashuze ngathi ligqirha lixhentsa*' [stamping like a dancing traditional healer] (p. 28)	Epithetic	1, 3	Produces spiritual and sensory intensity.	Healing practices are culturally meaningful performances.	Draws on spiritual traditions for atmosphere.
'*Uthe thaa okwethongo*' [like a dream] (p. 36)	Synonymous	1, 3	Suggests dreamlike perception.	Dreams are epistemologically significant in Xhosa belief systems.	Introduces spiritual perception into narrative.
'*Ndizolulalule okwenkwenkwe ecela umngeni*' [I stretched myself like a boy challenging others.] (p. 43)	Synonymous	1, 3	Suggests resilience and bodily assertion.	Youth challenge rituals reflect identity formation.	Links bodily movement to identity.
'*Oku ngathi yinkomo ebaleka ezindizeni ezomileyo*' [like a cow running in dry fields] (p. 50)	Metaphorical	3	Suggests urgency and disorientation.	Rural landscapes shape metaphorical imagination.	Grounds narrative in ecological imagery.
'*Wawubageca ngokungathi yirhengqe inqunqa iindiza*' [cutting them down like a sickle cutting dry maize stalks] (p. 58)	Metaphorical	3, 4	Conveys violence and rupture.	Agricultural tools symbolise force in rural life.	Creates narrative intensity through agrarian metaphor.
'*Abantu besifa okweempukane*' [people dying like flies] (p. 56)	Synonymous	2, 3	Expresses collective trauma.	Flies symbolise fragility in oral storytelling.	Intensifies emotional compression.
'*Ngathi ngamaxhalanga ehlasela ihashe elifileyo*' [like vultures attacking a dead horse] (p. 58)	Metaphorical	2, 3	Evokes moral decay and threat.	Scavenger imagery reflects vulnerability.	Builds symbolic violence.
'*Okwethole lisiya kunina*' [like a calf going to its mother] (p. 61)	Synonymous	3	Suggests emotional dependency.	Pastoral cattle relations shape meaning systems.	Creates intimacy through pastoral imagery.
'*Ngathi yinkwenkwe ikhutshwa emasimi eepesika ngemvubu*' [like a boy being chased out from a peach field with a sjambok] (p. 61)	Synonymous	3	The simile is interpreted as constructing shame, fear and urgency through embodied memory of punishment and flight.	This interpretation is grounded in rural childhood socialisation practices in which farming spaces and disciplinary encounters form part of lived experiential knowledge.	The authorial voice is interpreted as drawing on lived rural memory to produce vivid, socially grounded narrative realism.
'*Okwamasi anengqaka kwiselwa elintamo imxinwa*' [like thick sour milk in a narrow-necked calabash] (p. 63)	Synonymous	1, 3	The simile is interpreted as intensifying emotional pressure and constraint through tightly contained imagery, suggesting psychological compression.	This reading is grounded in traditional food storage practices in which calabash containers are culturally significant domestic objects in IsiXhosa material life.	The authorial voice is interpreted as fusing domestic material culture with emotional expression to deepen thematic resonance.
'*Ndimdaka okwengubo yenkwenkwe*' [I was dirty like a boy's blanket.] (p. 79)	Synonymous	1, 3	The expression is interpreted as constructing embodied shame and hardship through tactile imagery of dirtiness and neglect.	This interpretation is grounded in everyday household material culture in which children's clothing and blankets index poverty, labour and lived hardship.	The authorial voice is interpreted as using intimate domestic imagery to foreground emotional authenticity and social realism.
'*Ngathi lihashe elithengiswayo*' [like a horse for sale] (p. 83)	Synonymous	1, 3	Suggests commodification and vulnerability.	Livestock economy informs symbolic meaning.	Critiques disposability through rural metaphor.

Table 1 continues on the next page →

TABLE 1 (Continues...): Coding of simile types, categories and their interpreted impact and significance in *Ukhozi Olumaphiko*.

Simile (with page reference)	Type	Category codes	Interpretive psychological reading of character experience	Interpreted cultural and social grounding (not assumed)	Construction of authorial voice (as interpreted stylistically)
'*Babefana nomgqwaliso kum*' [They were like a bad aura to me.] (p. 85)	Hyperbolic	1	Expresses emotional discomfort.	Reflects idioms of spiritual and/or social negativity.	Intensifies subjective tone.
'*Yabangathi kuqhawuka iintambo zentsontela*' [It was like the failing of ropes.] (p. 87)	Epithetic	3	Suggests rupture and tension.	Rope imagery reflects labour symbolism.	Builds symbolic fracture.
'*Ejingisa isisu ngathi yingxowa esindwa ngamatye*' [with a hanging stomach like a sack filled with stones] (p. 91)	Synonymous	3	Expresses emotional burden.	Material labour imagery reflects struggle.	Embodies psychological weight.
'*Oku kondonci ogqunywa lirhawu*' [like a fatty intestine turned inside out by someone clumsy] (p. 94)	Epithetic	1, 3	Intensifies discomfort and bodily disturbance, evoking visceral reaction	Reflects rural slaughtering practices and domestic animal imagery familiar in Xhosa cultural settings	Expands a realist, unembellished but vivid stylistic register
'*Ndandithwethwa okomzingeli*' [I was walking stealthily like a hunter.] (p. 99)	Epithetic	1, 3	Suggests vigilance and anxiety.	Hunting is embodied rural knowledge.	Produces survival-based narration.
'*Ngathi ubulele umntu*' [like you have killed someone] (p. 102)	Synonymous	3	Foreshadows moral tension and emotional shock	Engages culturally embedded associations of guilt, accusation, and moral rupture, thereby intensifying their symbolic impact.	Engages culturally loaded associations of guilt, accusation and moral rupture
'*Yahexa ngathi inesathuthwane*' [It swerved like epilepsy] (p. 102)	Epithetic	4	Suggests instability.	Illness metaphors reflect embodied experience.	Creates sensory immediacy.
'*Nqwa nobentaka*' [like that of a bird] (p. 104)	Hyperbolic	2, 3	Evokes fragility and heightened emotional sensitivity	Bird imagery reflects nature-based symbolism of vulnerability in Xhosa oral expression	Reinforces poetic compression in narrative voice
'*Unkone oku kukaFriday*' [You are marred like Friday.] (p. 107)	Antonymic	5	Introduces irony and social humour	Reflects social naming practices and informal cultural labelling	Adds conversational, socially embedded narrative tone
'*Oku kwenkonyana yemazi efihlayo*' [like a calf of a cow that produces little milk] (p. 117)	Epithetic	2.3	Builds descriptive tension through agricultural imagery	Rooted in cattle-economy symbolism central to Xhosa rural life	Strengthens agrarian-inflected narrative style
'*Ngathi yinkomo enxakamayo*' [like a restless mooing cow] (p. 122)	Metaphorical	1,2,3	Represents anxiety and instability through animal behaviour	Draws on cattle behaviour as culturally intelligible emotional mapping	Deepens characterisation through rural symbolic logic
'*Ngathi kukhanywa idlakadlaka lengubo*', [like wringing water from a worn-out blanket] (p. 123)	Synonymous	2.3	Conveys deep attraction and love interest through tactile imagery	Everyday domestic practice becomes metaphor for emotional revival	Reinforces experiential, materially grounded narration
'*Ngathi linxala likhweza ethambekeni*' [like an antelope running across a slope] (p. 123)	Synonymous	1, 2, 3	Constructs movement and emotional dynamism through embodied natural imagery	Draws on wildlife landscapes familiar in rural lived environments where animal movement is a primary perceptual frame	Reinforces a poetic style grounded in ecological observation and lived rural sensibility
'*Ngathi yinkomo etyiwa sisibawu*' [like a cow bitten by a horsefly] (p. 137)	Epithetic	1, 2, 3	Expresses irritation and distress through bodily discomfort imagery	Cattle symbolism reflects agrarian life world in which livestock behaviour encodes emotional states	Strengthens a materially grounded and sensorially rich narrative voice
'*Ayengathi ngamangolwane*' [They were like bird mites.] (p. 139)	Metaphorical	2, 3	Intensifies perception of irritation and social discomfort	Reflects pest imagery drawn from everyday rural environmental experience	Develops a critical tone that renders oppression through ecological metaphor
'*Kwakungathi kuzingelwa kubanjiswa iinyamakazi*' [It was like hunting and trapping wild animals.] (p. 140)	Epithetic	1, 2, 3	Conveys heightened threat and pursuit through predation imagery	Hunting metaphor reflects historical and cultural knowledge of tracking and capture practices	Builds a tense, survival-oriented narrative register
'*Oku kwengxangxosi*' [like a secretary bird] (p. 141)	Synonymous	2	Creates visual precision through bird imagery	Secretary bird symbolism is drawn from local fauna and observational knowledge of nature	Enhances sensory clarity and descriptive immediacy
'*Selegxanyaza okwexhego lilahlekelwe yinqawa yalo*' [walking in wide strides like an old man who has lost his pipe] (p. 153)	Synonymous	3	Introduces humour and embodied character movement	Reflects everyday social observation and elder imagery in community life	Adds colloquial texture and oral-narrative rhythm to the voice
'*Njengamaza*' [like waves] (p. 154)	Gradation	2	Suggests rhythmic emotional Metaflow.	Water imagery common in oral symbolism.	Enhances narrative rhythm.
'*Oku kwesithende ebesixhathisa*' [like a balancing heel] (p. 157)	Synonymous	3	Builds tension through bodily instability	Draws on the embodied experience of balance and physical control	Strengthens experiential realism in narrative voice
'*Okwenkatyana eza kufakwa idyokhwe*' [like a bullock about to be yoked] (p. 158)	Synonymous	1, 3	Intensifies anticipation and threat	Imagery drawn from rural life reflecting layered cultural experience	Deepens narrative urgency through hybrid imagery
'*Njengentlola*' [like a spy] (p. 160)	Antonymic	5	Suggests surveillance.	Reflects social distrust.	Introduces political tension.
'*Amehlo ngathi ngawesikhotsholo*' [eyes like those of a python] (p. 173)	Hyperbolic	2	Heightens fear and psychological intensity	Snake imagery draws from local fauna symbolism associated with danger	Strengthens a visually charged and tense narrative mode
'*Okwegangxa liqhuqha nomqheliswa wehashe*' [like a novice rider struggling with an untrained horse] (p. 186)	Synonymous	3.4	Produces complex embodied motion and instability	Reflects horse-riding as culturally embedded rural skill and learning process	Enriches narrative complexity through experiential analogy
'*Ngathi yibhokhwe enqunyulwayo*' [like a goat being throat slitted] (p. 191)	Synonymous	1.3	Conveys violence and emotional shock	Goat slaughter imagery reflects rural ritual and subsistence practices	Deepens tonal gravity through culturally embedded violence imagery
'*Ngathi yingqolowa ilaliswa yirhengqe*' [like wheat being cut down with a sickle] (p. 193)	Synonymous	3, 4	Intensifies collapse, destruction, brutality and killings imagery	Agricultural metaphor reflects farming-based livelihood structures	Strengthens stylistic density through agrarian symbolism
'*Yeyomntu ongathi uyaphupha*' [like someone dreaming] (p. 197)	Epithetic	3	Suggests liminal consciousness.	Dreams as cultural epistemology.	Expands surreal narrative tone.

Source: Created from Saule, N., 1996, *Ukhozi olumaphiko*, p. 216, Via Afrika, Pretoria

Note: Please see the full reference list of Jaxa, N.P., 2026, 'The power of similes: Exploring the unique voice of the author in the text of the novel Ukhozi Olumaphiko', *Literator* 47(1), a2240. https://doi.org/ 10.4102/lit.v47i1.2240; Codes:1 - cultural background-inspired simile, 2 - nature-inspired simile, 3 - experience-inspired simile, 4 - language-inspired simile, and 5 - social context-inspired simile.

stylised. The literary voice is further distinguished by the use of irony, humour and sensory richness, particularly in social and politically charged contexts, such as '*Unkone oku kukaFriday'* [You are marred like Friday.] (p. 107), '*Iintsizana ezimbini zesoseji ngathi ziingqatha zekati*' [two miserable pieces of sausage-like cat droppings] (p. 17) and '*okwengxowa yomsuzo*' [like a sack of fart] (p. 7). The similes here add comic contrast and humour in a socially reflective scene.

The ways that similes contribute to the psychological depth and expressive quality of the text of the novel *Ukhozi Olumaphiko*: In the text of the novel *Ukhozi Olumaphiko*, the similes are also used as a means to externalise the emotional, psychological and traumatic experiences of Mfazwe, the main character. The most used similes are the experience-inspired similes (code 3), reflecting the lived realities of hardship, fear, oppression or inner turmoil. For example, the similes like *Ndandithwethwa okomzingeli'* [I was walking stealthily like a hunter.] (p. 99), *Okwamasi anengqaka kwiselwa elintamo imxinwa'* [like thick sour milk in a narrow-necked calabash] (p. 63) and *Ngathi kukukhanywa kwedlakadlaka lengubo'* [like wringing water from a worn-out blanket] (p. 123) convey hardships and emotional burden carried by a character. The simile, *Ngathi ubulele umntu*' [like you have killed someone] (p. 102), evokes a deep sense of guilt, dread and emotional heaviness, and the simile, *Abantu besifa okweempukane*' [people dying like flies] (p. 56), highlights collective psychological trauma, transforming abstract suffering into stark, visual form. The frequent use of hyperbolic and epithetic similes enhances the expressive intensity of the narrative. These forms allow the author to go beyond surface description, giving shape to the otherwise internal state of the characters. This ability enhances character development and invites readers to emotionally engage with the narrative on an intimate level.

How the similes in the text of the novel *Ukhozi Olumaphiko* reflect cultural and individual identity: Similes in the text of the novel *Ukhozi Olumaphiko* serve as conveyers of cultural memory, indigenous knowledge and personal identity. Many of the comparisons rely on cultural symbols, traditions and locally resonant imagery, firmly anchoring the narrative in the cultural landscape of the characters. Cultural background similes (Code 1), such as '*Uthobe amehlo okomntu oza kubulisa*' [eyes lowered like someone about to do greetings] (p. 13), '*Ngeziya nyawo zakhe ngathi ngamaqhekeza esonka sombona*' [with those feet like pieces of mielie bread] (p. 13), '*Seyithe chu ngoku okomtshakazi enqumla inkundla*' [walking slowly like a bride crossing a courtyard] (p. 19) and '*Oku kwenkatyana eza kufakwa idyokhwe*' [like a bullock about to be yoked] (p. 158) reflect values of humility, suffering and respect. These expressions go beyond mere ornamentation – they preserve and transmit social norms, belief systems and indigenous cosmologies. Furthermore, nature-inspired similes (Code 2) like '*Ngathi linxala likhweza ethambekeni*' [like an antelope running across a slope] (p. 123) and *Ngathi yinkwenkwe ikhutshwa emasimini eepesika ngemvubu'* [like a boy being chased out from a peach field with a sjambok] (p. 61) draw from familiar rural and environmental settings to reflect lived experiences and shared cultural references. Moreover, in the text of the novel *Ukhozi Olumaphiko,* similes are utilised to distinguish individual characters and their social roles. For example, '*Yayingathi kuzingelwa kubanjiswa iinyamakazi*' [It was like hunting and trapping wild animals.] (p. 140), '*Ngathi ngamaxhalanga ehlasela ihashe elifileyo*' [like vultures attacking a dead horse] (p. 58) and '*Wawubageca ngokungathi yirhengqe inqunqa iindiza*' [cutting them down like a sickle cutting dry maize stalks] (p. 58) demonstrate both the vulnerability and the social reality of exploitation. In these moments, similes operate as tools for both cultural affirmation and individual expression, capturing how identity is formed at the intersection of personal experience and collective tradition.

In conclusion, the similes in the text of *Ukhozi Olumaphiko* are multifunctional. The similes shape the author's literary voice by enriching it with metaphorical depth, poetic language and cultural specificity. Also, they (similes) enhance expressional and psychological depth, making the invisible emotional state tangible and accessible to the readers. Moreover, the similes are used to reflect and affirm identity, drawing on cultural, natural and experiential sources to express the complex realities of characters living through historical and social upheaval. These results confirm that the text of the novel *Ukhozi Olumaphiko* not only is for the adornment of the text but is deeply woven into its structure, meaning and aesthetic power.

Table 1 presents the similes identified in *Ukhozi Olumaphiko*, their classifications, and their psychological, cultural and stylistic functions. The analysis reveals six main categories: metaphorical, synonymous, epithetic, hyperbolic, gradation and antonymic. Although differing in form and function, these simile types jointly shape characterisation, emotional expression, cultural representation and Saule's authorial voice. The following sections examine each category within a consistent analytical framework.

Metaphorical similes

Metaphorical similes compare concrete images with abstract qualities, emotions or experiences. In *Ukhozi Olumaphiko*, they vividly enrich meaning through culturally familiar references. Expressions like '*Inkathunkathu entamo ibomvu ngathi yihagu ephaliweyo*' [a dry-skinned white person with a red neck like a scraped pig], '*Ngeziya nyawo zakhe ngathi ngamaqhekeza esonka sombona*' [His feet were like pieces of maize bread.] and '*Ngathi ngamaxhalanga ehlasela ihashe elifileyo*' [like vultures attacking a dead horse] turn everyday observations into striking figurative images. Drawing on animals, food and rural life familiar in IsiXhosa society, these similes evoke strong emotions. They are central to Saule's voice: culturally resonant imagery creates a narrative style that is imaginative yet grounded in daily social realities, linking individual experience to broader cultural meanings.

Synonymous similes

Synonymous similes use closely related images to intensify an action, emotion or state and are central to representing character experience. Examples include '*Yathi yakumana isithi swenyeswenye ngapha ngathi linxila liphepha izicithi*' [like a drunkard avoiding grass-covered mounds], '*Ingqondo yam ijikeleza okwenja ileqa umsila wayo*' [My mind spins like a dog chasing its tail.] and '*Okwethole lisiya kunina*' [like a calf going to its mother]. These similes convey confusion, uncertainty, dependency and vulnerability through familiar images. Psychologically, they turn inner emotions into concrete images, giving readers access to characters' emotional and cognitive worlds, while stylistically creating a narrative voice that blends psychological insight with cultural familiarity.

Epithetic similes

Epithetic similes use descriptive comparisons to highlight specific qualities or emotional states. In the novel, they mainly serve characterisation and evaluation. Examples include '*Uthobe amehlo okomntu oza kubulisa*' [eyes lowered like someone greeting], '*Lidwashuze ngathi ligqirha lixhentsa*' [like a dancing traditional healer] and '*Ndandithwethwa okomzingeli*' [like a hunter]. These similes emphasise humility, intensity, vigilance and emotional alertness. Drawing on recognised cultural practices such as greeting, traditional healing and hunting, they describe characters while also conveying social values and indigenous knowledge. Their use strengthens Saule's culturally grounded stylistic identity.

Hyperbolic similes

Hyperbolic similes use exaggerated comparisons to intensify emotional, social or evaluative meaning. In *Ukhozi Olumaphiko*, they often create humour, criticism and emotional emphasis. Examples like '*Okwengxowa yomsuzo*' [like a sack of fart], '*Impumlo yakho isoloko isemoyeni okweyenja*' [Your nose is always in the air like a dog's.] and '*Babefana nomgqwaliso kum*' [They were like a bad aura to me.] use exaggeration to express discomfort, ridicule, suspicion and social judgement. These similes strengthen the narrative's expressive force by heightening emotion and creating vivid images, showcasing Saule's skill in blending humour, criticism and social commentary through figurative language.

Gradation similes

Gradation similes use comparisons that highlight progression, continuity or shifting intensity. Although less frequent than other types, they play an important stylistic role. The example '*Njengamaza*' [like waves] suggests rhythmic movement and emotional fluctuation, conveying an ongoing process rather than a fixed state, and thus creating emotional flow and narrative continuity. Stylistically, gradation similes shape the pacing and rhythm of the narrative and sharpen the depiction of changing emotional states and experiences.

Antonymic similes

Antonymic similes rely on contrast, opposition or tension. Although least frequent in the data, they significantly support thematic development. The example '*Njengentlola*' [like a spy] evokes surveillance, secrecy and mistrust. By contrastive comparison, the simile exposes social tensions and intensifies the narrative's uncertainty. Despite their rarity, antonymic similes add complexity and conflict, building suspense and reinforcing themes of suspicion and social strain.

The findings show that similes in *Ukhozi Olumaphiko* serve multiple stylistic and narrative functions. In all categories, they enhance the imagery, emotion, characterisation, cultural representation and plot (Smith & Lee 2021). The analysis also reveals that Saule's similes are firmly grounded in IsiXhosa culture, drawing on animals, agriculture, ritual, social customs, spirituality and daily life. Through these figurative resources, the author creates a distinctive voice that blends psychological insight, cultural resonance and stylistic creativity.

Discussion

This study examined the role of similes in shaping the authorial voice in Ncedile Saule's novel *Ukhozi Olumaphiko*. The findings reveal that similes are not merely ornamental linguistic devices but multifunctional stylistic resources that contribute to character representation, emotional expression, cultural meaning-making and narrative development. Through their diverse semantic and syntactic configurations: similes create vivid imagery, intensify affective meaning and support thematic development. More importantly, they reveal how figurative language contributes to the construction of a distinctive literary voice that is simultaneously individual and culturally grounded.

From the perspective of expressive stylistics, the findings demonstrate that Saule's use of similes constitutes a significant component of his stylistic identity. The prevalence of metaphorical, synonymous, epithetic and hyperbolic similes suggests a sustained commitment to figurative expression as a means of narrating experience. Rather than relying exclusively on direct description, the author frequently draws on culturally familiar images derived from animals, agriculture, domestic life, ritual practices and communal experience. Similes such as '*Inkathunkathu entamo ibomvu ngathi yihagu ephaliweyo*' [like a scraped pig], '*Ngathi ngamaxhalanga ehlasela ihashe elifileyo*' [like vultures attacking a dead horse] and '*Wawubageca ngokungathi yirhengqe inqunqa iindiza*' [like a sickle cutting maize] illustrate the author's tendency to transform ordinary social and material realities into vivid literary imagery. Through this process, Saule develops a narrative voice that is both imaginative and recognisably rooted in IsiXhosa cultural experience.

The findings further suggest that the literary distinctiveness of *Ukhozi Olumaphiko* derives not primarily from its thriller elements but from its sustained use of culturally embedded figurative language. While the novel may share certain

thematic and structural features with other works in the thriller tradition, its stylistic identity emerges through the deployment of similes that draw on indigenous knowledge systems, rural life, communal practices and oral expressive traditions. Images associated with cattle, hunting, traditional healing, marriage rituals, dreams, agricultural labour and animal behaviour recur throughout the text and function as culturally meaningful interpretive frameworks. The repeated use of such imagery contributes to a distinctive narrative texture that differentiates the novel from works that rely primarily on genre conventions to create literary effect.

The contribution of similes to narrative development becomes particularly evident when considered in relation to the experiences of the protagonist, Mfazwe. Throughout the novel, Mfazwe encounters situations characterised by uncertainty, social conflict, emotional burden and moral tension. Similes such as '*Ingqondo yam ijikeleza okwenja ileqa umsila wayo*' [My mind spins like a dog chasing its tail.] translate these experiences into concrete and culturally familiar images, allowing readers to engage with his confusion and psychological struggle. Similarly, comparisons associated with hunting, cattle and physical labour illuminate broader themes of resilience, vulnerability, survival and social responsibility that underpin the narrative. In this way, similes contribute not only to stylistic expression but also to characterisation and thematic development (Roncero et al. 2021).

The analysis also highlights the important relationship between similes and psychological representation. Roncero et al. 2021. Although the study does not seek to reconstruct authorial psychology, the findings demonstrate how figurative language contributes to the representation of emotional and perceptual experience within the narrative. Several similes translate complex psychological states into concrete and accessible images. For example, the simile '*Ingqondo yam ijikeleza okwenja ileqa umsila wayo*' [My mind spins like a dog chasing its tail.] conveys confusion, uncertainty and mental agitation through an image that is immediately recognisable. Similarly, expressions such as '*Abantu besifa okweempukane*' [people dying like flies] and '*Njengamaza*' [like waves] transform emotional and social experiences into vivid sensory representations. Such figurative constructions allow readers to engage with the subjective experiences of characters and contribute to the psychological depth of the narrative.

This psychological dimension is particularly evident in the representation of the protagonist, Mfazwe. A number of the similes identified in the analysis illuminate states of confusion, vigilance, emotional burden, dependency, uncertainty and resilience. Similes such as '*Ndandithwethwa okomzingeli*' [like a hunter] and '*Okwethole lisiya kunina*' [like a calf going to its mother] reveal aspects of a character's experience that might otherwise remain implicit. Rather than merely describing external actions, these comparisons provide insight into how characters perceive and respond to their circumstances. In this way, similes function as interpretive devices that enrich characterisation and enhance readers' understanding of the emotional dimensions of the narrative.

Another significant finding concerns the close relationship between figurative language and cultural identity. Many of the similes are deeply rooted in social practices, shared experiences and systems of knowledge that are familiar within IsiXhosa cultural contexts. References to traditional healers, marriage rituals, cattle, hunting, dreams and communal forms of social interaction indicate that the figurative language of the novel draws extensively on culturally situated ways of understanding the world. These findings support arguments that literary language often serves as a repository of cultural memory and indigenous knowledge. The similes therefore perform a dual function: they facilitate narrative expression while simultaneously preserving and transmitting cultural meanings.

The presence of dream imagery and references to traditional healing practices is particularly significant in this regard. Similes such as '*Uthe thaa okwethongo*' [like a dream or vision] and '*Lidwashuze ngathi ligqirha lixhentsa*' [like a dancing traditional healer] reflect symbolic systems that extend beyond literal description. Such images evoke cultural understandings of spirituality, knowledge and perception that remain important within many IsiXhosa communities. Their incorporation into the narrative demonstrates how literary texts may draw upon indigenous epistemologies to construct meaning and enrich interpretation.

The findings further reveal that similes operate simultaneously at collective and individual levels. On one hand, they draw upon shared cultural resources that are recognisable within the broader IsiXhosa community. On the other hand, their selection, frequency and deployment reflect Saule's individual creative choices. The author's voice emerges not through the invention of entirely new cultural symbols but through the distinctive ways in which familiar cultural resources are transformed into literary expression (Yiğen 2019; Miller 2019). This interaction between collective cultural inheritance and individual artistic creativity is central to understanding the authorial voice in African-language literature. The findings therefore suggest that literary style should be viewed not as separate from culture but as emerging through an author's creative engagement with culturally available forms of expression.

Overall, the study demonstrates that similes play a central role in shaping the stylistic texture of *Ukhozi Olumaphiko*. Through their figurative, psychological and cultural functions, they contribute to the narrative development, characterisation, emotional resonance and construction of the authorial voice. The findings further demonstrate that the study of figurative language offers valuable insight into the relationship between literary creativity, cultural identity and stylistic expression in IsiXhosa literature. By foregrounding the role of similes, this study contributes

to ongoing scholarship on African-language literary stylistics and highlights the importance of culturally grounded figurative language in the production of literary distinctiveness.

The focus of this study is (1) to highlight the efficacy of similes in shaping the author's literary voice in IsiXhosa literary texts, such as the text of the novel *Ukhozi olumaphiko*, (2) furthermore, to examine the contribution of the similes to the psychological depth and expressive quality of the text of the novel *Ukhozi Olumaphiko*, and (3) lastly, to highlight how the similes that are used in the text of *Ukhozi Olumaphiko* reflect cultural and individual identity. According to Bingham (2026), the 'voice' refers to the author's writing style, or authorial voice. It is the stylistic imprint of the individual author – their unique, signature style, if you like. An authorial voice should have an instantly recognisable quality, or personality, and it should remain present throughout the novel. This discussion therefore interprets the results through the lens of literary stylistics, with particular emphasis on expressive and psychological stylistics.

Firstly, the expressive stylistics delves into the way literary language conveys the author's attitude, emotions and unique style through linguistic features (Ahmed & Mohammadzadeh 2021; Semino 2017). The results demonstrate that similes in the text of *Ukhozi Olumaphiko* are instrumental in crafting a distinct literary voice of the author, characterised by rich metaphorical language and cultural nuance. The continual use of metaphorical and epithetic similes, lodged in indigenous cultural references, reconciles with recent stylistic research illustrating that figurative language enriches authorial expressivity and narrative voice identity (Beibitoval et al. 2024; Simpson 2020). The linguistic artistry reflects the author's skill and creativity in using culturally resonant imagery to build a voice that is both poetic and socially grounded. Additionally, similes function as expressive devices that communicate not only descriptions but also the author's cultural position and emotive engagement with the novel's themes, which is central to expressive stylistics.

Secondly, the experience-inspired similes (Code 3) contribute richly to the psychological depth of the novel by externalising complex inner emotions. Psychological stylistics examines the ways in which language evokes mental states and emotional responses in readers, in a manner that facilitates cognitive and affective empathy. For example, similes such as '*Ingqondo yam ijikeleza okwenja ileqa umsila wayo*' (p. 18) clearly portray emotional burdens, inciting readers to simulate the main characters' psychological experience. This is in accordance with what is noted by Deignan and Oxley (2022) that figurative language assists readers in accessing subjective mental states, enhancing immersion and empathy. Therefore, the similes in the text of the novel *Ukhozi Olumaphiko* act as linguistic mechanisms that deepen the psychological realism of characters, enabling readers to engage empathetically with their struggles and emotions.

Thirdly and finally, the strong roots of similes in indigenous culture and social experience foreground their dual role in expressing both collective and individual identity. This view that culturally embedded language is crucial in representing individual identity formation within a social context is underscored by stylistic scholarship such as McIntyre et al. (2022). The findings demonstrate that similes serve as expressive markers of cultural memory, beliefs and social realities, while at the same time revealing personal psychological states. This dual function of similes is congruent with stylistic theories that highlight the intersection of expressive language and psychological portrayal in literary texts (Mahlberg et al. 2019). The similes in the text of *Ukhozi Olumaphiko*, then, do not only create vivid imagery but also interpose cultural identity and psychological experience, enriching the novel's emotional and socio-cultural complexity. By leveraging the power of similes, all of them created by the author, they have not only deepened the narrative but cemented the author's distinctive literary voice. By leveraging the power of similes, the narrative is deepened and enriched, contributing to a distinctive literary voice as constructed through the text's stylistic and representational choices.

Limitations and recommendations

The limitations of this study may stem from the fact that the study focused only on one IsiXhosa literary text, a novel which is a thriller and a rare genre among IsiXhosa creative texts. Also, the fact is that the study used an IsiXhosa novel only and did not include any novel from other languages. Therefore, future studies can be performed with a broader scope, as this study used only one out of numerous IsiXhosa novels, and the study has focused only on an IsiXhosa novel and has not used novels written in other languages. Research with a broader scope may yield new insights that may challenge the findings of this study. However, this study could be very useful and shed light on other new research concerning the use of similes in literary texts. It (study) has revealed another feature of similes, which is often ignored or unnoticed. Furthermore, this study could contribute significantly to scholarly research concerning the efficacy of similes in shaping the literary voice of an author.

Conclusion

This study foregrounded the pivotal role of similes in shaping narrative meaning and the distinctive literary style evident in *Ukhozi Olumaphiko*. It addressed a gap in stylistic research on IsiXhosa literature, particularly the limited focus on how similes contribute to narrative voice construction and character representation. While similes in IsiXhosa literary studies have been examined from various perspectives, their role in shaping the novel's stylistic distinctiveness and narrative expression has not been sufficiently explored.

The analysis demonstrated that similes in *Ukhozi Olumaphiko* are not merely decorative elements but integral components

of narrative construction. Through their varied semantic and syntactic formations, they enrich imagery, intensify emotional meaning and enhance thematic development, particularly in relation to the experiences of the protagonist, Mfazwe, and other characters. The frequent use of culturally embedded, experience-based similes contributes to the depth and authenticity of character portrayal while also reinforcing the narrative's expressive richness.

Furthermore, the study showed that similes function as key stylistic resources through which the text achieves vivid description, emotional intensity and cultural resonance. The novel's status as a thriller also amplifies the effectiveness of these similes in generating suspense, tension and narrative immediacy, making it a distinctive contribution to IsiXhosa prose fiction.

Overall, the findings establish that similes in *Ukhozi Olumaphiko* are central to its meaning-making, driving narrative development, character construction and stylistic distinctiveness. This finding affirms their significance as a primary literary device in IsiXhosa narrative fiction.

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Competing interests

The author, Nontembiso P. Jaxa, declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Nontembiso P. Jaxa: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Validation, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

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