

Transformative Belief: Flight and Transcendence in Sipiwe Gloria Ndlovu's *The Theory of Flight*

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Abstract

Sipiwe Gloria Ndlovu's novel, *The Theory of Flight*, uses the theme of flight to depict issues of self-belief, freedom, and identity in postcolonial Africa. Ndlovu portrays the importance of belief as a means of transcending and dealing with one's difficulties. Her dislike of dualities and categorisations is evident in her unification of the natural and the supernatural in the novel, as well as the characterisation of the protagonist as a "hybrid" being. The novel's anti-binarist stance exemplifies the divisions that have echoed and developed from colonialism, such as sexism and racism. Such issues are prevalent in modern-day South Africa owing to the dehumanising system of apartheid, and can be seen through the country's high rate of gender-based violence and racial inequality. *The Theory of Flight* suggests that self-belief is humanising and allows individuals to take back their power and free themselves from racist classifications, allowing for a postcolonial society to heal and move forward. This article begins with a brief summary of events in the novel relevant to this analysis. Thereafter, the usefulness of the theoretical frameworks of spiritual realism and postcolonialism are discussed. The theme of flight in the novel is then explored, as well as its significance in the context of the text. Together with this, further links between tropes and images of flight are drawn, allowing for an in-depth analysis of the significance of flight in Ndlovu's novel.

Keywords: Sipiwe Gloria Ndlovu; flight, freedom; Southern African literature; postcolonialism; spiritual realism

Introduction

The Theory of Flight by Siphiwe Gloria Ndlovu (2018) follows the life and death of Imogen “Genie” Zula Nyoni, portraying the people and experiences that have an impact on her as she navigates through life. Imogen’s birth and death are both mystical events, signifying the importance of her character. Her father, Golide Gumede, is obsessed with flight, and attempts to build an airplane in the latter part of his life. This leads to him developing a following of individuals who believe that he is capable of flight. However, he is unable to complete building the airplane as he and his wife are among those who are killed during a “civil war massacre” (Stobie 2020, 32). Despite this, Imogen claims to have seen them fly away. She not only witnesses the death of her parents, but she is “gang-raped by the ‘sojas’ and infected with HIV” (Stobie 2020, 32). She is then adopted by the family of her childhood friend, Marcus Masuku. Imogen grows up understanding that she does not fit in within the nucleus of her adoptive family, and when she learns that she is HIV-positive, she resolves to set herself free and do something meaningful. At the age of 18, Imogen leaves the Masuku household to live on the street with a vagrant, Vida, who saves her from death after she is knocked down by a car. Imogen’s intention is therefore to save Vida just as he saved her. She lives a fulfilling life with Vida, one longer than expected given her diagnosis. When Imogen reaches her life’s end, she flies away on a “giant pair of silver wings” (Ndlovu 2018, 32), thus achieving her father’s dream of flight and transcending the boundaries of what is perceived as “real” or “possible.”

The Theory of Flight is a contemporary work of fiction that explores various postcolonial issues through natural and supernatural imagery. It can therefore be said to encompass the genres of both spiritual realism and postcolonialism. At the heart of this analysis are the numerous literal and metaphorical representations of flight that surround the protagonist, Imogen “Genie” Nyoni and her father, Golide Gumede. Through flight, Imogen is able to transcend her hardships into a domain of peace and acceptance. As the novel was published recently, in 2018, and perhaps because it is Ndlovu’s debut novel, only two academic publications have appeared on the text: a book review by Annie Gagiano (2020) and a research article by Cheryl Stobie (2020). Both scholars note the importance of flight in the novel; however, Gagiano focuses on the book as a whole, while Stobie examines the themes of precarity and conviviality in the novel. Although there is a paucity of critical reception on *The Theory of Flight*, the gap in the literature affords one the opportunity of exploring an important theme in the novel that has not yet been focused on. An in-depth analysis of the theme of flight adds a further dimension to the existing scholarly interpretations of the novel. The aim of this article is to explore the images and metaphors of flight related to the characters of Imogen and Golide, and how these symbols represent strength and a state of physical and mental transcendence in *The Theory of Flight*. The theoretical concepts deployed for this analysis are spiritual realism and postcolonialism.

Engaging Spiritual Realism and Postcolonialism

It has been argued that postcolonial writers have commonly deployed magical realism in their work as it allows for different, resistant, and more culturally oriented storytelling (Naidoo 1998; O'Brien-Udry 2014; Sharma 2021). However, though there are a number of metaphysical occurrences within the novel, Ndlovu has expressed her dislike of the term “magical realism” due to the limiting effect the term might impose (Ndlovu and Malec 2019). Furthermore, the word “magical” may suggest a separation of the natural and the supernatural (Naidoo 1998), which could be seen as contrary to the African worldview, where the supernatural and the natural are generally associated and exist together or within each other (Petrus and Bogopa 2007). Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992) proposed the term “spiritual realism” as an alternative to the term “magical realism,” as magical realism is more rooted in the South American perceptions of the supernatural (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2007). Furthermore, François Gavillon (2013) argues that spiritual realism is better suited to sharing indigenous knowledge, making it a more appropriate lens through which to view the novel. Stobie (2020) has therefore suggested the use of the term “spiritual realism” as a suitable critical lens for analysing *The Theory of Flight*, as Ndlovu employs “Western traditions and African oral and mythic elements” (2020, 33) in the novel. However, due to the relative paucity of elaboration of the term “spiritual realism,” this article will use scholarly discourse on both magical realism and spiritual realism to underpin the framework of spiritual realism.

In the novel, Imogen’s ability to fly evokes the theory of magical realism as well as the concept of liminality, as she transcends what is typically perceived as “normal.” Both magical realism and liminality are related to postcolonial theory (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2007), as they are able to create an in-between space that goes against the normative binary. Liminality is closely associated with hybridity, both of which create an “in-between” or “transcultural” space that goes against binaries and divisions (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2007). Although the country’s setting in the novel is hinted as being Zimbabwe, Ndlovu chooses to leave it unnamed, thus situating the text in its entirety in a liminal space. This provides the reader the opportunity of deciding how to place the novel, and further allows for the text to work on an “allegorical level” (Gagiano 2020, 1), which is the level of analysis that this article focuses on. The theoretical frameworks of postcolonialism and spiritual realism therefore prove useful in analysing symbols and imagery in the novel, as they allow for both a contextual and deeper interpretation of the text. Other than the various suggestions of the novel being set in a postcolonial country, the word “postcolonial” itself is also used at different moments in the text to allude to the current state of affairs that exists within the novel (Ndlovu 2018, 158, 217, 218, 306). The various allusions to a country no longer under colonial rule, together with the postcolonial concepts of liminality, hybridity and magical realism, allow for the novel to be interpreted through a postcolonial lens. In addition, postcolonialism seeks to celebrate “indigenous cultures and traditions” (Ukande and Igba-Luga 2019, 93), and this can be found in the novel through its

incorporation of aspects of African culture. The following section, on the power of belief in flight, begins with an exploration of the symbolism associated with freedom, transcendence and resilience in *The Theory of Flight*, and goes on to discuss the theme of identity in the novel.

The Power of Belief in Flight

Freedom and Transcendence

According to Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa (n.d.), a well-known traditional healer from KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa and a controversial “authority in the fields of, among others, Zulu folklore, nature conservation, astrology and extraterrestrial life” (Steyn 2003, 67), birds hold various meanings in African culture (Podolecka 2018). An apparent example of the symbolism of birds in the text is the surname of the main character, Imogen “Genie” Zula Nyoni; *nyoni* translates to “bird” in several Nguni languages. In different African cultures, specifically in the Zulu culture, birds represent a state of freedom (Mutwa n.d., 2); the *ingonyi* or *nyoni* is “the freest of the free” (2). Imogen is further likened to a bird as she “hatched from a golden egg” (Ndlovu 2018, 235), and she is portrayed as fluttering and twittering as a toddler (43). When she dies, Imogen flies away on a pair of silver wings, further emphasising her similarity to a bird.

It is not only through Imogen that the symbolism of birds emerges, but also her father, Golide Gumedé. He gains an insight into life that inspires him to build an airplane so that he may take flight:

There was this feeling that Golide got ... a knowing. ... He became aware of his place in the world. He understood that in the grander scheme of things he was but a speck ... a tiny speck ... and that that was enough. There was freedom, beauty even, in that kind of knowledge. It was the kind of knowledge that finally quieted you. It was the kind of knowledge that allowed you to fly. (Ndlovu 2018, 24)

This awareness that Golide attains is comparable to the associations of the hamerkop bird in Zulu culture, connoting “a powerful symbol of futility, a symbol that reminds human beings that they are really nothing” (Mutwa n.d., 3). This state of nothingness may thus be likened to Golide’s understanding that human beings are a mere “speck” in the “scheme” of life. In addition, when Imogen’s parents fly away, they turn into “nothingness” as they disappear into the sky (Ndlovu 2018, 232).

On her deathbed, Imogen has a flashback of witnessing her parents take flight, after which they too become a “speck”:

Genie’s parents become a giant pair of silver wings that take to the skies and turn into a flash of light and colour as they glint and gleam in the sunlight. The giant wings become smaller and smaller until finally they are a mere speck in the azure sky. And then, as if by magic, the tiny speck turns into nothingness and her parents vanish. (Ndlovu 2018, 232)

The idea of being a “speck” brings up the mystical African belief of “the self as a fragment of a Unified Self” (Naidoo 1998, 52), or a “dimension” of a larger constituent of the self (Nwoye 2006, 121). This view encompasses the belief that “the self is capable of transcending the limitations of space and time” (Naidoo 1998, 52). Similarly, flight in the novel is positioned as a mystical and powerful event, the belief in which frees one from the limits of the imagination and allows for transcendence to occur (Stobie 2020). Imogen’s parents are seen as a “flash of light and colour,” conveying the idea of them being starlike. Peter Alcock (2014) makes the general point that in different African cultures, certain stars encompass various meanings and significations. One belief which fits Ndlovu’s representation of Imogen’s parents as stars is that of the Nyae Nyae !Kung Bushmen, who “saw the sky as the dwelling place of all the divine beings and spirits of the dead” (Slotegraaf 2013, 62). This concept portrays Golide and Elizabeth as powerful and transcendental beings. Moreover, the couple is described as “a giant pair of silver wings,” a synecdoche which reinforces their belief in the power of flight.

Imogen’s self-belief and her belief in flight inspire others to believe in flight, just as her father’s “self-confidence instilled confidence in others” (Ndlovu 2018, 17). This can be seen when she speaks of her parents’ ability to fly; Esme, the wife of Imogen’s childhood best friend, believes that Imogen’s parents are indeed capable of flight. Esme perceives Imogen as a transcendental being who is capable of flight at any moment; she could “[s]imply fly out of the window towards the sky and become a multi-coloured ribbon in the sky, a rainbow, a wondrous thing to behold” (Ndlovu 2018, 273). The image of a rainbow connects with the love for colour that Imogen possesses as she often dresses in “colourful clothes” (Ndlovu 2018, 191). A rainbow is formed when sunlight passes through water, and sunlight itself is a fusion of all the colours of a rainbow (National Geographic [NG] 2013). Imogen thus shares similarities with both the sun and rainbows; she is frequently compared to sunlight and sunflowers in the text, and like the colours of the rainbow, she is a dynamic and diverse character. Rainbows hold various symbolisms, and are seen in some cultural myths (such as the Norse and Gabonese) as “bridges between people and heavenly beings” (NG 2013). An allusion to African culture can be seen through the depiction of rainbows; in some ancient beliefs in Gabon, “rainbows were the bridges that human ancestors took to travel to Earth” (NG 2013). These connotations of rainbows relate to Imogen as a colourful, transcendental being, linking to the image of a colourful bird which is found multiple times during the book: Imogen decides to send her aunt a “colourful bird” (Ndlovu 2018, 116), which Imogen seems to teleport to her as the bird appears out of nowhere and is carried home by Imogen’s aunt. Furthermore, when Imogen is on her deathbed, her lover, Vida, encounters a “colourful bird” (Ndlovu 2018, 242). Vida himself sees the similarity between the bird and Imogen for he says that he once had “a beautiful and colourful bird” (Ndlovu 2018, 244).

After the death of her parents and her rape, Imogen leaves her home by force, and when she finds out she is infected with HIV, she leaves the home of her adoptive parents by choice. Both times, however, she takes flight; to some extent, she escapes her hardships

but fights them at the same time, for she does not allow them to consume her. A part of Imogen's disposition is that she is able to decide when to fight, and when to take flight, once again showing the balance of her character as a hybrid being. Ndlovu describes the various times Imogen falls ill, allowing the reader to witness the pain Imogen endures because of her infection. As a result, the reader is able to decipher once Imogen reaches her life's end, for she bleeds to the extent that her blood soaks through the sheets and the mattress. At this point, the reader witnesses Imogen's decision to take flight and free herself from her suffering, rather than to fight. Her pain is contrasted with images of that which she loves—her childhood, the sunflowers and her parents—displaying her resilience. Although death is typically a sad event, Ndlovu depicts Imogen's death in such a way that the reader feels a sense of peace and calm, just as Imogen did at the time of her death: "the prevailing images are of the transcendence of flight as she is borne aloft on silver wings, filled with love and leaving her mystically transformed heart behind as a sensuous reminder" (Stobie 2020, 33).

The "Theory of Flight" is not only the title of the book, but it also emerges in the text as Golide's theory of flight, as well as the name of Vida's set of art. As a theory generally has scientific and rigid connotations, the phrase "theory of flight" has oxymoronic qualities given that flight has fluid connotations. Placing both words in one phrase reinforces the anti-binarist theme in the novel, just as the use of the natural and the supernatural does. Furthermore, Imogen's character goes against the binary: as a hybrid being, Imogen is both grounded but able to fly; and like the nameless country in the text, she occupies a liminal space as she takes flight at her life's end although she is incapable of physical flight during her lifetime. One symbolic meaning of flight in the novel is freedom, hinting that the theory of flight could contribute to a theory of freedom. One theory of freedom is that of Immanuel Kant, which posits a "positive conception of freedom" as "the free capacity for choice" (Demenchonok 2019, 191). In other words, Kant's theory of freedom "asserts the unconditional value of the freedom to set one's own ends" (191). This autonomy is particularly seen in Imogen who follows her own path, and due to her firm belief in herself and in flight, she is able to fly. Therefore, through portraying the various manifestations of flight as well as the power of belief in flight, a postcolonial theorisation of flight as freedom is suggested in the text.

A common connotation of flight is escaping danger, just as the phrase "fight or flight" signifies. Imogen's ability to remain optimistic does not negate the negative experiences she has, and therefore, the flight she experiences in the novel could also be indicative of the manner in which she copes with the hardships she faces or "frees" herself from them. Not only is Imogen's rape not disclosed to the reader, but she keeps it a secret from the characters in the novel. It is only towards the end of the novel that the reader is shocked by the indirect revelation of Imogen's rape. For Imogen, concealing this traumatic event allows her to suppress the horrific memory, acting as an escape or protection from the memory. Moreover, the revelation of the rape late in the novel prevents the reader from feeling pity towards her character, which speaks to how

Imogen perceives herself and would like to be perceived. This allows Imogen's resilience to shine through more vividly.

Resilience

The reader is informed that the events of the story revolve around the "life and death" of Imogen (Ndlovu 2018, 2), positioning her as the central character in the novel. The prologue begins with the mystical event of Imogen's flight, which points out the use of spiritual realism in the novel:

At the moment of her death, Imogen Zula Nyoni—Genie—was seen to fly away on a giant pair of silver wings, and, at the very same moment, her heart calcified into the most precious and beautiful something the onlookers had ever seen. (Ndlovu 2018, 4)

Imogen's flight can be seen as the main supernatural occurrence in the novel, for her flight is made explicit by Ndlovu throughout the text. Both Imogen's nickname and surname could be said to represent her ability to fly. Imogen goes by the nickname "Genie," a fitting name as a genie is a supernatural creature "rooted in Mesopotamian legends and developed in Middle Eastern and African cultures to characterize a being with free will ... who has the powers of shapeshifting and flight" (Stobie 2020, 30). Similarly, Imogen possesses a sense of agency (Stobie 2020), and although she may not be able to literally change form, she can be seen as a character who adapts to her circumstances with ease. After becoming an orphan, Imogen is adopted by the Masuku family and she is able to adjust her "persona" to become "whoever the Masukus wanted and needed her to be" (Ndlovu 2018, 180), allowing her to transition into her new family more easily. Imogen's ability to adapt is also seen when she leaves the Masuku household to stay on the streets with Vida; on the first night she spends on the streets, Imogen sleeps "soundly and rather contentedly for someone who was lying in a strange place next to a stranger" (Ndlovu 2018, 189). Thus, her similarities to creatures that can take flight, as well as her belief in flight, provide Imogen with the ability to easily attune herself to her surroundings. She is therefore able to break free from the mental restrictions that would otherwise make it difficult for her to adapt to her surroundings.

Adding to the symbolism of Imogen's nickname is the concept of a genie that was born out of the Islamic notion of a "jinn," which is believed to be a spiritual being created from fire (Peterson 2007, 95). Fire itself often appears to possess a vertical motion, almost as if it is trying to fly upwards towards the sky. The image of fire can be found in various parts of the novel, and is especially seen in the art that Imogen's lover, Vida, creates. Vida uses scrap metals to create a series of three sculptures inspired by Imogen, and he names one of the pieces "The Firebird" (Ndlovu 2018, 218), which is yet another reference to Imogen being birdlike. Firebirds commonly symbolise "rebirth and resilience" (Krienitz 2018, 45), thus the "phoenix-woman sculpture" Vida creates can be said to epitomise not only Imogen's ability to fly, but also her strong personality (Stobie 2020, 32). Imogen's resilience is seen through her ability to triumph over her trauma: losing her parents at the age of nine, witnessing a bloodbath, and being raped

and infected with HIV. However, despite the hardship Imogen faces, she does not treat herself like a victim, but remains determined to do good (Stobie 2020). This can be observed through her nickname (an unusual one for the given name Imogen, usually contracted to Imo or Immy), which also shares a phonetic similarity to the word “genial,” hinting at Imogen’s convivial nature. When Imogen and Vida are salvaging for metals for his sculptures, she sees “beauty and value in things that he would have disregarded or discarded” (Ndlovu 2018, 192), portraying her ability to see the good in the bad, just as she sees the possible in the impossible. A distinct act of goodness by Imogen is her “salvific act of conviviality” to save Vida from his depressive state (Stobie 2020, 32), at which she succeeds. Even after death, Imogen “extends her healing, forgiving and harmonising influence” (Gagiano 2020, 16) as she reunites all those who played a part in her life in the same area which led to her father’s great discovery—the banks of the Zambezi, near the Victoria Falls.

According to Lothar Krienitz (2018, 45), “the motif of the firebird epitomizes the cycles of life from birth, death, decomposition, and reintroduction into the cycle,” which may be correlated with the cycle of Imogen’s life and her flight after death that the reader witnesses. In the novel, “The Firebird” is not only the name of the sculpture Vida creates, but it is also the name of Imogen’s favourite story as a child: “Genie borrowed *The Firebird* and renewed it every month” as she was “enamoured of the pretty pictures of the beautifully colourful bird” in the story (Ndlovu 2018, 63). Arthur Ransome’s translation of the Slavic tale describes the Firebird as having “golden feathers” that appeared to be “glittering like a flame” (2004, 123, 125). Similarly, the Firebird sculpture in the novel is described as a “flash of light” and a “dance of colour” (Ndlovu 2018, 306). The metaphor of the Firebird as Imogen is further manifested in Imogen’s hair being likened to “the colour of flames,” which creates an “amber brown Afro-halo over her head” (Ndlovu 2018, 271).

Linking to the concept of fire are the colours of gold and yellow, for fire typically has the appearance of these shades. The colour gold may be observed in various parts of the novel, beginning with the genesis of Imogen’s life which is described as “beautiful and golden” (Ndlovu 2018, 6). Imogen’s conception is a mystical and unique event, as she is born from a “shiny golden egg” after five years (Ndlovu 2018, 6), further indicating her “rare alterity” (Stobie 2020, 31). Vida encapsulates Imogen’s beginning in his sculptures by giving the name “Golden” to one of his pieces dedicated to Imogen (Ndlovu 2018, 218). Her “golden” identity is shared with her parents: whilst Imogen’s mother dons “spun golden hair” that once appeared to be “suspended in the air” (Ndlovu 2018, 19), the name Golide translates to “gold” in some Nguni languages such as isiZulu and isiXhosa. Imogen’s father’s full name, Golide Gumede, translates to “fields of gold” (17), an allusion to the sunflower field which Imogen loves. The closing sentence of the novel incorporates the colours of the precious metals gold and silver, thus alluding to the value of flight: “Overhead an aeroplane flies; its silver wings flash in the golden sky” (Ndlovu 2018, 403).

Reclamation of Identity

Golide chooses his nom de guerre “Golide Gumede,” which translates to “fields of gold,” as it is what he “envisioned for his people after the war” (Ndlovu 2018, 17). Although Golide hopes for “lives of plenty” and “lives of comfort” for his fellow people after the war (Ndlovu 2018, 17), he also hopes that they will achieve “lives of value, lives of substance, lives that mattered” (17). Therefore, for Golide, in order to achieve a life of purpose, one has to believe in oneself, and believe that the impossible is indeed possible. This belief in the impossible is shared by Imogen who, like Golide, observes swimming elephants and is filled with awe at the sight of them. She is amazed at how the “elephants were floating as if they were as light as feathers” (Ndlovu 2018, 169). Therefore, if an elephant is able to swim and achieve the “impossible” (169), then human beings would also conceivably be able to transcend the limits of what is impossible and take flight.

According to Jones (1999), it can be said that one’s beliefs may influence or form a part of one’s identity. Therefore, it may be deduced that for those who believe in flight, their identity is the epitome of this belief. Thus, their identities take on a form similar to the symbolism of flight; those with a belief in flight possess a freed identity that they can claim for themselves, an identity no longer controlled by colonialism and social constraints. Such an identity, which stems from a strong belief, allows one to transcend the mental and psychological shackles of colonialism, further adding to one’s physical freedom. This power and value of belief is seen in the calcification of the hearts of those who believe that they are capable of flight (Stobie 2020). Although they do not achieve physical gold, their hearts turn into “precious and beautiful somethings” (Ndlovu 2018, 394), and for Imogen who not only believes in flight but possesses the ability to fly, her heart calcifies into “the most precious and beautiful something that the world has ever seen” (389).

Ndlovu uses various images and metaphors to portray Imogen as a special human being with birdlike qualities. Although she exists in the natural world, Imogen possesses supernatural abilities, making her a dynamic character. Owing to her hybrid identity, she is able to unite the mystical with what is generally perceived as “normal.” The next section focuses on how flight represents an alternative state in *The Theory of Flight*. The section begins with a discussion of hybridity and liminality, and moves on to the theme of rebirth in the novel.

Flight as part of an Alternative State

Hybridity and Liminality

The colour yellow is especially prominent in the novel through the images of sunflowers. In the novel, the sunflowers appear to be “reaching for the sky” (Ndlovu 2018, 229), even though they remain rooted in the soil. This balance of remaining rooted yet possessing the ability to fly can be seen through Imogen (Gagiano 2020; Stobie 2020); although she is able to take flight, Imogen shares an intimate bond with the

sunflower field: “there was nothing she enjoyed more than digging her toes into the moist reddish-brown soil” (Ndlovu 2018, 229). Furthermore, when Imogen flies away at the time of her death, her body remains on earth and she is found with her feet “burrowed into the soil” (Ndlovu 2018, 386). Imogen herself questions whether she is a “hybrid thing” that is “rooted but free to fly” (Ndlovu 2018, 235), making explicit the postcolonial concept of hybridity in the novel.

Imogen’s hatching at birth and flight at the time of her death indicate that she is in a state of transformation during her life, positioning her in a liminal space, and supporting her perception of hybridity. Just as a bird is fledged, Imogen’s experiences ready her for her final flight as she grows up, allowing her “wings” to form. There are instances in the novel before her death that portray Imogen as a character capable of flight. For example, when Imogen is knocked down by a car, it seems as though she “had flown briefly through the air like something truly wondrous” (Ndlovu 2018, 139). Imogen’s return to a birdlike state at the time of her death portrays the cycle of life and death, as well as the African belief concerning time. In the African traditional belief system, time is not linear, but a “cycle” (Jongeneel 2009, 38), and beyond death, there is life (Ushe 2017). At the time of her death, Imogen chooses to ascend from the sunflower field, which is another symbol of the cycle of life and death.

Rebirth

The sunflower field represents the place of Imogen’s parents’ death, as well as those who believed in Golide’s message of flight. When Imogen ascends from the sunflower field, it is as though new life has emerged from it. This is similar to Vida’s ability to create sculptures from scrap metal, a process akin to alchemy whereby a base metal is transformed into a valuable metal, like gold or silver. Vida’s recycling of scrap metals to create his tangible art may be further likened to “recreating life” (Ndlovu 2018, 193), something Imogen does; she is able to create a new life for herself, not once, but twice in the novel: after her parents die, she is adopted by the Masukus, and at 18, she goes to live on the streets with Vida. Imogen’s ascension from the sunflower field reinforces the motif of life after death in the text, paralleling the theme of transcendence in the novel. When Imogen passes away, she is “borne aloft on silver wings” (Stobie 2020, 33), further adding to the idea of rebirth in the text. This use of spiritual realism in the text may be interpreted further to “demystify death and present an alternative reality of death based on cultural and religious beliefs” (Naidoo 1998, 290), tying in with the African traditional belief of death being a “transitional period” (Petrus and Bogopa 2007, 7) and of ancestors as the “living-dead” (Ushe 2017, 154).

Through the sunflowers, a young Imogen learns about the emergence of new life after death:

The sunflowers were being reborn. This was how they learned their most valuable lesson about death—that after it there is life again, that things that perish will rise again, that after every ending there is another beginning. (Ndlovu 2018, 57)

Imogen is also repeatedly compared to sunflowers in the text: she grows towards the sun, taller and taller, until she can finally fly towards the sky; and just as sunflowers are reborn again after death, so too is Imogen. She therefore chooses to take her “rightful place” among the sunflowers at the time of her death, just as she does when she is younger (Ndlovu 2018, 57). Sunflowers are typically “associated with the sun, as suggested by [their] name, golden colour and ray flowers, as well as tilting to face the sun during growth” (Fărcaș et al. 2015, 196). Similarly, Imogen “would turn her face towards the sun” (Ndlovu 2018, 229), further likening her to the sunflowers. One connotation of the “yellow-orange” colour of sunflowers is that of “wisdom, nourishment, light, and warmth” (Fărcaș et al. 2015, 197). These qualities may be seen in the character of Imogen, whose presence is once mistaken for “sunshine” by Vida (Ndlovu 2018, 185). Vida sees Imogen as “radiant” and as possessing “a light within her that made her luminescent” (185). Furthermore, when she is just a teenager, Imogen’s doctor finds her to have an “undeniable wisdom in her eyes” (290).

Ultimately, Imogen concludes that in her life, she “reached for something and touched it” (Ndlovu 2018, 235), just as the sunflowers seem to reach for the sky. Imogen herself sees the resemblance between herself and the sunflowers:

She strongly suspected that she had once upon a time been a sunflower, for she too was thin and tall, reaching for the sky; she too had a brown face that was turned up towards the sun; she too loved the gentle sway of the breeze. (Ndlovu 2018, 229)

Imogen and the sunflowers are so much alike that the “only difference between herself and the sunflowers was that they had yellow halos and hers was reddish-brown like the soil” (Ndlovu 2018, 229). The image of a “halo” brings to mind the idea of angels, spiritual beings that fly, here indigenised by the colour change. Imogen’s flight at the time of her death further connects her to angels. Her father also creates “a race of angels—followers who believed that they too were capable of flight” (84). However, Imogen’s hair is likened to a halo during her lifetime, adding to the possibility that she is a celestial being who always possessed the ability to fly. Imogen feels as though she had spent her life “in flight” like “something spectacular in the sky” (235). Her self-perception stems from her perception of her parents; she “[knows] for certain that [her] parents were capable of flight” (314).

The theme of flight runs throughout the novel (Gagiano 2020; Stobie 2020), and one of the ways it is represented is through various art forms (Stobie 2020). Ndlovu refers to visual art, such as the “The Theory of Flight in Three Movements” sculptures that Imogen’s significant other creates; audible art, such as the song “Calling Occupants of Interplanetary Craft” by The Carpenters; and audio-visual art, like Imogen’s favourite cartoon film, *Button Moon*. Imogen’s favourite fairy tale, *The Firebird*, is another reference to literary art in the novel. According to Stobie, art itself may be interpreted as possessing “the power to represent transcendence and the entry into another domain where disparate elements can be mystically united” (2020, 32). This uniting of

“disparate elements” lends to the anti-binarism feature of postcolonialism which can be coupled with Homi Bhabha’s conceptualisation of a “third space” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2007; Chakraborty 2016, 149). Art creates a type of alternative space where restriction is not placed on expression, and different mediums and materials can come together in a unique but complementary manner. This speaks to Ndlovu’s characterisation of Imogen; she is likened to both a bird, which is capable of flight, as well as a sunflower, which is rooted, thereby placing her character in a third or alternative space. This notion of a “third space” is also seen through Ndlovu’s handling of the number three in the novel. One use of the number three is seen through the set of sculptures that Imogen’s lover creates for her; he creates “The Theory of Flight” sculptures in “Three Movements” (Ndlovu 2018, 218), reminiscent of a “triptych” (Stobie 2020, 32).

Conclusion

Through the symbolism of flight, Ndlovu is able to convey various messages. The implications of the belief in flight are numerous: to believe in flight is to be able to transcend the bounds of the imagination, to find peace and resilience, and ultimately, it is to be free. Even if one cannot physically fly, one’s imagination can soar “far beyond the restrictions of an individual’s or a people’s circumstances” (Gagiano 2020, 2). Through flight, Imogen is not only able to deal with her difficulties, but she is also able to free herself from them. Imogen’s transcendence can be classified as both physical and mental; where her physical transcendence was her ability to fly, her mental transcendence was her strength as a person, and her ability to push forward regardless of her experiences. The use of spiritual realism conveys the possible and the impossible; the natural or the real represents what is seen as possible, and the supernatural is seen as the impossible. As a hybrid character who goes against the normative binary, Imogen is also able to transcend the boundaries of what is deemed real through her belief in flight and occupy a liminal space. In doing so, she bridges the divide between the natural and the magical, and raises the outlook that perhaps possibility and impossibility are mere concepts of the mind.

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