

## Artistic Representation in Petina Gappah's *The Book Of Memory*

Ngeno, Nicodemus  
University of Kabianga, P.O BOX 2030-20200, Kericho.  
Correspondence Email: [nmastamet@yahoo.com](mailto:nmastamet@yahoo.com)

### ABSTRACT

*Prison narratives are amongst the growing genres of global literature. Imprisonment has been in existence for a length of time now. The experiences of jailing authors is not something new, very many authors have been jailed as a result of dissimilar political, religious and social reasons. To the the system, the detention of these writers is geared towards 'killing' their Spirit thus making them give up their quest for liberation. Their sentencing though, has only physically encouraged them, making their intellect and thoughts to perforate the high prison walls. They air out their grievance through writing. The earliest forms of Prison narratives were, oral accounts shared among the inmates, and later on, the accounts were written for remembrance. The narratives put forth are autobiographies, poems, Letters and memoirs. Most of the writers narrated their experiences in custody. The written works form a link between the outer world and jail. This study open our eyes on the literariness of prison narratives in; Petina Gappah's *The Book of Memory* (2015). It endeavours to talk about the artistic expressions of prison life in the selected texts. The study will be a modest contribution to existing criticism of Prison Narratives.*

**Keywords:** Artistic, Literary representation, Imprisonment

**Copyright © 2024 The Author(s):** This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

### 1 Artistic representation of prison life in Petina Gappah's the book of Memory

A good artistic work seduces a reader and takes him or her into the fantasy world. All art creates a significant representational experience. The experiences normally put across meanings that are usually camouflaged and more than what it says. A good story is supposed to make us think and experiences meaning without saying so directly.

Art is constructed of representative essentials which are best described as signifiers representing signified and the relationship between them. In a

story, the representative elements include; plot, character, setting and style.

A plot, in literary work is the order of events in which the said events affect the next one through the principle of cause and effect. (Dibel, 2023) American science Fiction writer perceives plot as a 'thing' that can serve up as an action, referring to either to the author's ordering of events or rather planning of future actions in the story. A plot can mean a synopsis of a story that is a brief description of the events along the story line.

The plot used in creative writing can be grouped into the following styles: Linear, episodic, parallel and flashback, according to (Pardede, 2020). The length of the writing will dictate the nature of the plot. A Linear plot for example is majorly employed in short narratives, while episodic and parallel plots are use in long creative writing like Novels.

A character; a person, a being, a creature, or things in a creative work are used to perform an action, which does creates a message that was meant to reach the target audience. According to (Breth, 2021) a character is equally essential in a story, therefore each story must have one. Most stories though have many characters interacting amongst themselves. The primary elements in a story are character(s), which are uniquely portrayed by the author as they plays different role in moving a narrative along.

The word setting is mostly used to imply the social milieu in which the events of a novel occur. The setting; entails the passage of time, which maybe static in some narratives or dynamic in others.

Setting exists in three main forms: for example, the natural world, where the landscapes of the earth play essential part in the story or the living creatures which adapt themselves to the conditions and seasons as presented **by** time. The second form exists in the cultural and historical background in which the story resides. Past events that have impacted on the cultural background of characters or the locations bare grave consequences. The third form of setting is a public or private place that has been formed / maintained and /or inhabited by people. Examples of this include: a residential estate, a park, a street, a school, among others.

In a narrative, the way the writer writes or tells a story is what is known as a style. Styles are what distinguish one writer from another and create the “voice” that the audience hear when they read. There are many essential pieces that jointly makes up an author’s style; like tone, word choice, grammar, language, descriptive techniques among

others. The mood in any literature work can also be determined by the style employed by the writer.

## 2. Plot in Petina Gappah’s *The Book of Memory*

The story of ‘Memory’, the protagonist in *The Book of Memory* is a gripping one. She is an albino lady languishing in Chikurubi Maximum Security Prison in Harare, Zimbabwe, where she has been convicted for murder. The Novel exposes humanity showing not only the failures of human beings, but also the goodness that is inherent when one chooses to dig deeper than what is glaring out. The Novel was described by (Jaggi, 2015) as the most powerful narrative of innocent lives shattered by family secrets and sexual envy, unfairness and unacknowledged kinship.

The story is a narration by an albino lady named Memory. It is a testament from death row life, put down in a book at the behest of her legal representative, to give support to an appeal against her sentence for suspected murder. She is accused of killing her foster father Lloyd (the white man), thus arrested and sentenced to death. After her swift trial and murder conviction, she lived out her days in Jail.

At the beginning of the novel Memory’s murder case seems a difficult one as the public sees her as a remorseful criminal. To form a strong appeal, her lawyer advises her to sit and reflect about her past and mores so what led to her detention and then to record all in paper. This was a good avenue for her to heal, to have a flashback and reconcile with it while being optimistic about her future. Memory wrote all the accounts while in jail.

Memory in her defence, informed the court that she was sold to Lloyd by her parents, a narration that was dismissed by the court of law as just a mere fable as it was not accepted in Zimbabwe. This believes has been in her mind all through, until she gets a complete picture at the tail end of the narrative. She felt all along that she was abandoned by her family leading her to a sense of loss.

When the scenery shifts to Lloyd's place, Memory finds a new family. She became part and parcel of Lloyd, Liz and Sandy. The Professor's apartment replete with libraries of books, horses and servants is a sharp contrast with Mufakose her birth place, where she lived until the age of nine. All was going on well in Lloyd's place until Zenzo stepped in the picture. For the second time, Memory started feeling that sense of betrayal the same way she felt when she was rejected and abandoned by her parents.

She plans her revenge but in spite of it all, her affection for Lloyd transcends the twinge until he is painfully put to death and Memory is seen at the crime scene. This epic narrative explores several thematic concerns, including friendship, betrayal, courage, racism, family, colourization, and political upheaval. While in solitary confinement, memory bonds with the women of the prison. Most of the women are unreceptive and others like Loveness are very receptive. Loveness treats Memory with specialty, simply, because in Memory she sees her own daughter who was also an albino.

The terrible state of prison system and Judiciary system of Zimbabwe as well as the hypocrisy among the leaders is exposed in the novel. The worst hit by this rot are the women, who are detained like animals in the most unsanitary conditions. The society's religion and superstitions are also conveyed in the novel, but the most essential pit is the matter of racism, majoring on how the colour of the narrator is viewed. The negative perception of Memory's colour made her to shrivel into herself and pray that her skin will become darker.

"I prayed every second for God to darken my Skin. After Reverend Bergen said 'Ask anything of me, says the lord', I redoubled my prayers. I made all sorts of Bargain ...But my skin remained what it had always been. Religion having failed me, I turned to science," (Gappah, 2015)

Memory's internal turmoil and her feelings out of place added by her relocation to Mufakose(Lloyd's home), made her to find solace in books which eventually became important for her survival and mental health. Memory embraces imagery to describe her circumstances and environment in jail. We as readers are able to see her strengths as well as her vulnerability.

"Crippled by fear and longing for home, I was saved by books. The worlds I travelled allowed me to escape the pain of being uprooted from Mufakose." (Gappah, 2015)

The plot in the *Book of Memory* is not linear as it shows memories are not linear. The thoughts can interject other thoughts therefore a linear plot is next to impossibility. The trial that Memory is subjected to, makes her comprehend the world better. She accepts that things take place for a cause and the recognition of that fact makes her come to harmony with self.

At the end of the Novel, the cause of Lloyd's death is still unknown. Memory as a narrator remains in custody, with no end in sight for her legal case. The result of her murder conviction ironically turns out to be of little importance once she has capitulated to her plight.

In spite of her bleak position, she is able to replicate on the restorative muscle of writing and speech, which has allowed her to amalgamate various conflicting traumas, failures, and successes into a unified story.

### 3. Characters in Petina Gappah's *The Book of Memory*

The protagonist in the *Book of Memory*, Mnemosyne or better known as Memory has been created as a special and unique person by the author. An albino character is not something common in most narratives. Memory is confined in a state prison called Chikurubi Prison in Harare, after being accused of murdering a wealthy white man named Lloyd. Memory is a name given to her by her parents, and that name itself is an irony in

that they shared a few very few memories of their own with her; she did not know a lot about her grandparents or any information about their ancestral home.

Petina Gappah strongly probes the harrowing experiences of Memory, the first woman in more than 20 years to be sentenced to death. As part of her petition she begins writing down her reminiscences of what happened and her notes form the novel. Gappah in this story was influenced by her knowledge as a lawyer.

Memory spent most of her time documenting her painful and emotional experiences of being an 'outsider.' It shows how her skin, cracks and blisters in the sun as she was an albino. She was regarded with fear mixed with attraction and suspicion. She even contemplates ripping off her skin and in order to be replaced by a darker one. She felt like disappearing and just become an observer. "I spent much of my life trying to be invisible," says memory.(Page) Her misery was even escalated by her family life, with her volatile, cruel mother, and affectionate yet wretchedly sad father, both coming to terms with the demise of two of Memory's siblings, named Gift and Moreblessings.

Gappah brilliantly creates other characters and sceneries from the main character, Memory. The gulf between the Bourgeoisies and the Proletariat is exposed. This is clearly seen when Memory was sold by her parent to Lloyd when she was nine years. Mr. Llyod a white man who is financially better off as compared to Memory's parents. As a result of that, she moved from her impoverished township, Mufakose to the wealthy suburbs of Umwinsidale. Ironically the grand house made Memory to be crippled with fear and desire to go back home. She said, 'I discovered books that became as necessary to me as breathing.'(Page)

The non-linear narrative reflects the intertwining progress of Memory in the course of time, swerving over painful points and afterwards returning to prod the harrowing moments; the novel is marred with wounds.

'In my wild moments of loneliness, I thought of driving to Mufakose. But the wound, though partially healed, still throbbled enough for me to want to leave it undisturbed.' (Gappah, 2015)

The author's creation of the uniquely slippery narrator in Memory as an albino is very significant. As readers, we are able to see how Albinos are perceived by the society. The story clearly shows how they don't really fit in the black or white people. The narrator describes the open stares and ridicule especially from other children. There is also the perceived superstition about Albinos and humour takes the centre stage in the narration. For example, there is a part where Memory decides to scare an inmate by just unflinchingly staring at her at mealtimes. The people generally do not know how to react to albinos as a result this assisted Memory at times in Jail.

The names of the characters in the novel are something to behold because mentioning them would generate curiosity to the effect brought about by them.

Most of the characters in the book have names based on the attributes or just random nouns like; Memory, Loveness, Synodia, Evernicce, Princes, among others.

The characters in the *Book of Memory* are indeed disturbing and thought provoking. Mavis, for instance, a character who was jailed before the country gained its independence, has never known what a liberated Zimbabwe of the day was like. Another provocative character is Verity, who had deep thoughts and wondered how she conceived an idea to defraud European embassy of over half a million Euros by creating an imaginary organisation entitled 'Advancement and empowerment of the girl child'

## 4. The setting in Petina Gappah's *The Book of Memory*

The Setting of the *Book of Memory* is in Zimbabwe, a place where the writer grew up. Petina Gappah was born in Zambia in 1971 but brought up in Zimbabwe. Her profession as a lawyer also shaped the happenings in the Novel.

The setting shifts from place to place surrounding the protagonist known as Memory. Her recollections move from a Harare Township known as Mufakose, where she stayed with her parents and siblings for a period of nine years. Later on, she was sold to a mansion in Lloyd's suburbs at a place known as Summer Madness. She later realized that she had been sold to Lloyd by her parents. While living in Lloyds she was granted a scholarship to study in Europe. As Memory reflects on the actions that landed her in the women's wing of Chikurubi top-security prison, a web of secrets and delusions came to light.

Chikurubi Prison in Harare takes the centre stage in the novel. In this solitary confinement jail, we encounter a woman in her death row, an inmate who is waiting for the presidential reprieve. The eponymous protagonist is found guilty of the Murder of Lloyd.

The infamous Chikurubi prison is presented as one of the most humiliating and degrading detention centres particularly to Memory and by extension to the other prisoners. The women in their section are congested because two to three hundred of them living in close proximity. The humiliation was intensified since the prisoners sometimes were forced to collect their soiled sanitary protection, "foul – smelly and bloody pads" with their bare hands. This made them to wash out the blood before disposing their pads because that reduced their humiliation.

"When there is water, it is normal for the women to wash out the blood from the pads, before disposing of them." (Gappah, 2015)

Memory uses her uniqueness (the fact that she is an albino and that she has benefitted from a western education) to reconfigure the prison space. She achieves this by teaching Yeukai who is the daughter of Loveness and is also an albino. By doing this Memory escapes from the confines of cell and its inhumane sufferings. She also reconfigures the prison space by scripting her own life story. Many of these narratives focus on why Memory has ended up in prison and on the experiences that she is having there. The challenges meted upon these women are made vivid by these images.

## 5. Styles in Petina Gappah's *The Book of Memory*

Style distinguishes authors in literature. Literature is not only about the storyline and the content but sometimes how the storyline and content is brought out by the specific writer. Petina Gappah has employed several styles in *The Book of Memory* and some of them are captured below;

### 5.1 Flashback

The narrative is predominantly a flashback, a recount of what the protagonist Memory experienced before she was condemned to death. Her lawyer instructs her to have a recount of her past in order to aid her case. At the moment she is confined in Chikurubi Prison. From the recount our eyes are widely opened; thus; we are in a position to understand in depth what led to her arrest and not just mere accusation of killing her adoptive father Lloyd. Furthermore, her childhood experiences and how she endured racism because of her skin colour is clearly brought out.

We have several instances of flashbacks, for instance while on her way to the guard's lodging though technically imprisoned, Memory finds herself taken a back into her past. What she encounters triggers a past memory relating it with the present happenings.

A series of connections are established between this "suffocating familiar" house and her childhood dwellings in Mufakose, and having a

comparison of the imposing perimeter barrier of detention and the domestic green hedge surrounding this place, where the guards live. It pin points a change in the boundaries.

Hearing children play games outside the guard's house arouses the past thoughts in Memory's mind. When she was forced to remain indoors and simply observe and listen to others as they played. The arrival of the guard's daughter Yeukai is more significant because she is also an albino. Memory says, 'I saw myself again.' (Gappah, 2015, P.242).

This interlocking of past memories and the present is pushed further when one considered the implication of Yeukai's name. 'Yeukai' which in Shona implies 'remember'. Therefore; it became a means for Memory to have a flashback of her earlier period and to rise above it.

## 5.2 Suspense and Foreshadowing

The Zigzagging between the present and the past in *The Book of Memory* is a clear implication of the jumbled way in which people often recall what happened in the past while linking them to the present day occurrence. The deliberate withholding of details in the present by characters in order for these to be released in future is by itself suspense. We as readers have that desire to know what happen to this or that character, and at the end of the day, we would have reached the end of the storyline. Suspense in the *Book of Memory* in most instances is fused to foreshadowing, as whenever suspense is created, a lot of loaded flash forwards take place.

Zenzo, a character in *The Book of Memory*, has been created to play and key role and Petina intentionally mention him giving us only sketchy information. We are left, as readers, wondering and eager to know more. The curiosity generated makes us to read on. Several incomplete descriptions of one character as "all the ugliness with Zenzo" and "after business with Zenzo," without further explanations, leave us in suspense. In part two, chapter one of the Novel, we have a suspended phrase "Then Zenzo entered our lives, and everything wilted" (Gappah, 2015, p. 145),

thereafter all the information about Zenzo is given in the subsequent chapters.

## 5.3 Humour

The incidences of humour in *The Book of Memory* are entertaining. The painful experiences which the protagonist and other characters pass through, more so in Chikurubi Prison, are brought out in a manner that leaves us amused. For instance, Memory describes the food in the prison in a manner that leaves the reader in stitches. She says "there is not enough oil in the fried vegetables or there is so much that you almost fear that America will invade" as they did in the Middle East.

The story of the *nanga* woman, who was caught and arrested while trying to cross into Mozambique, is so humorous.

The inmate, Rotina Mavhunga also known as the 'diesel nanga' from Chinhoyi convinced the cabinet secretary that she could make diesel come out of a rock. She does demand to be given a farm and seventy billion dollars in order for her to perform the miracle. Wonders of wonders, the government believed her, and to proof that they indeed trusted her, half the cabinet went to meet her and, "they took off their shoes and socks. They exclaimed and clapped when the fuel came out. The women ministers ululated. All the while, behind the rock, she and her boyfriend had a tanker of diesel from Zambia," (Gappah, 2015, P.202)

Petina Gappah at some point fuses humour with metaphorical statements, making the narrative so 'delicious' and a perfect example from the narrative, is when Memory is recalling the three occasions when her mother took her to a traditional healer. In one of the visits, they went to a dusty little room of little round men and women in Harare. Her mother waited for ancestral spirits to visit them as they acted as mediums. When they made another visit to the same place, they found a little boy whose description is entertaining. "We found the house empty, except for a small boy of my age who was all mango; there seemed to be



more mango on his person than had made it into his stomach.” (Gappah, 2015, p.103)

The harsh reality in Chikurubi Maximum Security Prison is fortunately offset with humour. The inmates and the prison warders might not sound like fertile ground for amusement but it is seen in scenes where the prisoners hold mock court appearances, relying on flawed understanding of laws to rehearse their testimonies.

Gappah while drawing our attention to, societal beliefs of the power of witchcraft and dark magic in Zimbabwe, she uses humorous phrases that leave the reader laughing. Such instance is evident when, Mavis Munongwa is explaining to Memory the reason why she was jailed. She uses a lot of humour. Mavis was married in Gutu and when her husband died, she was not convinced about the true cause of his death, therefore, she decided to visit a diviner to seek answers. According to the diviner, her husband was killed by her sister-in-law and her sorcerer friend. In the night in the graveyard, the diviner told Mavi:

“They feast on his flesh and drink his blood. They made his penis into a whistle that they use to summon each other” (Gappah, 2015, p.79)

Gappah’s brilliant usage of Shona, paints the imagery of township life. This cuts across the whole the novel, as the narrator’s laments about lack of being properly educated amongst the warders are, which is very interesting.

Synodia’s witty utterances makes fun of Zimbabwean English, and this is illustrated by the paragraph reading, “Synodia sneered and said, *Pwongratulations, pwongratulations*. Don’t talk as if it is your father’s government.”

The superstition that surrounds albinism in the novel is described with a pinch of humour. For instance, there is a section where Memory decides to scare an inmate by just staring at her, during mealtimes. The fact that most people are unable to cope with albinos played out in her favour. What also added to her mystique is the chameleon that

she picked in the third month. She was not scared of holding chameleon in her hand, unlike most of the other women. Without having the slightest idea of what she was arousing, she rushed out to take it into her hands and instantaneously there was a cry that rang out. She at first didn’t know that it had anything to do with her. “The others moved together, as though their solidarity would ward off the miasma of my evil.” (Gappah, 2015, p.28) The news spread throughout the Prison and made her safe from all bullying, at least from other prisoners.

The narrators’ description of the charges that were levelled against the inmates before their sentencing opened the door to their past world. As should have been the case, the crimes committed should have been displeasing to the ear, but nonetheless the author is able to wittingly describe their experiences arousing laughter. A case to remember, where humour had been infused, is the crime committed by Jimmy. Jimmy looks like a cartoon lesbian would look, except that she had had sex with more men than all the women in the prison, according to the narrator. She has served four of her six years for attempted murder. The sentence was a penalty for, biting the genital of a man who refused to pay her after sex at a nightclub.

“Jimmy’s attacked was so ferocious that her victim fainted from blood loss. When he recovered, it was to find that Jimmy had fled to the women’s toilets, where she spat out an essential part of him into Harare’s sewers.” (Gappah, 2015, p.22)

## 5.4 Allusion

Petina Gappah in many instances alluded to famous personalities in her description of events related to the character in question. Memory’s believe that she was sold by her parents to a white tycoon named Lloyd, made her relate her life to that of Elizabeth –Jane Henchard who, was sold along her mother. The character featured in the stories she used to read when she was still living with her parents. Another character who she

relates to is Oliver Twist, who was sold out to be a mourner at Children's funerals.

Biblical allusion has been used mainly by the author to show hypocritical nature of some characters. Memory reflects the evangelical tyranny of one guard called Synodia. The name sarcastically, through sonority evokes sin. She hyperbolically barks at inmates. The inmates subversively ridicule her while appearing in her proselytism.

“You must fill your blood with his power, so that even the mosquitoes that bite feel that power. They will suck the power in your blood.” “Power in the blood!” echoes Evernice. (Gappah, 2015, p.28)

Gappah ironically posits through this grotesque analogy a negative contagion, to some extent like an ailment that is spread by mosquitoes. Evernice's reaction is potentially metonymic and subversive reminder of the minimal acts of fight backs carried out by them.

## REFERENCES

1. Gappah, P. (2015). *The Book of Memory*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, Bloomsbury House.
2. Jaggi, M. (2015). The Book of Memory By Petina Gappah review - a fictional testament from death row. *The Guardian*.
3. Mtenje, G. N. (2015). Drawing the limits of Marginality: Whiteness', disability and queer sexuality in Petina Gappah's *The Book of Memory*. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 16.
4. Onwah, O. (2020, January 15). Trials and redemption in the *The Book of Memory* by Petina Gappah. *Book Review*.
5. Sethi, A. (2015, 08 16). *The Book Of Memory review - A vivid life story from death row*. Retrieved from The Guardian : <https://www.google.com/amp/s/amp.the-guardian.com/books/2015/aug/16>
6. Shelves, S. (2016, April Thursday 7). Review of the Book of Memory by Petina Gappah. *A reader's Blog*.
7. Spemba, S. E. (2022). *Representation of Albinism and persons with Albinism in Narratives from East and Southern Africa*. Stellenbosch University, South Africa.