

Language, Creative Writing and Literature: Analysing Phebe Veronica Jatau's *The Hound* from the Poet-Scholar Perspective

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Abstract

The interrelationship among language, creative writing and literature is such that at any one moment one discovers that the end product which is literature in this order forms the ultimate amalgam of the other two. The scholar-poet or poet-scholar, and these two are not interchangeable, is at once the producer and the consumer in and of the creative writing process, the vehicle of both activities (production and consumption) being language. No one uses language as carefreely as the creative writer and no one takes time to pin the nuances of language to their very essence as the scholar or the critic. And when these converge in one person the output from such writer should engage the utmost attention of the reader. The poet-scholar is the producer of literature when she resorts to creative writing and she is the consumer when she attempts to access and assess the import of other writers' creative efforts. Until the publication of *The Hound* in 2014, Phebe Jatau had been content to remain a scholar, a postcolonial critic as it were, who is at home with social issues as they are portrayed in other texts especially as they affect women. This paper analyses social issues as they are portrayed in *her* text especially as they affect women and comes to the expressivist conclusion that Jatau's language and creative concerns are primarily a scholar-poet apprehension and not a poet-scholar representation. The implication for criticism being that the more she delves into creative writing the more honed she gets and the more her works would display this interconnectedness of language, creative writing and literature.

Keywords: poet-scholar, language, creative writing, literature

1. Introduction

If the truism of culture being the chief resource material of literature suffices in any form of literary discourse, the language as an expressive tool of this interaction should singularly be the most important. What this presupposes is that the writer of literature is preconditioned first by the language he chooses in the rendition of his story, then by the story itself. Because he is a product of his society and he is the producer of his artistic work, it follows that primarily the creative output is the mediated social construct as interpreted by the person of the creative writer. Where the poet-scholar is privileged to experience literature from the works of other artists, then he is in a better position to assess the influence of the society in the fictional works he comes into contact with. But most especially his own. Up to the present state in Africa, the utilitarian function of literature still holds sway. We still can reposition Chinua Achebe's conviction about African literature in 1965 (Olaniyan and Quayson, 2007:105). He said,

I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them.

At one point this sounds like an attempt to set the records straight. It appears like sentence carved out of the negritude manifesto. At another level which is the central concern of this thesis the statement underscores the poet-scholar's concern to educate his people about their own culture, knowing fully well the rich debt literature owes society. In the preface to his new book, *Contemporary African Literature: New Approaches*, Tanure Ojaide argues that the premise under which his book is conceived is that "literature is a cultural production... With this premise comes the acceptance of a utilitarian function of literature as of the other artistic creations of African peoples. (xi)

This speaks true for his book as for many other African texts and written for the literary minded reader. His is a book of criticism. And he insists that as a poet, he is better equipped to handle the business of criticism just as he has greater advantage as critic and scholar of literature to write creative works. In an attempt to explain what the poet-scholar perspective means, he says about his book, which is primarily a critical text, and which explanation we will later take to Phebe Veronica Jatau's *The Hound*. The poet-scholar perspective is a situation where

the author is not only a creative writer who has written many collections of poetry, novels, and short stories but also a literary scholar who has been studying and writing on traditional and

modern African literatures. It is from these vantage points of both creative writer and the literary scholar that I write this book. (xii).

Phebe Jatau writes from this perspective as well. The difference being that hers is a creative work. Another difference is that while Tanure Ojaide can lay claims to having written many books of and on creative writing, *The Hound* is Jatau's first attempt. As is expected so much of the story has an uncanny autobiographical ring. This is common with first novels. And this prevalence of the author's autobiographical details thinly disguised as creative work is not without its problems. One of these is stretching the reader's imagination to incredible level when attempts are made to dramatize events that he knows are not feasible in real life. In wholly fictional settings, even the farcical is believable. The other is the drabness of the narrative. In an attempt to remain faithful in the narration of real events, the spontaneity of the creative impulse is truncated and dramaturgy is lost and the novel reads like a textbook rendition of real events. There is no willing suspension of disbelief. The reader's imagination is already compromised by giving detailed attention to issues that would otherwise have been apprehended only in the imaginative realm.

2. Autobiographical Details and the First Novel

The autobiographical novel is otherwise defined as that piece of writing in which so much of the protagonist being is fashioned after the author's personality and so much of the events in the narration find parallel with actual events in the author's life experiences. The definition of the autobiographical novel on Wikipedia (2014), the free encyclopedia goes thus:

An autobiographical novel is a form of novel using autofiction techniques, or the merging of autobiographical and fictive elements. The literary technique is distinguished from an autobiography or memoir by the stipulation of being fiction. Because an autobiographical novel is partially fiction, the author does not ask the reader to expect the text to fulfill the autobiographical pact. Names and locations are often changed and events are recreated to make them more dramatic but the story still bears a close resemblance to that of the author's life. While the events of the author's life are recounted, there is no pretense of exact truth. Events may be exaggerated or altered for thematic purposes. Novels that portray settings and/or situations with which the author is familiar are not necessarily autobiographical. Neither are novels that include aspects drawn from the author's life as minor plot details. To be considered an autobiographical novel by most standards, there must be a protagonist modeled after the author and a central plotline that mirrors events in his or her life. (en.m.wikipedia.org :)

This definition fits *The Hound* like the glove. It is Jatau's first attempt at fiction writing. And since every writer's primary recourse is to their immediate experiences, it is clearly evident that what is narrated would doubtless be a result of what is experienced. Most first authors confess the presence of the autobiographical in their fiction and sometimes it is handled with remarkable degree of success. Others on the other hand find difficulty in resolving what part of reality would be fictionally recreated and what part abandoned. Is the story to be wholly imaginative or substantially realistic? Should the chaos and disorder of the modern world determine the storyline of the fictional creation as in most modernist texts or should the orderliness and lineal proportion of a well formed plot suggest the outlet of the doldrums that is modernity? Jatau does not have this problem. She consciously sets out to capture the story of a young girl growing up in a hostile environment and she is determined to succeed at all odds.

As a female critic, a seasoned academic who has two PhDs to her credit, it is expected that Jatau must have encountered the treatment of similar themes in the assessment of the literary works of other writers. One of her published critical texts is entitled *The Postcolonial Dimension of the Nigerian Novel*. In his Foreword to the book, Prof. Tanimu Abubakar said,

Dr Phebe Veronica Jatau contributes to the growing corpus of works on the relationship between literature and society and the specific contexts that define this relationship. The book gives attention to the problems of contemporary Nigerian society including the continuing presence of imperialism in its neocolonial form, the continuing stratification and inherited elitism of post-independence. It describes the wholeness of the experience from colonialism to the present in the way that other independent approaches to the study of postcolonial literary texts do not. (Jatau, 2014:ix)

What this implies is that Jatau is an erudite scholar who is at home with contemporary issues that afflict her society. This is what foregrounds her as the poet-scholar who attempts to reconstruct the story of Rebecca who grows up humbly and reaches the pinnacle of her academic career. Having critiqued the works of other writers, the poet-scholar is at home when it comes to treating issues similar to the ones she has read or commented about. She is also in a position to determine the advantage or otherwise of a chosen mode of representation.

The novel offers limitless freedom for experimentation with ideas and with narrative techniques. It also offers an avenue for intimate exposition and revelation of the author's most private experiences especially if the style chosen is that of the autobiographical novel. The critic however needs of necessity have certain information about the author to make inferences as to the degree of autobiographical influence on the written creative piece.

In contradistinction to the arguments of the New Critics and especially the assertion of Wimsatt and Beardsley in their famous essay *Intentional Fallacy*, where extraneous details to a literary text can only be so regarded where issues of criticism and theory are concerned, biographical details become not only relevant but desirable when the interpretation of autobiographical novel is the critical business at stake.

In the case of Phebe Veronica Jatau, a cursory acquaintance with two or three of her texts would furnish the critic with needed information from which inferences would be drawn as to what aspects of the author's social reality influence what areas of her creative rendition.

3. The Journey Motif as a Recurring Decimal

First and foremost, the author establishes from the outset the philosophy of the journey motif. Life is seen as sojourn from one unknown destination to another – the period in between being the sole determinant of our success or failure. In this regard, the author resembles her protagonist, Rebecca. First they are all females on a journey. The metaphor of life as a journey finds expression in Rebecca's traveling to Lagos, literally alone, as there is no relation to accompany her, to acquire western education. What she goes through, the ignorance, the need for acceptance, the inferiority complex which is later overcome, the trepidation with which the future is perceived, all these are manifestation of what life holds for the author as their literal interpretation holds same for Rebecca. At the end of her academic journey, which instructively began from Zaria, and ends in Zaria with Rebecca looking up with optimism as "the day dawned" (*The Hound*:136). For a book that begins "on a bright sunny afternoon", the ending is apt, the geographical cycle of the day having been completed. As is suggested earlier, though, the significance of the journey motif is to mirror the philosophy of life as a journey from one end of the unknown continuum to the other, the experience gathered in between being the only important thing. Rebecca's optimism suggests the promise of happy ending for anyone who lives a purposeful, helpful and meaningful life.

4. Point of Departure

Rebecca, the central character of *The Hound*, shares some outstanding attributes with her creator. In the first, they are all females. All are from humble background. All thirst for western education. All go to Lagos to acquire their secondary school certificates. All come back to Zaria to attend the university. All get married before going into the university. All have two children boy and girl. All read to PhD level. All go to Minnesota USA for another PhD Education in Curriculum Instruction. The outstanding parallels are enough to suggest the autobiographical details present in the text. The autobiography however does not distort or hamper the fluidity of the prose. The narrative sails along without a single obstruction. The parallels drawn above however stop where creative writing begins. Rebecca is a scholar, but she is no poet. She possesses the zeal to learn, but she does not have the inquisitive nature of the creative artist.

5. Language and the Text

It is to be expected that the language use in this kind of prose should be expressive. It is. The poet-scholar is able to discern and discard the structurally convoluted style of critical discourse and settles instead for the easy rhythmical language of prose which in some rare instances attains poetic heights. One such example is found in this sentence (p.119) when Rebecca comes back from the visa interview and arrives Zaria very late in the night. She is compelled to walk loudly out of fear. "Her thought was that the noise from the slippers would alert the sleepers for help." The pun in 'slippers' alerting 'sleepers' is unmistakable here.

The text is replete with Nigerianese. This is a situation in which Nigerian English snuggles comfortably amidst the standard English. For a poet-scholar, assuming this attempt is a conscious one to introduce style, attention should be drawn to it. Where it is not done, and it is not, in the entire text, one is left with little choice but to conclude the author should have known better. A few examples would suffice:

1. In the first paragraph of p.7, a sentence reads, “No child among her seven siblings had gained admission to a unity college before *talk less* of traveling south from the north. (“Talk less” is a Nigerian English wrongly used in place of “let alone”). The sentence should thus read, ““No child among her seven siblings had gained admission to a unity college before, *let alone* of traveling South from the North.”
2. In line 4 of p.23 the sentence that reads “It had two single chairs, one two-sitter and a three-sitter” should read, “It had two single chairs, one two-seater and a three-seater.” The argument that this is simply typographical is untenable as in most cases typographical errors translate to grammatical inappropriateness.
3. The colloquialism of p.33, line 17 “They gisted about...” should read, “The talked about...” This finds no explanation grammatical anywhere as “gist” is simply a noun referring to the import of a discussion, the main idea as it were and cannot be made into a verb.
4. The omission of “to” in line 3 p.53 between “her” and “seek” is another manifestation of Nigerian English in the text. This occurs mostly when there is “enable” in the sentence. For some illogical reasons users of English here drop the “to” in expressions like “to enable her *to* seek admission...”
5. The first sentence on p.62 when “He claimed he went to see the Head of Political Science Department who was not on seat throughout the day” also needs to be taken to cleaners so at least it can read something like this, “He claimed he went to see the Head of Political Science Department who was *not in the office.*”
6. Even the pidgin expression on line 27, p.4 “*Man no die, man no rotten,*” is wrongly rendered. The correct expression is “*If man no die, man no rotten*”.
7. It may appear a proofreading error when *scrabble* in line 5 of p.6 is spelt as *scramble* and *scorching* appears as *scotching* in line 7 of p.1., but it most certainly is grammatical.
8. And surely something is very seriously wrong with facts reported in the very opening paragraph of the novel where 1st October 1975 is reported to be a *Monday!* This is a factual fallacy. 1st October 1975 is *Wednesday*. Since the emphasis here is not on the specific day, the author should have done away with the specifics all together.

Apart from these curious expressions which are peculiar to the Nigerian users of English alone, the text employs localese to commendable use. The problem here is that they are neither contextually explained nor fontally italicized. And there is no glossary of non-English terms or phrases. The result of this is that the non-Hausa reader of *The Hound* would suffer momentary frustration when he encounters these phrases abruptly. Surely the use of songs is beautiful but again translation is needed especially as the reader is led on to believe that there is a chorus and soloist and these written in English.

The argument proffered here is that poet-scholar who knows that her text is a living entity capable of influencing thought processes and speech and writing patterns to all those who believe in the power and efficacy of the printed word, should have endeavored to ascertain verifiable facts before documenting them for posterity. As it is now, even the printing of the second edition cannot correct the reader-impression created by the first.

6. Creative Writing and Literature

Through creative writing, literature is created. This is essentially true because the entire body of critical texts owe their existence to the presence of a creative work. Creative Writing encapsulates social issues and serves them to members of the society in form that is palatable, affordable and convenient. The subtle satire contained in most literary texts is the stuff that literature is all about. The subject of *The Hound* is education and its price. This is invariably so since the author as argued severally above is a poet-scholar. The protagonist is a scholar per excellence but she is not a poet.

Through the story of her struggles and the attainment of the highest possible accolade in the academia, the story of a nation in transition is told. Rebecca indeed is even larger than her society. Barraged, abused and condemned, she perseveres and turns out to become the proverbial rejected stone.

During her suffering years, especially her awful loveless matrimonial experience, an indicting statement is made on the society that places high premium on a girl's virginity. This is Africa of old but the satire is still relevant. Rebecca holds her own till she is married only for the husband to take the gift with non-challant aloofness that one wishes Rebecca had given herself much earlier to some of the younger men she met who genuinely loved her. As it is, Pastor James abuses her trust which seems to suggest that the author does not uphold this virginal ethics as either commendable or desirable. Women should go about their normal business. If virginity stays before marriage, fine; if it goes, also fine. There should be no hassles over the issue.

The poet-scholar also displays her streetwiseness in handling the character of the pastor. It is immaterial here whether such a character has a parallel in her own life. What is important is that James has proven the maxim that not all that is white is pure. He is most certainly one of the most reprehensible characters in the novel.

He is a man of God and he should have known better than to take advantage of an innocent girl who trusts him as she has never trusted anybody. He abuses this trust, abuses her and drives her from his home on groundless, senseless jealousy. What is curious here is that the pastor goes scot-free. This may be an artistic oversight. Surely Rebecca's academic success may well have washed off her past sufferings but it is inconceivable that a man with such deep rooted wickedness in his heart should go unpunished. May be this is the author's statement; so much evil in our society prospers. The creative writer reflects these social ills and truly he is not duty bound to provide solutions for them.

7. Conclusion

The discussion so far suggests that the issue of language, creative writing and literature are entwined in one person – the writer himself. His mastery of the language will guarantee the success or otherwise of his creative endeavor. Because of human fallibility, it behooves him to thoroughly research his material before documenting them. The influence of the literary product is boundless, therefore the producer of literature who is poet, and the consumer of same, who is the scholar are duty-bound to ensure the veracity even at the level of artistic imagination of the material they are serving the public. The author of *The Hound*, Phebe Veronica Jatau, has succeeded in making her social commentary in language that is lucid and unpretentious, barring the observations made in the body of this paper and her effort is really commendable. Through this effort she has portrayed the place and position of the woman in a society at the threshold of change.

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