

# Exhuming the Author's Remains: An Analysis of Saadatu E. Yusufu's *Whispers*

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**Abstract**---The argument about the relevance or otherwise of the author's role or intention in the critical appraisal of his or her work is ongoing and unending. From Barthes to Wimsatt and other poststructuralists, the fad is to divorce the text entirely from its creator when issues of interpretation are at stake. This paper submits that poststructuralist criticism is not only valid and germane, it also opens limitless avenues for theorization and textual interpretation and analysis. There appears no critical boundary which the literary scholar cannot traverse to arrive at the meaning of a given text. Still in so far as the text did not just happen by accident, no serious damage can be inflicted on its explication if the historiography or even manifest intention of the author is known and the knowledge brings itself to bear on interpretation of the work. The author may be dead, but his remains serve as a reminder that a creator once walked the literary firmament of this modern world. It is with this preoccupation that this paper discusses *Whispers*, the poetry collection of Saadatu E. Yusufu, an established author from Northern Nigeria.

**Keywords**---Author, Saadatu E. Yusufu, interpretation

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE argument is far from rested about the relevance or otherwise of the author's intention or his history in the explication of his written work. Indeed in their famous treatise "Intentional Fallacy" published in 1954, "W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley argue that the author's intentions – that is the vision the author has of what they are trying to achieve in a particular work – is not valid source of critical judgement about a text's relative worth as literature." (*Critical Theory*, 250). [1] In other words the author's professed intention for writing or at the time of writing should have no influence whatsoever in the critical evaluation of the text as a literary piece. Roland Barthes takes this a step further in 1977 when he declares that the author is dead. Explaining what this means, Ian Buchanan says that

Barthes's basic point is that the author's life (the intricate details of their biography, in other words) is not part of the literary object. Although Barthes makes no mention of it, his argument echoes the work of W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley. Barthes's point however differs in that in contrast to these two forerunners of New Criticism, he is not interested in judging the relative merits of certain literary objects, but is rather trying to unravel the specific ontology of the literary object. His argument has three strands to it, each one reflecting the influence of ideas that were in circulation at the

time of writing, though not yet synthesized as they are here: first, when an author creates a character and gives that character a voice, the author ceases to be the one who is speaking (this point echoes Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of dialogism); second, all writing is simply words on a page, so it is language itself that speaks not an author (this is a fundamental premise of structuralism); third, all writing is quotation (this point echoes Julia Kristeva's notion of intertextuality). (*Critical Theory*, 110).

The thrust of this paper is not to challenge the critical standpoint of Barthes and other New Critics but to assert that the dethroning of the author from his historically privileged position of being the source of meaning to his work still holds social, even critical advantages in some areas of the globe. In places where literature is viewed as an academic exercise and a social enterprise, people can ill-afford to simply consign the discipline to the cult of academic rhetoric. The author may have been pronounced dead, but his resurrection is eminent since literature in Africa, particularly in Nigeria still has relevance as a tool for social transformation.

In discussing Saadatu E. Yusufu's collection of poetry entitled *Whispers*, this paper intends to foreground the author's discussion in her text, about her text and through text to show that her exercise is not simply an academic exercise. What this presupposes first and foremost is that, in her case, she is very much alive, physically that is, and decides not to be taunted by the claim that she has no say over what she has written.

When the writer of this article confronted her with the issue of her supposed literary death, she smiles and quotes Alexander Pope with nonchalance and perhaps belligerent simplicity, "the artists are partial to their arts, it's true/But are not critics to their judgements too?" [2]

What this implies is that if the postmodernist arguments about the death of the author holds true the modernist poets may as well meet and pronounce the critics dead. "On a more serious note," she says, "the artists still have a social and spiritual role to play in fashioning out directions for their societies." [3] It is precisely this type of stifling pontification that the New Critics abhor from the author's role as a commentator. In other words, once his job of writing is done, he should disappear and not to be seen or heard again. But so long as the text exists, his name remains.

## II. EXHUMING THE AUTHOR'S REMAINS

Analysing Michel Foucault's "What is an Author" which was published in 1969, Clark Richard, L.W. (1986) is quick to note that in Foucault's thesis, the author is anything but dead

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because it (not he or she) “is a concept fabricated by the various discourses which constitute the discipline of literary criticism. Foucault’s concern is with the discursive construction of authorship in the ways briefly alluded above, that is, the author as function of discourse and equally importantly, with the functions which the author historically served.” (1) [4]

The concern here is with this historical role of the author. Michel Foucault may well thingify the author in his article by asking “What” instead of “Who” is the author. But this thingification does not in anyway dehumanize the author any more than Roland Barthes pronouncement has killed him. Since the text remains as a living memorabilia for the author’s work, or at least his name, it follows that for posterity he would continue to exist even if it is as a mere unacknowledged appendage of creativity. And this is not plausible anyway since as time goes on, and the more he writes or his memory venerated, the bigger he grows. Shakespeare, for instance, is now more than an author. He is an institution. Wole Soyinka in Nigeria or Chinua Achebe or Ngugi wa Thiongo are already bigger than the books they created. There is therefore no killing these institutions. There lives will always be felt in their works.

The argument here is that given the tripod at the tip of which the author is bayoneted to death by Roland Barthes, one may argue that the author’s death is not fait accompli: in the first, when the author creates a character and gives that character a voice, the author ceases to be the one who is speaking. The fact that the author ceases to speak, does not mean he ceases to be. Or if he does, the sum total of the characters in his given text should together represent an undying and indestructible idea that is the author’s, which again is saying that he is far from dead. This is because at the level of the existing text being analysed the author represents the rallying point around whom the characters that people the text revolve. That they speak of and for themselves does not mean they exist by themselves. The argument here is almost theological. But there it is. The absence of God in our individual lives does not negate His universal existence.

The second leg of the tripod is the one that suggests that since all writing is simply words on a page, it is therefore language itself that speaks not an author. Again at the level of polemics, this is plausible. But all one needs to understand the untenability of this assertion is that language has always existed independent of men. Yet it is man that arrogates the language its own status to elevate his own. Still in spite of the sophisticated level language has reached especially in this age of digital technology it will be hard put to suggest that it can take the place of man. What the structuralists are saying is that man is the preserve of language and not language the preserve of man. So once the author’s role of recording language is done in the text he ceases to be. The logic of this eludes the rational mind for if the author has to be done with altogether would the language itself arrange itself in the text. Why should it wait to be given autonomy only to displace its benefactor in place of authority?

The third argument is in the realm of intertextuality which suggests that all writing is quotation and therefore nothing in meaning is original or permanent, least of all the author who is stringing these tissues of quotation together. The point is

that since as theory of meaning and meaning of production, intertextuality holds that all texts are composed of other (pre-existing) texts held together in a constant state of interaction, there can be no original texts, no complete texts and no singular texts.

All texts exist in a state of partiality and interdependency with other texts. This is not simply a fact of language, according to Julia Kristeva, but its necessary pre-condition. Every writer is first of all a reader so their works are created from textual resources they have digested in a lifetime of reading; by the same token, readers are like writers, they build up a picture of what they read by associating it with everything they have read before. Meaning is therefore always in between. (*Critical Theory*, 252).

The point raised above is well put, but the philosophy is almost truistic. Surely writers, just as readers, are the products of what they read. What makes for originality however is the ability to consciously harness the old experience with the new and bring forth something novel. This is where the author’s role is significant. For even though he is an embodiment of several digested texts, this is not materially evident until he makes manifest this textual experience in yet another text. This underscores continuity not extermination. The author is therefore very much alive and relevant to represent the rallying point of this interconnectedness of pretexts, the texts and ones yet to be textualized so that literature can continue to flourish. In some critical instances really there is no separating the art from the artist.

### III. THE POETRY OF SAADATU E. YUSUFU

Of all the writers that throng the literary market place of Northern Nigeria, Saadatu E. Yusufu is perhaps the only creative artist who is as comfortable with prose as she is with poetry. But her poetry has the direct thrust and challenge denied her novels. She has no pretensions over her commitment. Saadatu Yusufu does not even shy away from the controversy of the writer-text-reader interrelationship as will shortly be seen when her opening poem is compared with the comments of her blurb writer. She is all for simplicity and immediacy. Not for her the convolution and contraption of linguistic circumlocution. Indeed what follows is like a textual inversion or displacement of meaning from the poetic genre to the prose or vice versa. The exhortation in all the two instances is really more of an appeal for the reader to read the text but the approaches are poles apart. First, the critic’s observation:

Whispers is a humble collection of exquisite poetry. It reveals the outpourings of a very sensitive but controlled mind. The search for justice, for love, for harmony, serves as an underlying theme in this book. Though apparently completely bereft of any political innuendos, the collection greatly empathizes with the natural-cum-social situation of man. Natural phenomena and fixtures which are normally taken for granted are delineated with masterly stroke of the poetic pen to assume an inevitable parallel of significance with the human condition.[5]

Now the poet’s proemial poem:

Poetry

What other way to describe

The deep feelings of the heart  
 In a beautiful language  
 In a graceful style  
 A powerful, compulsive  
 Lyrical message, which  
 Only poetry can express.  
 It carries one to a height  
 Of wonderful realm, of  
 Visions and imaginations apt  
 Simply glorious, setting the  
 Mind at ease, the soul refreshed  
 Which only poetic verse can give  
 Relax, enjoy the beauty of it.

In the first excerpt it is clear that the reader is attempting to explain the content of the collection in manner which makes Lord Byron in different situation and setting to wish the speaker would explain his explanation. The second excerpt on the other hand displays the quintessential representation of simplicity.

This is what makes Aderemi Bamikunle to conclude with a tone of satisfaction that “her poetic voice is unassuming. She does not hustle over profundity. Her subjects are from daily experiences, sunset, rainfall, tea, food and drink, tears, death. In trying to be profound, many starters fall into pits of abstraction. In being natural, dealing with ordinary experiences of life, she has shown how profound ordinary experiences can be, how close human life cycle is to nature’s cycle, how close man’s aspirations are to birds’, how rain, storm, thunder symbolize God’s power. Her philosophy is an acceptance of life...The overall beauty of her poems is that they are accessible; the miracle of art is that so much that is beautiful can be said so simple and unassuming words. (Whispers, vii).

For this critic therefore, the author is very much present in her work. He makes no attempt to distinguish between the poet and the poetic persona even though he is aware the preference of one over the other suggests the traversing of jumping across the analytical chasm that exists between one school of literary theory and the next. Interestingly though, even the literary theories themselves are not as mutually exclusive as they appear. They overlap in several places. In any case, their rallying point is the text.

The argument for simplicity in Saadatu’s poems should not be taken too literally. The poem quoted in its entirety above is relevant to the discussion at hand. It at once talks about the text and its power and influence on the reader as well as the textual production with superlative effect on the author. These two statements are each respectively represented in a stanza of seven lines. “What other ways to describe/The deep feelings of the heart/In a beautiful language/In a graceful style”. Obviously the language referred to here is the poetic language, not language as a cultural expression.

It is clear here that poetry is therapeutic even for the writer of it. The poet protagonist as some critics insist the author be called is at once removed because the poet calls attention to fact that she is writing poetry because it allows her to describe the deepest feelings of her heart through the use of beautiful language in a graceful style. This is done with the soul aim of influencing the reader who as shown in the second stanza

would be carried to a height of wonderful realm, of/Visions and imaginations apt/Simply glorious, setting the/Mind at ease, the soul refreshed.” In other words, what this poem records is an undiluted example of metapoetics in which the poem calls attention to itself and without pretensions commands the reader relax and enjoy its beauty.

#### IV. ANALYSIS OF SELECTED POEMS

Studying the slim collection one comes out the sole conviction most of the so called natural phenomena the collection celebrates are really a metaphor for creativity and poetic composition specifically. Take the poems titled “Tears” (10) for instance. On the surface it describes the biological process of emotional expulsion, of releasing tension or expressing joy, of showing sympathy or displaying empathy. The human eyes are portrayed as fountain through which the tears gush to express the deep feelings of the heart.

Spring that flows from the eyes  
 To express the sorrow and joy of the heart  
 The retina is cleansed by it as it flows  
 In relief of heart, tears are spilled.

Earlier on this paper discusses the therapeutic essence of poetic composition and concludes that it works both the writer and for the reader. In this poem, the metaphor is for the writer, the author who is presumed dead and therefore has no influence when it comes to the critical evaluation of his art. It may well be so, but Saadatu E. Yusufu is saying is that while alive the process of poetic creation is emotionally cleansing. The spring that flows from the eyes finds parallel with ideas that flow from the writer’s pen which may either be expressive of joy or sorrow. What they represent though, since these ideas, like the tears, are expunged or removed from the mind of the writer, they are cleansing, enlivening, soothing. It is thus clear that given the all too obvious necessity of dispelling tears for sadness or for joy, which correspond with author’s desire to make his feelings known in graphic form, it follows that the result or effect of these tears are more paramount than the tears themselves. In other words the creative text in itself has very little social significance if it has no effect whatever on the creator or the person for whom it is created. The utilitarian conception of art has been in the domain of literary criticism from Plato’s time to date. In any case even the polemics of the structuralists does not negate the functionality of the creative text.

In the poem “Night”, there is yet another metaphor for creativity and rejuvenation. The poet tells us that

Darkness and gloom depicts the night  
 Creates the fear to grope around  
 Not knowing what awaits one in it  
 The end of day no one predicts.

But when sleep overtakes us all  
 The fears and gloom are all but gone  
 A blissful restful end of the day results  
 And night becomes a solace, balm.

For every night there is a day

And when the day overtakes the night  
 One is awakened well refreshed  
 To face the chores and tasks ahead.

The uncertainty of critical reception at the time of writing may well be what the poet is talking about the gloom and darkness that night depicts. Since no one knows what awaits them, it behooves the artist to go ahead and write irrespective of the manner in which his work would be received. When finally the job is created, one is at peace. This peace is what is likened to sleep which soothes and refreshes. But no sooner would one rest after the accomplishment of one's chosen task of creative endeavor than one would be overcome by the desire and zeal to create more. Just as day overtakes night and night meets day so does the cycle of human existence continue and the struggle for more creative work resume. Again what is relevant to the theme of this paper is that the author, even if he is declared dead after the production of a given text, he is likely going to have to "resurrect" to write another text. It appears the postmodernist critics have not problems with the author before composition. What they do not want to see is his presence during the critical evaluation of his work. Put differently, once his job of creation is done, he is not longer needed. He becomes like the shoe described in following poem, "My Shoes" (19)

My shoes, my shoes, my humble shoes  
 My loyal enduring shoes  
 All my weight on you  
 To plod in the mud and march on the brier  
 You carry me wherever I choose  
 Mutely you go complaisant  
 With diligence you continue to serve  
 When you are old tired and worn  
 Will I throw you away without a care?

The critics would doubtless throw the author away without care, and they would not even wait for him to grow old. The metaphor of the parasite in this poem is not far fetched in this poem. The writer's vocation is to write. The critic's is to evaluate, to judge. The existence of the author is thus a necessary precondition for the existence of the critic. For without the output of the author, there would be nothing for the critic to judge. The author as it were provides employment for the critic. Disgruntled with the arrogance, lack of finesse and ingratitude of the critics, Alexander Pope begins his famous *Essay on Criticism* thus

'Tis hard to say, if greater want of skill  
 Appear in writing or in judging ill,  
 But, of the two, less dangerous is the offence,  
 To tire our patience, than mislead our sense:  
 Some few in that, but numbers err in this,  
 Ten censure wrong for one who writes amiss;  
 A fool might once himself alone expose,  
 Now one in verse makes many more in prose.  
 (Essay, 3)

In Saadatu's poem, the author is presented as non-complaining individual waiting to be used and discarded, "To be gratefully dropped into the dustbin/And there to rest your

trodden life." In this condensed imagery the poet celebrates the creative artist by assuming the role the tyrannical critic who prescribes what the author must do and how. "You carry me wherever I choose...Until you no more can bear my daunt."

While it is true to say that the collection, *Whispers* is obsessed the place of art and the artist, it also gives attention to issues of everyday life. In "Zamani" (37) the poet laments the price for development and civilization. She longs for the good old days where though there was no electricity and pipe borne water, at least the younger generation listened to the older one. "I am no ingrate to think like this/I tried to sift the truth of time/To show the peace and love that was/Now misplaced by development."

In some instances, overcome by moral indignation, the poetic pieces are almost preachy. This does not however hamper their beauty or their rhythmical quality. Cases in point are "Conception", "Youth," "Ageing" and "Death" linearly arranged in that order. In her poem "Love", the poet talks about the risk that is attendant to this emotion and summarizes her observation by this most poignant of observations:

Love is blind  
 So it is often said  
 But truly love is "all eyes" that see. (5)

## V. CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to look at the concept of the author from point of view structuralism and postmodernism while arguing that his role as the romantic expressivists have understood is still valid. It may well be true that overriding concern with textual explication may have no place of the author's history or biography, it also true that his professed intention before or during composition may have little bearing on the critical assessment of the text, what however is paramount in this discourse is that the author has to be, for the text to be. Thus even though Roland Barthes and other postmodernist critics have pronounced him clinically dead, aspects of his life are still salvaged, indeed saved for posterity in *his* written text. The emphasis on the "*his*" should not be missed because in spite the hullabaloo and brouhaha of the ultimate demise of the author, anonymous creative texts are yet to make appearance in the world of literary criticism. The tangential presence allowed the author by Wimsatt and Beardsley (he writes the text but he has no business with its criticism) is what this paper utilizes and marries it with expressivist notion of the author's relevance to his text and in a manner of speaking exhumes his remains to make him witness the fact that his art is not only socially relevant but artistically significant. Saadatu E. Yusufu is a renowned poet from Northern Nigeria and the discussion so far places her among writers who use simple language with condensed metaphor to make their artistic statement. In this paper the statement is that irrespective of what New Critics and Structuralists would say, the author is still relevant, if not to the field of literary criticism and theory, at least to the field of creative output which may not necessarily preclude concern with matters of critical theory.

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