

# SOME NOVELS ARE NOVELS WHILE OTHERS ARE NOT: CARNIVALESQUE AND CONTEMPORANEITY IN DAMBUDZO MARECHERA'S *HOUSE OF HUNGER*

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## ABSTRACT

This article aims at investigating whether or not there is novelness as defined by Bakhtin in Dambudzo Marechera's *House of Hunger*. It focuses on Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of carnivalesque and contemporaneity in examining the quality of novelness in *House of Hunger*. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of novelness says that the novel has its own quality that differentiates it from other genres. It argues that this quality is realised through heteroglossia, carnivalesque, polyphony genre-absorption, and contemporaneity or contact with the present. Carnivalesque is the use of language of debasement, parody and travesty in sharing meaning. It also refers to parodying other genres, which is a key element in the novel. Contemporaneity refers to the novel's contact with living memory in contrast with the epic which is related to glorification of the past that is largely not linked to the present circumstances of the time. After examination of the novel, it has been observed that it exhibits elements of carnivalesque as a criticism of both society and other literary genres. It has also been observed that issues shared in the novel are contemporary and, therefore, key to issues relating to the reading public. The article therefore concludes that, based on carnivalesque and contemporaneity, there are elements of novelness in Dambudzo Marechera's *House of Hunger*. For that reason, *House of Hunger* is a novel.

**Keywords:** Novelness; African novel; heteroglossia; carnivalesque; contemporary.

## Introduction

Bakhtin introduces novelness in his essay 'Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel' (1981). (It should be mentioned on the onset that all Bakhtin texts referred to in this article are the translated versions as opposed to the original Russian versions. Note, further, that this article is based on a 2024 PhD study by the lead author supervised by the second author, entitled: Novelness in the Zimbabwean Novel: A Bakhtinian Examination of Black-Authored Prose Fiction in English). In the essay, he argues that the novel is centred on a quality referred to as novelness. This quality, he continues, is chiefly informed by the multi-layeredness and the multi-linguagedness of the novel.

He begins by acknowledging that the novel has written qualities. This implies that the novel is realised in written form. It appeared in the era of writing unlike the epic and poetry whose background is in orality, making it younger than the other literary genres. What is most significant about the novel, as a genre, is

that it has the ability to consume other literary genres while they cannot do so to it. The novel is able to carry within it literary genres such as drama, the lyric, and the epic. It is further realised that while it is important to discuss the novel as a literary genre, Bakhtin (1981) takes the concept further when he talks about novelness. The novel should not only be seen as a specific literary genre but also as a literary quality that is fully realised in the object, the novel. Novelness further implies the ability for a literary work to employ the nature of the novel. Other literary genres as well have the ability to behave like the novel once they develop the quality of the novel. This quality appears in the multilayered nature of the language of the novel. The novel uses a language that is a hybrid of multiple languages, none of which is subordinate to another. Once this quality slips into other genres, they become novelised and behave like the novel.

The novel, Bakhtin (1981) has further argued, is not a closed form like the other literary genres such as poetry. It is a genre that is still open to manipulation and modification. The novel is still evolving and it is for this reason that it is regarded as an open-ended genre. It is still being experimented with and still liable to being experimented with by novelists.

In general, there are three characteristics of the novel. The first is heteroglossia, the second being absorption of other genres and the third, the novel's contact with the present. Heteroglossia is a multi-linguaged consciousness, as the novel is a collection of varied languages structured in wholeness. This multi-linguagedness of the novel can be seen in the way, as Bakhtin (1981) has argued, the stylistic reading of the novel should be done. In 'Discourse in the Novel' (1981), he has suggested that a complete stylistic reading of the novel should consider all the various language realisations that take place in the novel. He has identified these as the direct narration by the author in its literary artistic form, the use of everyday oral communication, employing various everyday semi-literary (but written) forms such as the letter and the diary among others, various specially crafted forms such as moral and scientific writings among others, and the individualising of speeches by characters. All these language forms and varieties occur in the novel. He sees this as a creation of a realistic nature that has not been achieved in other literary genres such as the epic, lyric and tragedy.

Bakhtin (1981) further shows that this multilinguagedness of the novel still has tension at the centre of the relations between the competing languages. The languages in the novel are always tension-filled, implying that this multilinguagedness is not merely a collage of languages but a struggle between the dominant and weak languages, each fighting for prominence. This struggle, which could be interpreted as conflict in the whole design of the novel, is the engine for continuity in the novel as no language achieves victory over other languages. The multilinguagedness of the novel and the tension in the languages would, in this case, be taken to be the lifeblood of the novel, setting it apart from the other genres as has been discussed further in considering the other qualities of the novel. It should be noted that the concept of carnivalesque falls under heteroglossia because it defines the language of debasement, parody and travesty.

This article is informed by the carnivalesque theory which is extensively dealt with in *Rabelais and His World* (1948). In this work, Bakhtin (1981) argues that language is the key to giving human beings freedom. He notes that there is a key difference between the language of authority and the language of the common man. The language of authority is usually presented as the main if not only narrative. This narrative usually takes a sacred or political slant. Bakhtin (1981), observes that, during the carnival, the language of the common man takes over. He notes that during this time, there is nothing sacred and language is used for dethronement purposes. The world becomes upside down and words referring to the lower spectrum of the human body are no longer uncommon. It is for this same reason that Aschkenasy (2007: 437) views the carnival as the space in which “existing structures are mocked and parodied, bringing about a social, and psychological... transformation” among others.

Bakhtin (1981) notes that the language of the novel is basically carnivalesque in type. The novel differs from the epic in the sense that the epic uses structured poetic language and deals with a high figure, the epic hero. The novel on the other hand deals with common members of society who are human just like the reader. The novel further does not restrict itself to a specific type of language, which means that it explores all possible languages. Therefore, Baldick (2001) notes that through the element of carnivalisation, the literary tradition is liberated through popular humour. These literary forms that are carnivalised help to dethrone official culture and other voices are finally able to find room within the literary forms.

It should be noted, here, that carnivalesque is an element of multilingualness because it relates to polyphony which is similar to decentering. Carnavalesque, like polyphony, attempt, to create a platform on which characters, readers and authors operate on a similar plane. Bakhtin (1981) has noted that Dostoevsky has led to a dialogue occurring between the author and hero. Further, polyphony that develops an open relationship between the author and the hero further helps the reader to fully engage with the characters on a non-vicarious level, which helps to ensure that the novel is not escapist or voyeuristic (Emerson, 2010). It is for this reason that carnivalesque has been taken to represent multilingualness and aspects of genre absorption considering that the breaking of literariness equally works like carnivalesque as through absorption of other genres, all genres are brought to a common form which is a carnivalesque in nature.

### **Synopsis of *House of Hunger***

The plot of *The House of Hunger* is not easy to establish or articulate because it is a novella of fragmentation: the timeframe is achronological, shifting between the narrator's memories and events in the present (Wayne and Grogan, 2018: 110).

*House of Hunger* begins with the self-eviction of the unnamed narrator and main character after being beaten by his older brother Peter. The beating is as a result of a so-called “disinterested intervention” on behalf of Immaculate, Peter's child's mother. He heads to the beerhall but stops at a bottle-store where he meets his friend, Harry, who is now a Special Branch policeman. Later, they proceed to

the beerhall where he meets other friends such as Julia, who is now a whore. He also meets Immaculate again. Then the story runs through haphazard memories of his childhood, his father and promiscuous mother, school, university, and a nervous breakdown he once experienced. In the course of the narrative, a number of characters appear and disappear: his brother Peter, who became a guerrilla, his best friend Philip, whites like Citre the filmmaker, and Patricia, with whom he has a sexual relation. All these appear degenerate in one way or another as they seem to be an extension of his own near-insane reality. Ultimately, the plot does not lead anywhere.

### **Novelness in *House of Hunger***

Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* (1948: 370) argues that debasement is a key artistic principle in creating grotesque realism. He notes that there is always a downward movement, both earthly and bodily, in grotesque realism. He further notes in fights, beatings and blows, there is debasement as the direction is usually downward. He also points out that in fighting:

“they throw the adversary to the ground, trample him into the earth. They bury their victim.... The downward movement is also expressed in curses and abuses. They, too, dig a grave, but this is a bodily, creative grave. Debasement and interment are reflected in carnival uncrownings, related to blows and abuse. The king's attributes are turned upside down in the clown; he is king of a world “turned inside out.”

Without making reference to curses on the onset in *House of Hunger*, it is important to see that there is a strong sense of debasement in the story. For example, just from the beginning of the story, the main character says “... I felt I was reviewing all the details of the foul turd which my life had been and was even at that moment” (pg. 1). In this case, there is a clear debasement of life. He appears, in this case to relate his reality to fecal matter. In this case, he goes on to create a sharp relationship between reality and disgust. The case where he has related his life to faces, shows a disbelief in the future. His view is that the future is bleak and, therefore, nothing to focus on. This negative view of an uncertain and also disgusting reality continues as he proceeds to state that one’s life was steadily becoming gut-rot. He goes on to describe one’s squatting astride the pit latrine and how it affected his thoughts that are given a quality of flies describing them as buzzing inside one’s tin head. This disgust and lack of confidence in his circumstances creates a carnivalesque atmosphere which continues with his reference to sex when he introduces Nestar, who is described as Queen of prostitutes. He goes on to describe one event when they followed a prostitute who went to the bush with her client and on her way back:

There was nothing particularly interesting about her. It’s just that we could see on the gravel road splotches and stains of semen that were dripping down her as she walked (pg.49).

While the above can be related to his disdain for women, which he argues was brought about when he experienced a VD, it can be said that he sees all this as part of his life; an unhappy life. His life relates to sex as a failed act in human affairs hence presenting it in such a negative image. He presents a case of a fight between a man and his wife where the man ended up:

“actually fucking–raping–his wife right there in the thick of the excited crowd. He was cursing all women to hell as he did so. And he seemed to screw her forever–he went on and on and on and on until she looked like death. When at last–the crowd licked its lips and swallowed–when at last he pulled his penis out of her raw thing and stuffed it back into his trousers....” (pg.50).

While all along the narrator has been showing a sexual act, in this case he presents it as a death-bringing act. It appears, here, that sex is not to be a bringer of life (even if birth comes primarily after sexual experiences that lead to conception and finally birth) but a death wish. His experience with the VD showed that sex can lead to suffering. Even though sex is central to continuity of the human species as argued by Sukel (2013), and that Freud viewed civilisation to be built largely on erotic energy which has led to modern human beings being obsessed with the sexual desire since it is the only primordial adventure left (Hof, 2015), and that sexual love is the prototype of all happiness (Jaanus, 2013), the narrator creates an impression that sex is bad as it led to his VD and finally, hatred for women. In the case of white men and prostitutes, it is said that:

‘White men have a thing about black women, you know,’ she confided. ‘And there was nothing I wouldn’t do. Most wouldn’t even touch me. They’d just make me do things and they’d watch with their eyeballs sticking out. And masturbate like hell. But there was one who always had the same old thing. I would suck his balls and he would come off into my hair. He would really grease my hair with the stuff. Rubbing it in like a bishop laying on hands, while I licked the rest of the drops from his stick. Then he would make me stick my arse right out into the sky of his face with my head between my knees and he would breathe it in like god accepting incense and then the baptism would come when he’d sort of writhe and cry for me to fart and urinate into his face. Like rain. A sort of storm scene....” (pg. 51)

What can be seen in the above quotation is an example of hardcore pornography. It has been calculated to disgust and offend. This pushes the boundary of censorship which Bakhtin (1948) refers to above in grotesque realism. The everyday reality is turned upside down and the world is presented in a different way. In a case where one imagines someone being invited to fart, it is inevitable that the imagination of

what can go wrong if the fart failed could be the subject being defecated on which leads to further disgust.

*House of Hunger* does not agree with the central narrative that humanity shares hence its departure from the norm. However, this can further be understood to mean that *House of Hunger* is generally against established social norms hence it takes a stance that removes the narrative and allows people to view the reality of their world from a different perspective. *House of Hunger* allows what the majority consider as profane, the unwanted and the reality on the fringes of everyday life to merge with daily living. *House of Hunger* further debases what has been socially held in high esteem. For example, the fist of power which symbolises political struggle, resilience and, ultimately freedom. It states: “And they seemed to know that the upraised black fist of power would fill up more lunatic asylums than it would swell the numbers of political martyrs (pg. 50). This changes both tradition and the community’s higher aspirations. Using carnivalesque tendencies, the story debases the fight for political freedom by associating it with madness. As Bakhtin (1984: 104) argues: “The theme of madness allows the world to abandon its official routine and join the hero’s carnivalesque fancies.” Clearly, the upraised black fist of power plays the role of official routine which madness debases and allows the world to become part of the carnivalesque world of the hero of the story. The mad, the fools and the people without knowledge are the happiest of people. People who choose not to know are spared pain and allowed to enjoy their lives (Jaanus, 2013; Erasmus and Grafton, 2015). Madness, therefore, leads to happiness.

Another case of debasing is shown through parody in *House of Hunger*. The hero says, “A cloud of flies from the nearby public toilet was humming Handel’s Hallelujah Chorus” (pg. 10-11). In another case, he continues, “And, outside, thousands of flies, whipped up into a frenzy by their invisible conductor, buzzed a crescendo of Handel’s Hallelujah Chorus...” (pg. 45). The relationship between the religious chorus and flies buzzing in the toilet is not only hilarious but also the turning upside down of the world, carnivalizing the sacred. Heteroglossia is evident considering that one would not expect musical references such as the invisible conductor, crescendo, and Handel’s ‘Hallelujah Chorus’. These are ludicrously out of place in this context giving false dignity to a disgusting scene but also debasing language. It is the same thing that been used as the hero talks about his father’s death:

The old man died beneath the wheels of the twentieth century. There was nothing left but stains, bloodstains and fragments of flesh, when the whole length of it was through with eating him. And the same thing is happening to my generation. No, I don’t hate being black. I’m just tired of saying it’s beautiful. No, I don’t hate myself. I’m just tired of people bruising their knuckles on my jaw. I’m tired of racking my brains in the doorway. I don’t know. Nothing turns out as exactly intended. A cruel sarcasm rules our lives. Sometimes freedom’s opportunity is a wide waistline. The bulldozers have been and gone and where once our heroes

danced there is nothing but a hideous stain. They stretched the wings of our race, stretched them out against the candle flame. There was nothing left but the genitals of senile gods (Pg. 45-46).

It should be noted, though, that the passage is not a coherent, logical and predictable argument; it is a series of short utterances that are difficult to paraphrase, a style that resists logical analyses and interpretation. Bakhtin's (1984) view of the carnivalesque text is that it is a provocation designed to annoy, outrage and cause apoplectic fits of dire condemnation of law-abiding, god-fearing citizens which is what *House of Hunger* does.

Similarly, there are several instances of heteroglossia in the quotation above. There is, for example, the language of conversation (...through with eating him.), a response to another utterance when he is responding (I'm just tired of saying it's beautiful), a sudden lofty philosophical thought (A cruel sarcasm rules our lives), bathos (sometimes freedom's opportunity is a wide waistline), and debasement (the genitals of the senile gods). In this quotation, heteroglossia is used to such an extent that one can see the main character's father's death provoking a reaction, use of bathos, and shifts of perspective among others.

Marechera's *House of Hunger* has attempted to use language to question, challenge and create an interpretation that is different from what would normally be expected. One can never be sure of what is coming next in Marechera's work. The use of language in this case has been to allow for change of expected turn of the narrative. *House of Hunger* uses the technique of shock and surprise and 'nothing in its place' in a similar fashion that was proposed by Shklovsky (2007: 778) that the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects unfamiliar, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception."

Even though this work is highly autobiographical (Habla, 2006), Marechera attempts to remove himself from appearing to be the central figure. He has distanced himself from the work through the use or lack of use of language. For instance, Marechera has chosen not to use his native language, Shona. He has, instead, chosen to use English. Before settling that Marechera uses English as opposed to Shona in this work, it is important to note that there is a struggle in the narrator between Shona and English. The narrator acknowledges that his first language is Shona while English is the second. It appears that this is a serious problem in the narrator. Turning to the work itself, one notices that even though Marechera has used English, he has used the language in a special way. He does not restrict himself to English even if the work is rendered largely in English. He writes like a Westerner as opposed to an African which makes it difficult for one to see the African in his work. The writing itself, to some extent becomes intelligible because of the style so employed. Marechera has used a style that is modernist with stream of consciousness being the driving force of the work. This suggests that Marechera, the Zimbabwean, writing an autobiographical work, has successfully removed the

African tongue from the work, hence making the work becomes independent of the writer (Wylie, 1991; Habila, 2006). On the other hand, it may appear that this use of English disrupts and perhaps explodes the work as a radical distortion of English prose that comes from the African experience.

*House of Hunger's* debasement takes a strong form of fights too. Veit-Wild (1997) in the essay *Carnival and Hybridity in Texts* by Dambudzo Marechera and Lesego Rampolokeng notes that Marechera made reference to Bakhtin in literature just as Booker (1998) points out the fact that there is a dialogue between African literature on one hand and British and American literature on the other hand. It is for this reason that the carnivalesque in *House of Hunger* is not strange. Bakhtin (1984) has noted that in fights, the direction is usually downwards. It is for this reason that the adversary is thrown to the ground and trampled on to the earth, something observable in *House of Hunger*. Bakhtin (1984: 146) makes reference to Veselovsky whose view of Rabelais (the subject of Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory) is that he was "a healthy village boy who has been let loose from a smoky hut into the spring air; he rushes madly on, across the puddles, besmirching passersby with mud and laughing merrily when lumps of clay cover his legs and face, ruddy with springlike, animal gaiety." Similarly, the description of fights and beatings take a carnivalesque form in this *House of Hunger*. The fight between the hero and Harry is described as follows:

"The storm grabbed me around the body and hurled me after Harry. Utter blackness alternated with flickerings of eel-like lightning. The rocks of rain had immediately drenched me to the marrow. And then something jumped upon my back and I fell face flat in the churning mud of the night. Something was trampling me into the sticky mess of mud. I grabbed for a leg and twisted. Harry cursed as he fell. And then we went for each other like madmen. But neither gained any advantage. We fought and plastered ourselves with mud and blood while the massive rocks of rain hurled themselves down upon our bare heads. We fought until we were so tired that our blows could not have flattened ice-cream" (pg.33).

Here, there is a combination of mud and blood in this scene. The mixture bears a semblance of the carnivalesque. However, there is also the use marriage of the unrelated in the novel where mud and blood on one hand is presented against ice cream on the other hand. This dialogic presentation shows a contrast of the expected in the sense that the sweet and much-desired ice cream and mud and blood can occur in the same place. This achieves the novel's purpose which Bakhtin (1981: 147) notes to be "uncovering of social contradictions". This is the same picture that is seen when Philip beats Nestar's son, "smash(ing) the boy into a stain. Stains! (pg. 55), or when the hero's father is crushed by the train and there is "nothing left but stains, bloodstains and fragments of flesh" (pg. 45).



*House of Hunger* has rejected the power of a single narrative, thereby disrupting the idea of narrative itself. Habila (2006) has argued that Marechera was against the idea of power as it always remained a threat to the general welfare of a people, and Gaylard's (1993) view is that Marechera believed that a single sided approach, whether for colonial or national purposes, was unable to work as it entailed the accumulation of power in one central space which would lead to not only abuse but also oppression of one by another. This argument permeates *House of Hunger* and, for this reason, the work cannot be enclosed within one sphere of categorization. This can also be seen in the narration style in *House of Hunger*. Veit-Wild (1992; 187) notes:

The *House of Hunger* has a unique style of narration. The story-line is interrupted by memories and reflections, the boundaries of time and place shift constantly, flashbacks and stream of consciousness blur the lines between dream and reality.

The novel does not respond to traditional narrative structure and disrupts known conventions. It, therefore, allows room for it to be described in many ways by challenging strict definitions. The style employed defies definition and therefore makes it open-ended and unfinalized.

### **Contact with the Present in *House of Hunger***

The presentness and contemporaneity of the novel is almost non-questionable considering that from the onset, the work deals with contemporary Zimbabwe referred to as Rhodesia. One key feature of contemporariness in the novel are the strong images of exploitation of the weak by those with power. However, Marechera presents this on both micro and macro scales as it happens on the domestic level as well as the national. The opening image of him getting his things and leaving creates thoughts of despair and resignation. Even though this is shown much later, the fact that the narrator goes for the bottle just upon leaving seems to suggest that without drinking, the narrator will have challenges coping with reality. It is important to note that this is in 1978, two years before the independence of Zimbabwe. It will be assumed that at this time, it was highly expected that Zimbabwe would be independent since only Zimbabwe and South Africa were under white minority rule (Habila, 2006). This, therefore, could have been Marechera's prophecy that the rising sun on Zimbabwe was a mere mirage that would not translate into anything tangible, which really turned out to be the case with the failure of Mugabe due to disillusionment in the Zimbabwean of the time shortly after the attainment of independence. Marechera, in this work, is interested in the lives of the Zimbabweans who are looking forward to a better Zimbabwe that, apparently, does not seem to be coming. In an interview (Veit-Wild, 1992: 38), he stated that before independence, the objective most writers had was to 'fight racism and obtain independence'. *House of Hunger* shows these power imbalances and speaks for the exploited.

Similarly, the work is concerned with the effects of urban life. Quoting David Kerr, Habila (2006) says, “train carries the thrust of Western technology, destroying indigenous African culture, and leaving in its wake both literal death, and more widely a psychic destruction, the anomie which engulfs [Marechera] and, even though sometimes they do not realize it, his whole generation.” In this case, Marechera is concerned with his generation, his society and his present circumstances. *House of Hunger* is deeply rooted in the present circumstances of the society and goes further to be prophetic of the future of Zimbabwe when indigenous Zimbabweans take over the running of the country. As Gaylard (1993: 102) notes, “Marechera operated as some sort of urban n’anga or sangoma, seeing to the psychological and spiritual health of the people”. Marechera is concerned with disease in *The House of Hunger*, mental health and physical challenges of people who are the population that makes up the world of the story.

### **Conclusion**

*House of Hunger* has displayed tendencies of multilingualness in various ways such as language play, rejection of the social desires such as sexual pleasure, the glorification of folly while also rejecting the veneration of the gods and acceptance of insanity. As Bakhtin has argued that the novel should have elements of novelness, the paper argues that elements of novelness such as carnivalesque and contemporaneity are evident in *House of Hunger*. For this reason, it is notable that *House of Hunger* qualifies to be called a novel. As Lucacs (1971) argues, some novels are novels while others are not. The novel has ‘a caricatural twin almost indistinguishable from itself in all inessential formal characteristics: the entertainment novel, which has all the outward features of the novel but which in essence is bound to nothing and based on nothing, i.e. is meaningless’ (73). The entertainment novel can therefore is a novel. Similarly, Galligan (2005: 324) says that some novels “are not novels; instead, they are something else.” But Dambudzo Merechera’s novel is a novel as has been exhibited in relation to Bakhtin’s argument.

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