

Saints and Sinners: Protest in Waiting for Angel

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Abstract

Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* tackles headlong the evils of military rulers and their civilian collaborators in Nigeria, between 1990 and 1998. This orchestrates a shift of theme and concern, with the impact of colonization and historical past towards an examination of current socio-political problems of abuse of power by the ruling elite, corruption and widespread social inequality and justice in Nigeria's political landscape. This paper examines how Helon Habila in *Waiting for an Angel* portrays Nigerian society in a manner that utilizes its status as fiction. It takes contemporary facts and analyses them from the perspectives of different characters in order to bring out their deeper meanings for society. The versatility with words and keen insight in the novel's central character enable him to delineate society in such a way that the arbitrariness of historical interpretation of events becomes clear.

Key Words: Waiting for Angel, Helon Habila

The title of *Waiting for an Angel* defines the underlying theme of despair and despondency, which pervades the Nigerian political atmosphere which lasted from 1993 to 1998. The novel engages Nigerian society in a manner that utilizes its status as fiction which consciously takes contemporary facts and analyses them from the perspectives of different characters in order to bring out their deeper meanings for society.

The Military as Harbinger of Terror

Waiting for an Angel underscores the reign of terror orchestrated by successive military administrations in Nigeria, especially the military regimes of Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha. The novel is a documentation of the atrocities of the military in all facets of Nigerian life between 1990 and 1998. The narrative of torture, victimisation and brutality in the novel is presented from the viewpoint of Lomba, who serves as the novel's central character.

He is a journalist and writer, a person whose versatility with words and keen insight enable him to delineate society in such a way that the arbitrariness of historical interpretation of events becomes clear. Although intelligent, he has abandoned his pursuit of a degree in English because of the prolonged closure of his university by the military authorities, and is forced to take up journalism on *The Dial*. Lomba was arrested and kept in detention when a coup was attempted against the maximum ruler, General Sani Abacha, by some officers close to him. While in prison, Lomba kept up with his creative writing but this was soon exposed to the prison authorities by his fellow inmates, thereby exposing him to the ire of the prison superintendent:

'So, you won't talk. You think you are tough,' he shouted, 'You are wrong. Twenty years! That is how long I have been dealing with miserable bastards like you. Let this be an example to all of you. Don't think you can deceive me. We have our sources of information. You can't. This insect will be taken to solitary and he will be properly dealt with until he is willing to talk.' (14)

Waiting for an Angel is a novel composed of seven interrelated stories. Its significance lies in its capability to capture socio-political circumstances and events which border largely on state-sponsored violence during the Babangida and Abacha military regimes. The novel opens with the incarceration of Lomba and other political prisoners and closes with violence in which a prominent journalist, Dele Giwa is killed and *The Dial's* premises are set ablaze by soldiers:

"Yes? Adam ... hello' He has one hand on the wheel; the other holds the phone to his ear.

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What breaking news? Dele, Dele ... who? Dead?' His voice shoots up and Lomba stares at him curiously. (150)

The novel reflects Habila's thoughts on the political crisis in Nigeria in the late 1990s. Protest against the military is carried out by socially-marginalised men and women in society. Lomba, the protagonist, is ubiquitous throughout the novel. Through this device, Habila is able to condemn the corruption and authoritarianism of the military dictatorship. Although the novel has a loose plot, its political message is nevertheless striking. This is realised through specific and beautifully-drawn characters like Alice, Joshua, Kela and James. The narrative of military brutality is sufficiently articulated by the characters in the novel as well as the colourful evocation of its locale, emphasising street names, filthy environments and the many casualties of military brutality that ostensibly portray Nigerian life.

The portraiture of the military in *Waiting for an Angel* is foregrounded in a semiotic of deprivation and destruction. This can be seen in the deprivation of the downtrodden masses on Poverty Street, the urban debris of Lagos with its squalid slums, its suppurating sewers, its huge craters on the road, and the mountain of filth and dirt of Egunje Road. Rot and dilapidation demarcate the landscapes of Nigeria during Abacha's rein of terror. The political class and members of the opposition are decimated due to constant arrest and outright liquidation. Political repression and the economic marginalisation of the mass of the people has led to the virtual elimination of the embryonic middle-class.

Habila retrospectively presents indictments of the oppression and corruption of the Abacha regime. *Waiting for an Angel* takes an unambiguously committed political stand on degradation of humanity by the military. Terror and violence are inscribed in the narrative of the seven stories in *Waiting for an Angel*. Such a narrative combines a grotesque irony with chillingly realistic details of the regime's propensity to employ torture and summary execution as a convenient weapon of violence and terror. In line with its status as a work of fiction, the novel weaves a narrative that reflects actual practices and events during the Babangida/Abacha regimes. One of such events is succinctly captured when Joshua, a civil rights activist, is brutalised by the police, on the orders of the military sole administrator, during the change of name of *Morgan Street* to *Poverty Street*:

All eyes, including those of the police, were on Joshua as he jumped down from the drum and headed for the police column on the north, where an inspector, fat and furiously moustached, stood in front, tapping his leg with his baton, looking undecided. The inspector turned and whispered to his men, and just as Joshua reached him, he did a curious thing. He raised his right hand and brought it down sharply. And his men charged. (134)

The impulse to pull down the larger-than-life façade of military invincibility is what marks out *Waiting for an Angel* as the prototype for the more overtly radical Nigerian political novel. Its rhetoric of disillusionment with military adventurism reflects a general sense of disappointment harboured by the generality of Nigerians regardless of ethnic origin. Through the centrality and articulateness of Lomba, Habila is able to mobilise other characters to protest the excesses of the military. Lomba typifies the spokesman for the young generation in the novel. Protest in *Waiting for Angel* is both verbal and psychological. Lomba's articulation of the social and political vices of corruption, political manipulation through election rigging and the brazen annulment of the 1993 presidential election purportedly won by Chief M. K. O. Abiola provides the connection between the fiery narrative of military domination and vibrant artistic commitment comparable with Ofeyi in Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*.

Motifs of Protest

Waiting for an Angel combines elements of fact and fiction to varying degrees to depict the impact of military rule in Nigeria and to gauge the corresponding reactions as foregrounded in the attitudes of the characters.

Habila's characters often come to terms with themselves in situations of involuntary incarceration, be it prison detention or the no less constricting confines of poverty and social marginalisation. He is aware enough to realise that such confinement does not only afflict those who are put behind bars; the

superintendent of Lomba's prison is as much a prisoner of his hopes and fears as any of the captives he presides over.

Prison as Motif

Imprisonment is employed as a motif of protest, and it can be clearly seen in *Waiting for an Angel* when Lomba is kept in prison. The prison experience of Lomba is utilised as a protest against the military's intolerance for dissent views. Prison in *Waiting for an Angel* strengthens Lomba. This is reiterated when he continues with his writing. Prison here is seen by Habila as an extension of the struggle against an authoritarian military, and as a pungent comment on the cruelty of a system which has no regard for human dignity. Lomba is presented as an intellectual who is directly involved in the struggle of his society for social justice in a cynical military regime. His emotional detachment from the discomfort of the prison, and his pre-occupation with writing to amplify his triumph over his immediate confinement are what Eldred Durosimi Jones refers to in *The Writing of Wole Soyinka* as:

The triumph of the universal mind in its ability to go beyond the limitations and frustrations of a purely local situation. (195)

Lomba's defiance of the prison situation to continue with his writing is employed by Habila to underscore a notion that prison does not negate the continuation of social struggle and protest against injustice in society. It is not a euphemism for surrender on the part of the writer or political activist, nor does it connote defeat. Rather, it fortifies the writer with the needed mental rejuvenation required to continue with the social struggle against all social and political vices from without. Lomba's commitment to social struggle through his writing in spite of the prison limitations is succinctly acknowledged in the words of Randa Abou-bakr:

The strategic shunning of the traditional position of the hero of resistance literature can at the same time be viewed as a comment on that literature and an implied attempt at reinventing the imprisoned political activist as one with the people living an antiheroic life under oppressive regimes, rather than as yet another category of "intellectual" alienated from those people's everyday lives. (285)

Lomba's imprisonment is used as a metaphor by Habila to universalise the bizarre political situation in Nigeria during the notorious regime of Abacha as a huge prison where all semblances of humanity are violently suppressed. Bukuru's imprisonment at the dreaded Bande Maximum Security Prison constitutes a vibrant motif of protest against the military establishment. Bukuru's confinement is intended to stifle truth out of him.

Physical Assault of Protest

Habila criticises the viciousness of the police when they rape girls on the university campus during students' demonstration. The exploration of rape as motif of protest by Ndibe and Habila further evaluates the extent at which the military can go to devalue and defile women whom they regard as little more than booty.

Bola and Lomba were beaten up by security operatives in *Waiting for an Angel*. Bola was brutalised and subsequently lost one of his legs during a nationwide demonstration against the annulment of the June 12 presidential elections of 1993. An unnamed character was shot dead after the coup in *Waiting for an Angel*. Military brutality also claimed the lives of the ace journalist, Dele Giwa and Chief M. K. O. Abiola, the acclaimed winner of the June 12 election. General Shehu Musa Yar Adua was given a lethal injection while in prison detention.

Mysticism as Motif of Protest

Habila employs the motif of Arab-Islamic mysticism to protest the wanton killing associated with the military in *Waiting for an Angel*. In Chapter Two, foretelling the future is tied around the military which is

presented as an angel of death or Israfael. This is a fallout of an encounter between an unnamed character with a marabout at Badagry beach. The fortune teller foretold the imminent death of the character which will be occasioned by Israfael. Habila emphasises that the military is the obvious symbol of death as the prophecy came to pass following a coup broadcast on the television, when soldiers deployed to the streets to enforce the obligatory curfew, overzealously kill the unnamed character. Through the exploitation of the mytho-poetic signification of death, Habila presents a moving picture of the way in which the viciousness of the military is responsible for irrational and needless deaths. Killing is portrayed as a demonstration of the way in which the military in post-independent Nigeria reacts to the slightest restiveness in the civilian populace.

This outright killing of the unnamed character by the military as forewarned through fortune telling is further juxtaposed with Bola's dream of the death of his father, mother and two sisters, who die when their vehicle suffers a head-on collision with a stationary military truck "carrying furniture of an officer on transfer from Lagos to Ibadan." Habila uses dreams as a manifestation of metaphysical ethos to emotionally prepare Bola for the imminent loss of his family. This further reiterates the portrayal of military heartlessness. Their notoriety for orchestrating death is felt both physically and terrestrially. In narrating the loss of Bola's family, Habila reveals his compassion for the underdog. The tone of the narrative underscores the complexity of the military as a social problem. It affords Habila the opportunity of protesting the social conduct of the military while generating sympathy for the civilian populace who collectively epitomise the unfortunates and who are trapped in the quagmire of military subjugation.

As the title of the novel, *Waiting for an Angel* betrays the notion of a benign intervention from cosmic forces. It looks more like a supplication offered to the divine in order to get rid of the military scourge plaguing Nigeria. Habila makes a swipe at the pretentious messianic outlook of the military who have held Nigeria captive and made it a pariah shortly after independence. The novel reiterates the anguish of people under military repression, waiting anxiously for supernatural intervention to break the dire social and political straits in which they find themselves. Habila presents the military as a monster whose destructive potentialities are so covert that they take their victim by surprise. For Nigeria to maintain its equilibrium, it must seek divine intervention to get rid of the military. Habila uses the trope of an angel to explore the narrative of dissatisfaction with the military by Nigerians, and their hope of divine succour and celestial vengeance.

Michael Hanchard has argued that the mediation of political and spiritual tropes by a writer to articulate a critical social issue in a text serves as one of the markers of Afro-modernity's "specific deployment of time in relation to liberation movements, where the language of transcendence is harnessed in the service of concrete, immanent struggle" (285).

Habila's employment of the spiritual motif to protest military oppression in *Waiting for an Angel* demonstrates that quest for the correction of social and political malaise in post-independence Africa requires more than just the use of satire, but also the employment of spiritual tropes alongside satire in order to forge a robust struggle against a prevalent social malaise. The author's deployment of both satire and spiritual tropes to confront military repression in the novel underscores the desire by the younger generation of Nigerian writers to adopt a new epistemological framework in their campaign against the deep-seated problems besetting the country. As Antonio Candido claims:

The production and fruition (of literature) are based on a sort of universal need for fiction and fantasy which is surely coextensive to man, since it appears invariably in his life as an individual and as a group, alongside the satisfaction of the most basic needs. And this happens with the primitive and the civilised, with the child and the adult, with the learned and the illiterate. (80)

National Narrative in *Waiting for an Angel*

In *Waiting for an Angel*, Habila's narrative of Nigeria is grounded in the problematics of nation and nationalism. Nigeria, undoubtedly large, powerful and relatively wealthy, is portrayed as a country drifting precariously towards disintegration. General Abacha's military regime provides the narrative platform for

articulating the concept of a nation in the novel. Nigeria under Abacha is a country under dictatorship. In order to maintain himself in power, he suppresses his opponents by imprisoning and killing some.

During his rule, corruption and nepotism are heightened. Rather than improving the living conditions of Nigerians, Abacha uses national resources for his family and to take care of his terminal illness. Through Abacha, Habila has accurately described many post-independence African rulers who have imagined their countries to be an extension of their personal estates. The subjugation of Nigeria to a military ruler like Abacha foregrounds Nigeria as a fixed physical space, an artificial structure vulnerable to construction and reconstruction by its military rulers. This underscores Iliana Pardes' notion of a nation as an "imagined construct" or an "inscape rather than a landscape of national identity" (9).

Pardes sees nation as a wishful thinking, mere conjecture, whose shape and sphere can be arranged and rearranged at will by leadership. This corresponds with Rhonda Cobhan's perception of a nation as "having a shifting and unstable significance within African political discourse" (84) because dictators have appropriated the task of defining national character, thereby subverting the process of narrating their countries by the replacement of national narratives with their personal narratives.

The artificiality of the Nigerian state is raised in the narrative of Nigeria by Habila in his account of the annulment of the June 12 presidential election won by Chief Abiola, a Yoruba politician from the southern part of Nigeria. This was an annulment carried out by the regime of General Babangida from the northern part of Nigeria. Abiola was subsequently arrested and incarcerated by the successive military regime of Abacha. Abiola's narrative of political persecution depicts Nigeria as a web of disparaging ethnic nationalities yoked together by the colonial system, where the dominant ethnic group with superior numerical strength in the armed forces could lord it over other ethnic groups.

Literary Techniques

Memory

Waiting for an Angel chronicles in great detail Abacha's repressive regime within the trajectory of memory which unobtrusively shapes its narrative aesthetics. The novel is grounded in the recollection of the disruption of social and political life in Nigeria during Abacha's military rule, and it thus features a reportorial narrative style that painstakingly portrays the minutiae of the characters' surroundings and experiences.

As a work of fiction, the novel makes it possible to identify with Nigeria's real world, the people and the actual events depicted in the narrative. This identification with real-life situations is one generic characteristic of fiction which distinguishes it from other narrative forms which are considered fictional. *Waiting for an Angel* catalogues the bizarre and traumatic experiences of Nigerians in Abacha's reign of terror between 1994 and 1998. It is a historical period when Nigeria became a pariah in the comity of nations and life became unbearably difficult for its citizens, as scores of politicians and journalists were herded into detention and those who were not lucky to survive the period were murdered by the minions of the military junta.

In his literary recreation of this period, Habila's narrative plank is memory, and language constitutes the main trope of such memory. In the novel, memory assumes the antenna that picks the signal of a diminished social life, the mediation between presence and absence of Lomba, the central character: present when he recorded social and political events while working as a journalist in Nigeria and absent when he was kept in solitary confinement, which signals his absence from the society. His delineation of the categories of persecution and brutality of Nigerians under the military junta crystallizes the dehumanisation perpetrated by Abacha's despicable military regime.

In his narrative of military repression, Habila has been able to establish that the relationship between the military ruler and the ruled is grounded in the ethos of power relations. This recalls the Foucauldian perception of power relations in the discourse of events and dialectics of social relationships between two opposing sides in a narrative:

Power never ceases its interrogation, its inquisition, its registration of truth: it institutionalises, professionalises and rewards its pursuit. In the last analysis, we must produce truth as we must produce wealth, indeed we must produce truth in order to produce wealth in the first place. In another way, we are also subjected to truth in the sense in which it is truth that makes the laws that produces the true discourse which, at least partially, decides, transmits and itself extends upon the effect of power. In the end, we are judged, condemned, classified, determined in our undertakings, destined to a certain mode of living or dying, as a function of the true discourses which are the bearers of the specific effects of power. (93-94)

The articulation of power as embedded in the discourse of the military junta is signified by its brutalisation of the people. This brutality, however, raises a paradoxical condition: on the one hand, it affirms the power and supremacy of dominant discourses of the military, but on the other hand, it also frees the traumatised people from its grip by inscribing, no matter how marginally, the resistance and resilience of their own alternative discourse. The resilience of Lomba against the military in the wake of the re-naming of Morgan Street to Poverty Street leads to a bloody confrontation with the junta. This resilience and confrontation empower the dehumanised people to insist that the boundaries of discourses can never be completely closed, no matter how temporarily dominated by the military junta.

Narrative Strategies

Humour

Habila in *Waiting for an Angel* makes a mockery of the military. It is couched in the representation of the military in exaggerated militarism of a character called Mao:

“Look, we are living under siege. Their very presence on our streets and in the government houses instead of the barracks where they belong is an act of aggression. They hold us cowed with guns, so that they’ll steal our money. This is capitalism at its most militant and aggressive. They don’t have to produce any superior good to establish monopoly. They do it by holding guns to our heads” (122)

Habila lampoons the image of the military as a rapaciously kleptomaniac institution with a pronounced tendency to subjugate and dehumanise members of the public. Habila does not confront the military through a direct repudiation; instead, he uses one of his characters. The import of the repudiation of the military regime as a political aberration in the governance of a state is too obvious to miss.

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