

## The Military as a Motif in the Nigerian Novel: Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*

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### Abstract

This paper examines the continuous presence of the military as a motif in the Nigerian novel. It examines the paradigm shift from the older generation of Nigerian novelists who saw the military as corrective mechanism to the younger generation of Nigerian novelist who hold that the military is the bane of the decay that has come to envelop the modern Nigerian society. It is the position of this paper that ideologically, the military cannot be seen as a corrective mechanism. This is because it is responsible for the corruption religious malaise, academic rot and human right abuses among other observations that have bedeviled the Nigerian society. These among others are the issues which this paper has set out to discuss. Finally, the paper concludes the civil rule should left for civil authority while the military should remain within its orbit of protecting the territorial integrity off the nation.

**Key words:** Scaffolding; Zone of Proximal Development; Peer review

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### INTRODUCTION

Though military involvement in politics had been

predominant in African countries, studies have shown that throughout history the military has at one time or the other been involved in politics. According to S.P.I Agi (1999, p.2)

Throughout history, from Artaxerxes on, military has interested itself in politics. Military groups-the Sacred Band of Thebes, the Praetorian Guard in Rome, the Samurai in Japan, the Junkers in Prussia, the Janissaries in the Ottoman Empire, the army of France from the time of Napoleon have often influenced political decision.

Agi's position is not to justify military usurpation of political power, but to prepare a background of the military in Nigerian politics. He further argues that the armed forces handed to Nigeria at independence had as its primary responsibility the security of the nation, and was to be subjected to civil authority. Under many pretences, the military has got involved in politics; some of these pretences include: non inclusion of the military in political decision making, the Western Region crisis of 1962, political intolerance among the politicians, party in-fighting, weak political leaders among others provided for the military cogent reasons for the military to take over power from the civil authority. To justify itself, the military came to regard itself as the savior with national interest that would bring political salvation to the nation. To justify their grip on political power, they claimed that they would correct the anomalies, cleanse up the political system and keep the country united. These have all failed as successive military regimes have demonstrated gross incompetence, corruption, intolerance to opposition, human right abuses, assassination among other evils. Military usurpation of political power has kept the country disunited. The citizenry live below poverty line and have remained under the vicious circle of poverty.

According to Ladipo Adenolekun (1985, p.100), the military has always claimed "the logic of a legitimacy derived from the barrel of the gun". This according to him is an irrational logic. He further illustrates with the failure

of the military to keep the "Aburi Accord", a failure that plunged the country into a thirty-month civil war. This and many other failures are the trade mark of the military in Nigerian politics.

This brief background gives a glimpse into military involvement in politics in Nigeria. It is germane to note that this paper is not intended to present a political thesis, but to examine the military as a motif in the Nigerian novel. Many African novelists have viewed the military as saviors. For instance, Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1965), Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born* (1965) see the military as saviors, but Armah appears ambivalent as he has no faith in the military. Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Soza Boy* and *Prisoners of Jebs*, Ngugi Wa' Thiongo's *The Wizard of the Crow*, Adebayo William's *The Remains of the Last Emperor* Okey Ndebe's *Arrows of Rain*, Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*, Festus Iyayi's *Heroes* among others condemned military usurpation of political power. They all view the military as the architect of modern corruption in Nigeria.

## 1. HELON HABILA

Helon Habila has published three major novels *Waiting for an Angel* (2002) which reflects the social realities of the military usurpation of political power in Nigeria, *Measuring Time* (2006). This novel which is set three years before Nigerian independence, it is also an ambitious piece that interrogates and mirrors the lives of two Twins Mamo and Lamamo as they make succinct effort to assert their place in a nation that kills their ambitions. This novel attempts a re-creation of history and the evolution of the Nigerian nation. The novel tells the story of the Nigeria civil war from a dispassionate point of view. Habila's most recent novel *Oil on Water* (2010), examines vividly the effects of oil exploration and exploitation in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria.

## 2. WAITING FOR AN ANGEL

*Waiting for an Angel* explores the deplorable condition of the Nigerian State in the realities leading to the expulsion of Nigeria from the Commonwealth of Nations. The novel recreates vividly the human right abuses, police and military brutalization and the violent revolt across the nation. The military usurpation of political power culminates in the annulment of June 12 presidential election supposedly to have been won by Chief MKO Abiola, the setting of the Interim National Government (ING) headed by Chief Ernest Shonekan, the eventual stepping aside of General Ibrahim Babangida, the overthrow of Shonekan in 1993, the death of Abiola, Kudirat, his wife among other issues are explored in this novel.

It is the recurrent presence of the military in Nigeria political landscape and its recreation in the literary form

that this essay seeks to explore. According to Mary Whipple (2004, p.1), "the author shows us the effects of this dictatorial government on the ordinary people". The people are helpless, but they are not ignorant of the machinery of state ruled by a ruthless and despotic leader. The author uses the novel to explore the ways of making the people understand the harsh realities of their recent past under mean, self-centered and self-serving military gangsters masquerading as leaders. The novel exposes the helplessness of a people caught in the web of despair.

In retelling the story, Habila blends facts with fiction to recreate artistically the dark days of military regime, like the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa by the Sani Abacha administration, the assassination via letter bomb last of Dele Giwa, the Editor of *Newswatch* by the General Babangida administration, the assassination of Mrs. Kudirat Abiola among others. All these are historical facts which he blends with fiction to paint a vivid picture of the military. Whipple further argues that "Habila's novel is a powerful defense of freedom of the press and a celebration of the lives of those courageous writers who have refused to be silenced even when faced with death" (p.1). Whipple's position is that Habila's novel presents heroes of democracy who resisted military dictatorship, even in the face of staring death. Her position agrees with Wole Soyinka's position that military dictatorship creates palpable fear. "While the regime lasted, however there was no question about it: for the first time in the brief history of her independence, the Nigerian nation near uniformly was inducted into a palpable intimacy with fear (p.3). It is this palpable fear created by military dictatorship that this essay investigates.

According to Niyi Akingbe (2010, p.27), *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 1990-1998. The narrative structure, victimization and brutality in the novel are presented from the view point of Lomba who serves as the novel's central character.

The military atrocities according to Akingbe have had untold hardship on the masses. He further states that;

The portraiture of the military in *Waiting for an Angel* is for grounded in a semiotic of deprivation and destruction. This can be seen in the deprivation of the downtrodden masses on Poverty Street... (p.28)

Most people in Poverty Street suffer according to Habila because of the prolonged closure of the universities by the military authorities. Through these frequent closures of the universities, the military has retarded the moral, educational, economical, political, as well as the social growth of the nation. This explains our earlier premise that the military cannot pass for saint or redeemers. As an organization the military has become mere saints of an abandoned religion. Through state sponsored violence,

the military silenced opposition. As Akingbe points out, the device of protest used by Habila points at one thing, Nigerians have shown total disapproval of the military. This protest device also portrays the military as agents of destruction as seen in the image of Poverty Street with all the rot and filth. The street also becomes the microcosm of the Nigerian society where abandoned projects abound. The street becomes the metaphor of the realities of the ordinary Nigerian. The picture of Poverty Street is, "one of the many descript disease-ridden quarters that dotted the city of Lagos like ring worm on a beggar's body" (p.120). In spite of the deplorable condition of the masses, the military also exhibits a high propensity to deploy maximum force and torture which often lead to termination of lives. It uses torture as a veritable tool to silence opposition. The military only seeks political domination and those who dare to resist this domination are liquidated or incarcerated like the case of Lomba. Lomba narrates his ordeals while in prison.

All I felt was the crushing blow on the back of my neck. My face struck the door bars I fell before the superintendent's boots...(p.9).

The superintendent even confirms this, when he says "Twenty Years! That is how long I have been dealing with miserable bastards like you. Let this be an example to all of you"(p.9). This brutality often results in loss of self. Lomba says; "now I realized that I had no self. That self had flown away the day the chains touched my hands"(p.23) This loss of self is caused by the long years of incarceration. In the case of Bola whose family has been crushed by a military truck, the loss of self took the form of dementia. Bola's psyche is bruised, his dream shattered by the military, and hope is lost. In this demented state, Bola becomes somehow eccentric as he shouts "*The military has failed us! I say down with Khakistocracy! Down with militocracy! Down with Kleptocracy* (p.168)". This type of violence that the military unleashed on the masses is structural violence which according to John Galthing (1990) cited by Oke Ibeanu (2010, p.4) "has to do with social conditions such as poverty, exclusion, intimidation, oppression, want, fear and many types of psychological pressures". These are issues which cause human suffering, even in this condition the coercive instrument of state still seized Bola and took him to their torture camps. "The men identically dressed in long black coats and dark glasses had reached him...plucked him down from the perched"(p.69). The men took him away not minding the state of his mind "their glasses were like a wall separating us from them"(p.69). This shows the military lack of human feeling and state of their human indifference and callousness.

Habila sees the military as an unjust authority whose language is that of oppression. "His gun is unslung, the barrel points casually at my direction" (p.49). The soldiers barked at him "Get out"(p.49)? In an attempt

to run, another shouts "stop or I shoot!" (p.45). Habila is lampooning the senselessness of the military whose falsehood has assumed a maximum proportion. "We are tired of phantom transition programmes...down with the junta" (p.45). In another instance Lomba becomes more specific as he says

Can't you see what is happening? The military have turned the country into one huge barracks, into a prison. Every street out there is crawling with them; the people Locked their doors, scared to come out. They play with us as if we are puppets (p.50).

On Poverty Street, the posters continue to paint the same message of the evil of the military "Go! No More Soza" (p.52). These expressions of resentment are replete in the novel.

The military according to Habila is responsible for the decay of the academia. Lomba's poem are destroyed when the soldiers invaded the campus and Lomba laments "I felt the imprint of the books on my mind, I felt the rifling, tearing hands rippling through my very soul...my mind was sore...I could not think" (p.71-2). This lack of thinking has remained a major setback on the economic development because the military has killed all creative minds and the great minds have remained unproductive and sterile. The economy has become very bad, there is fuel scarcity in a nation that produces and exports crude oil, but none for local consumption. "See the long queues of cars waiting for fuel, some of them have been there for days"(p.108).

On the other hand the military breeds ethnicity and poverty. The people they claim to lead wallow in poverty.

If you care to look you will find more ethnicity, religion, poverty one General goes another comes, but the people remain stuck in the same vicious groove nothing ever changes for them except the particular details of their Wretchedness. They have lost all faith in the government unending transition programmes (p.108).

In the face of these florid realities the soldiers continue to deal deadly blows on the hopeless masses at the slightest provocation.

One major threat to the continuous existence of Nigeria as a nation is the vicious circle of poverty. A major street is named Poverty Street. Poverty Street becomes a metaphor for Nigeria where all sorts of vices abound. In Poverty Street, we have roads as Egunje Road. "Egunje" is a Yoruba word for bribe and has become a local word which has come to symbolize corruption "Olokun Road is the shabbiest and the poorest of all the quarters in Poverty Street" (p.121). Next to Olokun Road is the University Road. "The University Road was the flux point for all vices on the street, there were hotels for sex, and alcohol and there were doorway alley-mouth for marijuana and cocaine. The "sex street workers were mostly young university girls (p.121)". Habila's portrayal of the University Road is appalling thereby lampooning government's failure to develop the academia. The university which is supposed to be a centre for molding

minds who in turn will build the nation has now become a commercial sex centre, because of the frequent closures of the universities by successive military regimes.

Brother, a member of Poverty Street tells us how he lost his leg during the post June 12 protest to a soldier's bullet. Many do not believe him, instead they laughed at him, and whenever they do that he says, "you laugh at my friends here because dem de live for old broken houses, because dem no get brothers in the army to thief and send dem money" (p.133). Brother's speech paints the military as thieves and looters of the treasuries and the military is responsible for the massive corruption that is plaguing the nation. The people in Poverty Street have become cynical, indifferent and complacent. Brother is quick to explain thus:

But make I tell you something you de laugh at the wrong people. Make you go laugh at all the big Generals who de steal our country money everyday de send am to foreign bank. While their country de die of poverty and disease. Dem de drive long long cars with escort while I no even get two legs to walk. (p.134)

Brother's speech sums it all, the real people to laugh at are the military.

Habila has written taken this detailed portrayal of the military in order to raise the consciousness of the people; make a clarion call to the people, whom he sees as being imbued with revolutionary qualities to take action that will oust the dictators, who are sitting tight on the nation's treasuries. The call on the people to revolt garnishes the novel with revolutionary aesthetic. It is only through a violent revolution that the people can unseat a dictator. As the junta continues to clamp down on the opposition and the media, the need for a violent revolt becomes expedient. "Arrest of pro-democracy activists by the military government" (p.158), has become a recurrent decimal. Habila goes on to say, "This country is in dire need of a revolution.... We need to utterly destroy the status quo in order to start afresh" (p.157). For the cynics who may see it as an unworkable talk, he quickly reminded them that "Rowling did it in Ghana" (p.157) Through inter-text device he cites Franz Fanon's claim that "Violence can only be overcome by greater violence" (p.158). Habila sees the people as being pushed to the wall where a peaceful revolt won't work. "It is never peaceful"(161). Habila continues to remind the people that there is a common enemy-the soldier who are ready to kill at any time. "Look around you, can't you see they are desperately looking for someone to shoot or lock up?... they want to make us martyrs" (p.161). Habila holds that a martyr must die for a cause. He reminds the people of Martin Luther Jr. and Ken Saro-Wiwa who both died trying to liberate their people. To further buttress his position, Habila says "Here in this country dreams are never realized, something always contrives to turn them into nightmare" (p.164). It is this nightmare that he wants the people to fight. Through this the tyrant must

be made to know how the people feel and that really is the main thrust of the struggle. The artistic vision here is that defying insurmountable odds requires a heroic commitment by the people, who have given their lives for the struggle "we can't continue to be onlookers when a handful of gun-looting thugs are determined to push our beloved nation over the precipice"(p.48). Having been persuaded the people march to the Local Council Authority. According to their leader:

We have come to tell you Sir our clinic is run-down and abandoned, we have come to tell you that we don't have a single borehole on Morgan street and we have to go to other streets to fetch water, our schools are overcrowded and our children have to buy their own seats and table because the ones they have, have not been replaced since the schools were built ten years ago... we are here to protest against this neglect. Where is the subsidized drug programme promised us from the Special Petroleum Trust Fund. We need it now, because our children and our wives are dying from disease. We are dying from lack of hope (p.170-1).

This speech outlines the failure of the military. Though the people are crushed by the state might, they resolve to remain resolute. The message is passed: is military regimes are not good; therefore they can't be alternative to civil rule.

One major stylistic device which Habila employs in this novel is the fusion of facts with fiction, through this technique, the people easily learn about their past. Through this, he is able to tell the people about the ominous presence of the military in their past and it do not symbolize good. Habila plays the role of a griot telling his people about a flawed past which will help them to re-evaluate the present. There is also the use of irony in the novel. Nigeria exports crude, yet it has none for local consumption "Long queue of cars waiting for fuel". This goes a long way to explain the failure of the military, as no refinery is working. Thus Saro-Wiwa describes the military as "the ruiners of the state"(p.335).

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## CONCLUSION

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This paper interrogates the presence of the military as a motif in the Nigerian novel. The paper reveals how military dictatorship is exposed in *Waiting for an Angel*. It also examines how the ruling class which is one of tyranny, exploitation and subjugation of the will of the people has continue to muffle the voices of opposition will not stop the torch of resistance burning until the tyrant and his henchmen are removed. The paper posits that through artistic innovation and experimentation, Habila has shown that no matter the argument by older writers like Achebe, the military is not good for any decent society. The position of this paper agrees with the vision of the author that the need for a violent revolution has become imperative. The paper commands Habila for positively portraying the role of the people in the overall struggle to

make Nigeria a better society.

Through the use of facts and fiction, Habila artistically achieved great feats in an attempt to recreate and reconstruct history and place many historical figures in better perspective in the historical evolution of the Nigerian nation. In the final analysis the paper affirms that *Waiting for an Angel* explores labyrinthine history of Nigeria which has been “punctuated by a brutal, perennial military dominance” (Allwell & Ezechi, p.126).

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