

IDEOLOGY AND MILITARISM IN HELON HABILA'S WAITING FOR AN ANGEL

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the concepts of ideology and militarism in Helen Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*. The novel essentially focuses on the military regime of Abacha which the novelist uses to depict Nigeria's political ideology during military era. It underscores the dictatorial tendencies of the junta encapsulated in the manipulation of the citizenry and erosion of individual freedom. The novel *Waiting for an Angel* by Helen Habila raises a number of questions about the plight of people under an obnoxious regime, a regime that limits the freedom of the people it is supposed to lead as it neglects and cages people under its own iron grips. The novel raises issues that are vital to the survival of man in an environment that is degraded, exploited and ruthlessly abused. Through the articulation of power as embedded in the discourse, Habila uses brutality to raise a paradoxical condition on the one hand, affirming power and supremacy of dominant discourses of the military; but on the other hand, frees the traumatized people from its grips 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 dehumanized people to insist that the boundaries of discourses can never be completely closed, no matter how temporarily dominated by the military junta.

Introduction

Paz (1985) in his book, *the Labyrinths of Solitude*, says that man has the capacity to make beautiful and lasting words out of the real substance of historical nightmare. In other words, the grandeur of man consists in transforming historical nightmare into vision by freeing himself from the shapeless horror of reality even if it has to do, for instance, by means of creation. Helen Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* is a perspective on the subject of the ideology of militarism in Nigerian history. Okonkwo (2005) classifies *Waiting for an Angel* among others like Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Okey Ndibe's *Arrows of Rain* as novels that

"te(x)stify" to the horrors of events that took place during the period of dictatorship from 1984-1998. These events are used as a type of text that is alluded to symbolically in the novels.

The title *Waiting for an Angel* defines the underlying theme of despair and despondency that pervade the Nigerian political atmosphere from the period of 1993 to 1998, to be precise. The period is significant because of the militarization of the entire society. It was a period characterized by a reign of terror, which was orchestrated by successive military administrations in Nigeria, especially the military regimes of Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha. The novel is a mirror of the atrocities of the military in all facets of Nigerian life. It is characterized by the narrative of torture, victimization and brutality, and this is portrayed through the viewpoint of the central character Lomba. The novel comprises seven interrelated stories. Its significance lies in its capability to capture socio-political circumstances which border largely on state-sponsored violence.

Anthony (2012), in his article, "Trend and Style" in Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*, chronicles the repressive government of Babangida and the crude and unbridled dictatorship of Abacha. This period is characterized by the muzzling of the press and radical intellectuals by various agencies of the military. The entire Nigerian masses were not spared. They languished in abject poverty, misery and general social malaise that were as a result of harsh economic policies, most especially the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of the Babangida era. Those facts are true to life. It is an x-ray of the incarceration of Lomba to the various strikes, riots and demonstrations. It is a symbol of the jailing of Nduka Irabor and Dele Thompson of the Guardian Newspaper. It also depicts the various strikes action that swept across Nigeria beginning from the petroleum subsidy riot that started at the University of Jos and climaxed with the petroleum workers' strike of 1994 and the various June demonstrations across the country. There is also the juxtaposition of true life events that have resemblance to their character and institutions. These events are the expulsion of Nigeria from the Commonwealth (p.192), the assassination of Dele Giwa (p.196-7), the existence of the pro-demonstracy group, NADECO and the eventual assassination of Kudirat Abiola (p.210). These are the lyrics of the era.

Helon Habila could be seen as not having power to physically change the oppressive conditions of the military state, but he can undermine the psychological oppression of the military state through the defiant use of the imagination in order to help shape a social imagination, though not immediately dominant, but can eventually lead to physical change.

Meaning of Ideology

Ideology is a closely organized system of beliefs, values, and ideas forming the basis of a social, economic, or political philosophy or programme. Encarta (2009:11) says that the concept of ideology connotes a set of beliefs, values, and opinions that shape the way a person or a group such as a social class thinks, acts and understands the world. When ideology is employed in the use of government, it affects not only those who already conform to the ideology but those citizens who do not. It is a body of ideas that reflect the beliefs of a nation's political system which is called political ideology. Marx (1844), in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscript*, sees ideology as a major instrument in the hands of the ruling class used to deceive and subordinate classes about the true nature of capitalism and to perpetuate its own dominion.

Political ideology is a consistent sentiment of beliefs about one's political environment. We usually think of ideology in terms of the liberal-conservative practice but political ideology may be a multidimensional concept. Ideology is any system of interrelated ideas offering a comprehensive world-view and being able to mobilize a large number of people for or against political change. Coxal et al (1994) also view ideologies as containing interpretations of how societies have come to be as they are. It also contains prescriptions of goals to strive for in the future and recommendations of strategies and policies by which these goals can be achieved. The ideas that constitute ideology are illusionary, but they are also regarded as ideas, which express the interests of the dominant class.

Meaning of Militarism

Militarism is the prevalence of the armed forces in the administration or policy of the state. The military in Nigeria has come to symbolize a particular class and class interest - that of the military elite clinging to power. In this way the military has acquired a self-perpetuating character in the political life of Nigeria. Like all class and quasi-class formations, this perpetuation hinges on protecting and furthering the interests of a select few. In achieving this desire, the military mobilized its poorly positioned "labouring section" against the larger civilian population in a massive wave of militarization. Hence, the military has become the pivotal force defining the *raison d'etre* of those it has co-opted, and by the same token it has come to believe that, as a patriotic body, it must protect the corporate existence of Nigeria against the various ploys of the political class. But military rulers in Nigeria, according to Allen (1987:23), arise as political aberrations and with promises to democratize.

This much vaunted democracy has never really materialized: rather, brief civilian interregnums have punctuated the long years of military rule. In their

subtle agenda to remain in power, the military may have exploited ethnicity both as a unifying tool within select military-cum-regional cliques and a check on the ambitions of dissenting officers. In the wider society the military may secure its eventual return to power each time it hands over to a civilian regime by way of heightening ethnic tensions and allowing politicization along ethnic lines.

John (1987:10) contends that the articulation of ethnic feelings, goals and identities are usually directed towards the State. The political power play involved in a modern State may give rise to ethnicity which becomes a springboard upon which such power-play is launched. For Davis (1994:43), most pre-colonial States in Africa depended on the use of military force to extract surpluses from direct producers. Thus, military organizations developed in an environment which emphasized its coercive power, gave it priority attention and utilized it as a means of allocating and distributing resources, usually in favour of the elite. As a result, the African ruling elite had a mutually beneficial alliance with the military right from the early stage. In order to strengthen the military, keep opposition in check and guarantee continuous access to production surpluses, the ruling elites probably expended a significant part of these surpluses on the military and pampered its leading personnel. The implication of this form of predatory alliance in society has been well articulated elsewhere by Butter (1990). But right from the beginning the State in Africa has ascribed a privileged position to the military and has often seen its existence and strength as a prerequisite for the continued survival of the society.

In contemporary society, however, the military is no longer content with enjoying proxy leadership. With a corps of relatively well-educated and highly-trained manpower and in the context of the prevailing crisis in Africa's development, the military may see itself as the rightful heir to state power and as the legitimate recipient of public resources, as Marx foresaw.

47:3 Victimisation and Brutality

The story line revolves around Lomba, a Lagos-based journalist and a prospective novelist, who was imprisoned by the Abacha regime on fabricated charges. The depressed Lomba is taken undue advantage of by the prison superintendent who uses his office to coax love poems from the prisoner, Lomba, then sends them to his own mistress.

Habila shows in his novel, the Nigerian experience under the Abacha regime, a regime that no Nigerian who experienced it will forget in a hurry. The novel recounts vividly and lucidly the story of young Nigerians cowed by a regime that does not allow creativity to thrive. Lomba recounts the scenario that

surrounds his arrest and imprisonment. As a journalist, he covers a demonstration and along the line, is arrested by the police and abandoned in jail without trial.

Bola, a prominent character in the novel, is another victim of turbulence in the society as he simply lapses into insanity. The poverty of the people is also mentioned in the novel, which by implication constrains readers to conjecture that almost all the wealth of the nation comes from a particular region and the majority of the people still live in pitiable and abject poverty.

'Poverty Street' stands out clearly in the novel. It is a place whose residents can be described as 'the wretched of the earth': the poor, the sick, the mentally deranged, prostitutes, drunkards, the depressed, the disillusioned, the frustrated, the battered and the beaten in the society are on this street:

Poverty Street's real name was Morgan Street, one of the many decrepit disease-ridden quarters that dotted the city of Lagos like ringworm on a beggar's body...Behind the women centre was Olokun road, the shabbiest and poorest of all the quarters on poverty Street. (p120-21)

One of the major themes of *Waiting for an Angel* is that the military are harbingers of terror and exploitation. It is Habila's duty to portray the society the way it is and he brings to the understanding of the readers the reason why military government should not be desired by any right thinking person by making the characters like Lomba, Joshua, Kela and others go through various stages of terror. The writer portrays Lomba and Bola as sacrificial lambs that are made to suffer the consequences of bad military dictatorship.

The novel also raises a number of issues about the plight of the people under an obnoxious regime that limits the freedom of the people. It talks about the unholy plight of the people caged under the iron grip of terrible forces all in the name of politics. It equally examines those issues that are vital to the survival of man in an environment degraded, exploited and abused. Habila dwells on the condition of the people of a particular class and region who, in spite of so much wealth surrounding them, live in abject poverty and he underscores the fact that the Nigerian military junta does little or nothing to alleviate the suffering of the masses, particularly those of the poor and down-trodden.

The novel serves as an eye opener to the fact that the problem of leadership is responsible for the mess that Nigeria has been plunged into since independence. Instability in governance has become the order of the day while coups and all manners of atrocities have been committed to compromise the peace of the country.

The story narrated in the novel is a practical representation of a country that waits and hopes for an agent of change or the biblical messiah to come and

rescue her from the hands of abusive and hostile military rulers. The big question on the lips of all is, will the messiah ever come or will the people just wait perpetually?

465 **Gender Ideology in *Waiting for an Angel***

The underlying ideology in Habila's novel is fundamentally that of an African woman who performs roles ascribed to her by the traditional society where cultural beliefs undermine her ability to excel in life and is perpetually bestowed with the image of the weaker sex and inferior in all ramifications. Like most African writers, Habila paints the picture of a debased African woman who is pushed into unpalatable activities in order to sustain the family. This representation is also found in Agary's *Yellow Yellow*. Like Habila, Agary's theme of gender insecurity is projected through the characterization of Zilayefa, who suffers a debasement from the activities of multinational oil companies and the government. Female teenagers are also forced into prostitution in order to sustain their families.

The images accorded the woman in fiction as well as in life, as far as African culture is concerned, are laced with heavy contradictions because the woman is said to be sublime, perfect, beautiful, caring and nurturing. At the same time, awful and contemptible, after all man is the image and the glory of God while the woman is the glory of the man. In African literature, particularly those written by men, the woman's limitations are numerous. The man, in most societies, is presented as the ultimate, the subject, the human being, the essential and so the woman becomes the other, the object, the suffix, the inessential.

It is in this light that one may say that Habila, Agary, Achebe and a host of other writers reflect on the totality of the human society, a society in which military activities render every member, male or female, impotent. Impotence, in all its ramifications, colours the woman's entire being in these novels, as she is made to complete 'other' in this society. In a society such as is depicted in these novels, where oppressive norms exist, where social values and structures of institutions are determined by super powerful males like Sani Abacha, it is not surprising to find characters like Alice who will only be remembered for her sheer beauty even though Lomba is quick to add that there may be some other special attributes in her. Auntie Rachael, fondly called Madam Goodwill, is another character in the novel. She provides the rallying point in Poverty Street because her restaurant is not only an eating point; it is also a meeting point for dissatisfied inhabitants of the Street. From Kela's description, Auntie Rachael is a:

Secret drinker. She had ran away with her sweetheart when she was only eighteen, she was a no good lay about whore her father swore she'd never marry... but that her husband died at Nsukka fighting the Biafrans (p. 105).

To some, she is a strong and an independent woman just because she refused to remarry after her husband's death even though she had no child. To her nephew, the once beautiful life is gone because the brightness has disappeared, so also in the laughter. In their place are faintness, faraway look and evasiveness. (p. 106).

Hagar is Joshua's student; she is seen as a brilliant student who wants to go to the university to study English and Literature, but could not because she remarried. Her step father is described as being irresponsible. He drinks and squanders her mother's money. He also sexually assaults Hagar. He 'pinched' her bottom whenever her mother turns the other eye. Her mother finds out one day and accuses her of snatching her husband and for this reason throws her out of the house. Hagar drops out of school and becomes a prostitute. Hagar is portrayed as being very intelligent with a promising future until the death of her father. She sees herself as someone not worthy to be identified with as a result of her past.

'Tell him it won't work Tell him to forget me. I belong to the past. I am like an appendix useless, vestigial, and even potentially painful. Tell him that.'
(p153).

Hagar is therefore a victim of exploitation; as she puts it, '*a left over*' (p153). She has been exploited and harassed sexually, a painful experience for any woman worth her salt. Nancy is also a product of parental insensitivity as she is chased out of the parents' house when it is discovered that she is pregnant. She is short and dark. She is said to have quick, springy steps of tomboy. She is not pretty and she does not laugh much.

She is also said to be fond of cursing and screaming and she has a child out of wedlock. Nancy is also fond of writing graffiti on the wall of the restaurant just to express her frustration with the world – she writes proverbs, clichés, epigrams, even couplets. So far they express how she feels at every given moment. She comes to live with Auntie Rachael because the latter picks her up from the street.

It is not completely novel to see women whose competence and accomplishment will never be seen or recognized, such characters are present in *Waiting for an Angel*. For example, there are Alice, Madam Goodwill, Janice and Hagar. It is also not surprising to locate women whose past time is to please their male folks, women who are placed there to 'see' and 'hear' things rather, they are

viewed by this society as 'inner lamp' and not 'outer lamp'. This society gives no access to a voice. In Habila's novel, it is inconceivable for anyone during the military rule to voice out any discontent. Doing this could earn the individual incarceration without any consideration for fundamental human right, disappearance without a trace and endless persecution. The Abacha regime described in Habila's novel is not the type that allows for access to quality education and good health care.

The picture of the African woman is differently portrayed in this episode. Here, the modern African woman smokes, drinks and does all manner of things, very different from the traditional idea of the African woman. Habila and Agary give a panoramic picture of a society that constantly reminds the woman of her guilt and shame. Through Hagar and Zilayefa, one sees a society that wastes her prized jewels. Hagar becomes a prostitute, drinking and smoking her life into oblivion, her dream of reading English and Literature to be like her teacher is aborted. Like others before her, with dreams deferred, dreams terminated, Hagar loses interest in life but strives to be relevant in the political struggle that sweeps her off her feet in the riot at the Poverty Street Local Government. Her interest to support Joshua's political passion is therefore short-lived.

Similarly, Habila reveals a society that denies the woman something to desire, something to look out for, to make, achieve and something to give. This is perhaps the reason that he makes some of his female characters to assume a passive role or position all through the novels. Auntie Rachael (Madam Goodwill), Kelly's aunty, assumes a passive role in the novel because, to her, life is a waste and one must not expect much from it; so she lives the day as it comes. She refuses to remarry after the death of her husband, though she has no child. Auntie Rachael used to be happy as Kela recounts his first visit to Auntie Rachael's place 'my memory of the visit was of the fried chicken that I almost choked myself on. And of her white teeth, white like pearl' (p137). This signifies affluence or good living, after her husband's death in the Biafran war and as a result of hardship prevalent in the society 'the brightness was gone (page 137) and in its place comes gloom and bitterness, she didn't laugh much anymore' (p137). With this bitterness and a new perspective on her society, Auntie Rachael resorts to internal torture, self-remorsefulness and to the alcohol. She carves an unbearable edge around herself especially through alcohol consumption.

Janice is another female character. She is educated as far as the standard goes, a teacher and the Superintendent's lover. She is portrayed as a woman who loves poetry hence her lover strenuously tries to impress her with his love poems and very much like the persona in Spencer's sonnet 'Happy ye Leaves', the superintendent woos Janice with his love poems but he is not the poet. Janice

develops an insatiable appetite for more of these love poems which perform magic in favour of the superintendent who could not but express his joy and gladness having made the poem to voice his heart, but on the part of Janice, being an educated lady, a teacher in that sense, it sends a sign of suspicious spark down her spine. She pays a visit to the prison two months later and requests to see Lomba, and having met with him, the shadow of doubt is dispelled and the truth surfaces. '... I told Muftau I wanted to see you. The poems, I just knew it wasn't him writing them...' (p26). Janice is the only female character that is portrayed in a positive light in that she is well read, a teacher, and an intelligent woman whose horizon is not just limited to domesticity. She is a lady who feels the impulse of a society in dire need of change, a lady with the pain of the masses.

Militarism in *Waiting for an Angel*

The setting of the novel is in Nigeria during the 1990s. During this era, the Abacha military regime, the state was dominated and ruled by sadistic brutality. Also, violence on human rights was very prominent in the country. Nigeria was barred from the Commonwealth of Nations. Additionally, almost all countries had charges against Nigeria. This was the socio-political situation when the novel was written.

The military/dictatorial government of Sani Abacha eradicated the critical thinking of the country's gifted writers and scholars. The protagonist, Lomba, a poet and journalist, is caught in the web of military dictator for writing against the government and for covering a pro-democracy demonstration. Habila, through a detailed and conscious presentation of Lomba's ordeals, emphatically condemns militarism in the governance of his country, Nigeria.

The story opens with events that should have come at the end, coming at the beginning or earlier than expected. For instance, the story the story begins with Lomba in prison on the false charges of pro-democracy activism. But on page 179, we are told he was arrested after the demonstration. And yet again when we got to page 219, which is the last page of the story that we found out that Lomba was just going to cover the demonstration. The prison becomes symbolic and satirical. The prison symbolizes the instrument of brutality and torture that the military uses to haunt their opponents as symbolize by Lomba and others. Yet Habila stylistically, makes a mockery of the situation when the prison superintendent seeks assistance from the Lomba that has been an inmate in his custody, that he has been torturing. The prison poems become subversive claims of resistance against and power over the prison superintendent. The superintendent assumes that love poems are safe. Although letters that contain direct or concealed political content might embarrass the government. The

superintendent does not imagine that love poems might have the same potential. In fact, he believes that he can use them to his own benefit. He tells Lomba when he visits him in prison:

The letters, illegal. I burned them... prisoners sometimes smuggle out letters to the press to make us look foolish. Embarrass the government. But poems are harmless. Love Poems... you wrote the poems for your girl isn't it? (p26).

This quick discovery necessitates the movement of political prisoners who are held without appropriate charges and arrangement, the opportunity to be moved from one prison to the other.

Habila succinctly condemns the unwarranted attack on press freedom and the individual rights of ordinary Nigerian citizens. He paints a graphic picture people living in state of fear of arrest and detention. The soldiers and other arms of the military become a willing tool in the hands of the military junta. Citizens are whisked off to detention camps and police stations on the slightest excuse.

Combining the chaos that rapid changes of power (mainly through military coups) must have created, the novel avoids a more conventional approach to its story. The narrative is non-linear, practically beginning at the end. And the point of view switches from that of one character to another and to an unknown observer.

The combination of the political and personal – reveals Habila's sensitivity to his environment and to show that our world is informed by our social and political situation. This is expressed a little more explicitly in a sense where Lomba tells his editor that he does not want to write about politics. He is interested only in the arts. His editor, who is eventually arrested, reminds him that, 'In this country, the very air we breath is politics'(p118). Later, the same editor reminds Lomba of the duty free and the educated people have in times when the voices of others are being unjustly silenced:

You see, every oppressor knows that whenever one word is joined to another word to form a sentence, there will be revolt. That is our work, the media: to refuse to be silenced, to encourage legitimate criticism wherever we find it. Do you understand how? (p198)

The editor reminds Lomba, he cannot be an artist without engaging in politics. Lomba's placement as an "art page" Habila's assertions in the line quoted above clearly depict his view on militarism in governance.

Conclusion

Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* focuses extensively on social cum political ideology. Habila exposes the fact that African women have been, and will continue to be, relegated to the background with no hope of sustenance and survival. Women are the weaker sex, with nothing good to talk about. The resultant effects include, but not limited to, deprivation, dehumanization, frustration, diseases, disillusionment, depression, alcoholism, hooliganism, prostitution, and poverty just to mention a few. Habila contends that Nigerian women, who have no place in politics or economic life, have no hope of survival. Those who manage to remain alive do so at the mercy of the men folk.

Militarism is perceived by Habila as the weapon of the oppressor. In the oppressor's quest to sustain power and political monopoly, children, women and men are the casualties. Through blatant arrests and intimidation, the oppressor paves the way continuity of his dictatorial actions. But Habila believes that change is possible as humans learn to take their destinies in their own hands.

The reader is left with the utmost feeling that the messiah will surely come. Lomba gradually discovers, according to McCain (2007), that if oppression can be divided into indirect environmental oppression and into direct violent suppression, then it can also be divided into physical and psychological oppression. While neither the writer nor the inhabitants of the nation have much power to effectively resist the oppression of the military on a physical level, they do have the ability to resist the terror on a psychological level. This is what Habila captured in the novel *Waiting for an Angel* through the character of Lomba.

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