

HELON HABILA'S *WAITING FOR AN ANGEL*: THE POLITICAL BILDUNGSROMAN

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Abstract

This article examines the *Bildungsroman* tradition in Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*. It argues that Habila has modified and indigenized the form, in order to confront the political realities of his time. Most studies on third generation Nigerian novels as *Bildungsroman* are female centered. This paper concentrates on the male protagonist's process of maturation across geographical and social borders in order to emphasize the flexibility of the *Bildungsroman* and to create gender balance. It also reveals the extent to which the selected text represents or reverses features of the *Bildungsroman*. The paper adopts Karen Horney's Psychoanalytic Social Theory which is built on the assumption that interpersonal relationship, apart from early childhood experiences play significant role in the development of personality, and argues for a close reading and analysis of the novel as a unique example of postcolonial Nigerian *Bildungsroman*. It equally shows a broad extension of the genre to include the experience of contemporary Nigerians in Diaspora. The findings above imply that third generation Nigerian novelists have reformulated and adjusted the form to suit their environment and time.

Keywords: Bildungsroman, Psychoanalytic Social Theory, Diaspora

Introduction

Helon Habila was born in 1967. He grew up during the period of political dysfunction and military dictatorship in Nigeria. *Waiting for an Angel*, his first novel establishes him as one among the voices of a new generation of Nigerian Writers whom Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton describe as 'third generation' (7). The novel concentrates on the effects of military dictatorship on writers and journalists from the eyes of a youthful protagonist. Habila takes the reader through the plane of history, especially, the period of Abacha's rule which is marked by gross human rights abuse, political killings, imprisonment of intellectuals and revolt on the part of the masses. Writers, the political class and organised civil society were all victims of the state police (*Waiting* 128). According to Ikechukwu Asika, "Habila expresses the situation of terror, anguish, victimization, molestation and slavery meted on the citizens of Nigeria during military era in politics" (283). Clement Nwankwo adds that: "the General Abacha – Babangida junta was marked by gross human rights

abuse, outrageous executions, and imprisonment of human rights activists, including Ken Saro – Wiwa. Many intellectuals were either executed or driven into exile” (157).

The harsh environment in Nigeria at the time results in mass exodus of Nigerians to different parts of the world, to the extent that the Nigerian government launched an advert of “Andrew” (Enebeli Elebuwa who died in 2012) who had become fed-up with the Nigerian situation and wanted to “check – out”. It turned out to be a vain attempt at assuring Nigerians that their problems will soon be a thing of the past. Since then, many “Andrews” have left the shores of Nigeria, had children and grandchildren, without any hope of ever returning to their motherland. More so, since the Nigerian situation seems to be getting worse.

A literary renaissance began with Nigerians who left the country and Nigerians who were born abroad and still living in diaspora. Failure of both military and democratic rules in Nigeria since independence created the room to shift their themes to the life of young or adolescent protagonists, trying to construct identity for themselves. Thus, most of their novels display features of the *Bildungsroman* tradition.

The Bildungsroman Source

Bildungsroman is a German term for novels that follow the physical, spiritual, mental, moral and psychological growth of the main character in which change is vital. The goal of maturity or integration is achieved gradually with difficulty, after painful experiences and encounters with the outside world. Karl Morgenstern who first used the term define it thus: “we may call a novel a *Bildungsroman*, first and foremost on account of its content, but also represents the development of the hero in its beginning and progresses to a certain state of completeness, but also, because the depiction promotes the development of the reader to a greater extent than any other novel” (644-45). One peculiarity of the *Bildungsroman* according to Mikhail Bakhtin is that it describes “a man in the process of becoming” (19). The focus on youth as a crucial stage in human development and change in the main character differentiates the form from other novels that deal with youthful protagonists. As the *Bildungsroman* spread to other cultures of the world, it adapts to changes with variations and slight modifications to suit its new environment. Jerome Hamilton Buckley stresses that the form occurs according to a specific pattern and mentions key elements of a typical *Bildungsroman* such as childhood, journey, alienation, ordeal by love, mentorship, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy” (18). He asserts that no single novel precisely follows this pattern, but none that ignores more than two or three of the principal elements answers the the requirement of a *Bildungsroman*. Scholars of African literature have not outlined what should constitute

distinctive features of the African *Bildungsroman*. They are concerned with just applying the European model into African Literature. This is why Buckley's description of the structure of the form, which is popular among critics, will be useful to this study.

Third generation Nigerian novelists seem to be narrating the tortuous events of their growing up years which is a unique experience. This is why the *Bildungsroman* in this context is not just a physical journey of integration or accommodation into the society, but, the dominant feature is change. The change is not just physical, but also psychological. The novels lack harmonious reconciliation of the protagonist with the society, but emphasises that economic and socio – political factors prevent the protagonist from achieving self – realisation. Hence, the protagonist needs a second journey. The import of this study lies in the fact that the journey of the protagonist is a unique contribution, and example of variations in third generation Nigerian *Bildungsroman*. To locate these distinctions, the socio-cultural context of the novel is considered. This determines the growth process of the protagonists from childlike features to a more mature understanding of his world and situation. This is so because according to Karen Horney, the environment plays a significant role in the maturation process of the individual. Horney's psychoanalytic social theory explains human behavioural problems in terms of its social and cultural context. People who grow up under favourable conditions turn out to be responsible human-beings. Those whose need for affection is denied develop basic anxiety which they combat by moving towards, moving against or moving away from people (*New Ways*, 18).

Waiting for an Angel: The Political Bildungsroman

The narrative maps out the growth of Lomba from political ignorance to awareness. *Waiting* is exclusively realised through the character of Lomba. His early childhood experience is unknown. However, Lomba's reaction to his environment enables us to analyse his character. According to Horney, people develop basic anxiety due to unfavourable conditions or hostile environment (*Self...*91). The narrative begins with Lomba in prison, weaving other characters and ends with series of events that leads do his arrest and detention. *Waiting for an Angel* is a *Bildungsroman* since it follows the main character's psychological and moral development, and consists of features such as (a) Childhood, (b) Education and Career, (c) Family and Friendship, (d) Experience of Love Affairs, (e) Mentorship (f) The portrait of Lomba as a Journalist.

Childhood

Habila does not provide the reader with details of Lomba's childhood years, his family or the environment where he comes from in the northern part of the

country. The narrative introduces Lomba as an undergraduate in an unnamed university in Lagos. Habila deviates from the traditional pattern that requires childhood experiences of the protagonist as a characteristic of the male *Bildungsroman* (Buckley 18). Lomba seems to be an orphan character in the text, since no mention is made of his family background. He is made to seek a substitute family in Lagos where he spends his vacations with Bola and other characters who facilitates his *Bildung*. In this respect, the narrative follows the female pattern whose growth begins from adolescence.

Education and Career

Lomba moves into a larger society where he encounters real life. He is an intelligent student who prefers to spend his leisure hours with his lecturer, Dr Kareem, in his office. He enjoys “discussing his poetry with the older lecturer To have his poems discussed and argued; it gave him a kind of vague hope, a sense of place in the larger scheme of things” (*Waiting* 80). The university plays a significant role in Lomba’s career as an intellectual. He expresses his artistic talents for writing poems and short stories. Lomba’s desire to be published is so strong that he tells Alice, “I’ll become a writer. Novels and poems” (*Waiting* 91). He is forced to drop out in the second year due to military intervention and incessant closure of the school. The trauma of the loss of his roommate’s family and the destruction of his literary works by the military facilitate his exit from the university. According to Lomba, “when school began to look like prison, I had to get out” (*Waiting* 107). The fact that Lomba’s university education is incomplete marks a deviation from the requirements of the standard of a typical *Bildungsroman*. Nevertheless, he undergoes and completes informal education under the tutelage of his mentor and role model, James Fiki.

Family and Friendship

Regarding family and friendship, Lomba’s only best friend is Bola, his roommate in the university. Lomba describes Bola as a person that is so trusting, so guileless and loyal (57). He is not alienated from Bola’s family. He states: “I started spending my vacations with his family after the first semester” (58). Bola is carried away in the wave of students’ protest against the military government. He joins the other students in the rally instigated by Sankara, the president of the students’ union. That night, he had a terrible dream about “dead bodies and fire” (*Waiting*, 47). Bola’s personal tragedy only one day after the students’ demonstration affects Lomba. His dream for the future is crushed as he abandons school and chooses a life of solitude in his one room apartment on Morgan Street. This is in line with Horneyan principle that the protagonist moves away from people to combat basic anxiety (*Self...*, 91). Though he retreats into his own world, the narrative entangles him and makes him part of the political struggle against oppressive domination of the military. Lomba remains in his room for two years, trying,

without success, to write a novel. Lomba talks less to his neighbours. Apart from Bola, Lomba's short interaction with Kela encourages him to cover the demonstration. Habila gives little attention to family and friendship in the novel.

Experience of Love Affairs

A typical *Bildungsroman* hero must undergo two obligatory love affairs. Buckley states that one must be debasing and the other exalting (18). Lomba had love affairs with two different women, Alice and Sariman, who abandon him for other men. Lomba first meets Alice in Dr Kareem's office. Alice is described as the not too intelligent daughter of a General (*Waiting*, 83). Nevertheless, she manages to complete her university education. With Alice, Lomba experiences romantic love. Their love affair is short and brief, disrupted by military intervention. Lomba meets Alice many years after, while covering an article for *The Dial* at the Mercy Hospital. She still loves him, but she cannot marry him because she needs money to pay for her mother's medical bills (*Waiting*, 100). Lomba encounters Alice a third time while in prison from her wedding photographs, which he found in an old newspaper. As Lomba looks at the photographs, all he could see is Alice's pleading eyes, begging and saying: "Lomba, I am sorry, so sorry. You must hate me now. Do you?" (*Waiting*, 101). Lomba dedicates most of his prison poems to Alice, just as he had promised.

Sariman walks out of Lomba's life, having lived together with him for one year. Like Alice, she abandons Lomba for economic reasons. Lomba also loves Sariman sincerely. He states that he "tries to ignore the pain in the bleeding hollow where his heart used to be" (*Waiting*, 187). Sariman consoles the poor Lomba, "You'll find somebody else, you'll love again" (*Waiting*, 196). Although Lomba engages in two love affairs, both relationships leave him shattered. His mentor tells him: "Don't worry about her, you'll find love again" (*Waitin*, 271). His relationship with Alice and, later, Sariman is shattered by lack of economic sustenance. Lomba never experiences real love. The reader gets the impression that Lomba's love for Alice kept him strong even though it is not reciprocated. Habila's portrayal of two unsuccessful love affairs deviates from Buckley's standards.

Mentorship

The first mentor Lomba encounters is Dr Kazeem. He discovers Lomba's artistic talents and invites his friend, James Fiki, the editor of *The Dial*, to the listen to his reading. James publishes Lomba's essay unaltered and tells him: "Come, write for us when you graduate" (*Waiting*, 107). When Lomba drops out of school, James offers him a job in art and culture department. Lomba desires to be a novelist. He had hoped that he could even win the commonwealth prize for Literature. James helps Lomba to see beyond the

self, and takes him through series of awakenings. He tells Lomba: “We are talking theory now because in reality you won’t a publisher for it in this country...Nigeria was thrown of commonwealth of nations this morning” (*Waiting*, 192)Lomba accepts training from his mentor and undergoes complete change by the end of the narrative.

The Portrait of Lomba as a Journalist

When Lomba drops out of school, he continues to write in the solitary of his one room apartment on Morgan Street. He later turns to James for a job. Lomba rejects his first political assignment for *The Dial* Newspaper when he states: “I am not very political” (*Waiting*, 108). James informs him that it is very difficult to escape politics because “In this country, the air we breathe is politics” (*Waiting* 108). Government’s unending transition programmes, coupled with fuel scarcity and political unrest, is what James calls “the general disillusionment” (*Waiting*, 108).

James reminds Lomba again: “Everything is politics in this country, don’t forget that” (*Waiting*, 113). He leads Lomba to see the symbiotic relationship between arts and politics. Lomba experiences complete awakening and acceptance of his limitations. What emerges is shame and complete silence: “suddenly, he felt ashamed that he has shown himself to be insensitive, even morally wanting. He nods, “I understood ... I am sorry: James is his mentor; the one person he’d choose if he were to choose a role model” (*Waiting*, 193). He experiences complete change of attitude as he accompanies James to Bagadary slave port. James tells him “sorry I had to be brutal – but you need it. You can’t write with chains in your hands... we are in this together” (*Waiting*, 193). James urges Lomba to follow his steps closely.

The lesson is direct and effective, like a blow to Lomba’s stomach. He comprehends fully the challenges of journalism in a military state. James knows that “there will be a few bruises, even death” (*Waiting*, 195). But he persuades Lomba to cover the demonstration. He takes Lomba along with him as he attends a writers retreat. Lomba becomes aware that writers are not afraid of arrest, imprisonment or even death. He bonds with known and unknown journalists and writers as they continue to fight against injustice and oppression. Lomba accepts training from his mentor and experiences complete metamorphosis when he states flatly: “I have to cover the demonstration” (*Waiting*, 218). Although Lomba is arrested, he does not regret his decision. He continues to write in prison.

Lomba’s *Bildung* is complete when he becomes accommodated into the society of writers. He allows James to mentor him to self – realisation as he follows James to a gathering of poets, where James refuses the offer to leave the country in order to escape arrest or possible death. Lomba observes that

James “looks old ...so grey, so wrinkled, so bowed, so tired” (*Waiting*,216), but his determination to use his pen as weapon of freedom against state oppression inspires Lomba. His contact with poets, novelists and journalists in the residence of Emeka Davis further heightens his determination to cover the peaceful demonstration. These gentlemen of the pen are not afraid of arrest. A female painter advises Lomba, “you really must get arrested, that’s the quickest way to make it as a poet. You’ll have no problem with visas after that, you might even get an international award” (*Waiting*, 215). Although Lomba does not want to be arrested, he realises that “it is important to agitate against injustice, no matter the consequences” (*Waiting*,127). He goes ahead to cover the demonstration despite the likelihood of an arrest, showing that he has come to a self- realisation that the popularity of a writer is tied to his arrest and imprisonment as earlier stated by the female painter. Lomba also notes the defiant attitude of the writers when he informed them that *TheDial* office has been razed down. One of the young poets responds, “I’ll write that into my new poem,” while another said that, “I’ll use it as a prologue to my new book, it’s just the symbolism I’ve been searching for” (*Waiting*,213).

Lomba has come to the cognition that as a writer, he has made himself an enemy of the state. He decides to answer the call of journalism. Like other journalists, he states, “I have to cover a demonstration” (*Waiting*,219). By accepting to cover the demonstration, Lomba recognises his new status which aptly locates the novel within the *Bildungsroman* tradition. Lomba seeks to be arrested in order to gain self – advancement and popularity that might help him, “get out of this fucking country” (*Waiting*, 215). Lomba’s arrest and imprisonment remind the reader of the symbol of oppression in form of the slaves’ mouth – locks. Lomba is not allowed a lawyer, visitors or any means of voicing. According to him, “I have been forgotten” (*Waiting*,15). Lomba refuses to be silenced by prison chains; he finds a way of personal expression by keeping a secret diary. In prison, Lomba continues as a journalist and poet, writing letters and poems to express freedom of his imagination. Lomba decides to dedicate his life to journalism and experiences complete metamorphosis at the end of the novel.

Conclusion

Waiting for an Angel reflects the socio-political concerns of neo-colonial Nigeria. The seemingly endless challenges faced by the protagonist inhibit his growth/development and make it impossible for him to come to an end point in his journey. It is hoped that upon Lomba’s release from prison, he would continue with the profession of journalism. *Waiting for an Angel* presents an older hero who matures from ignorance to awareness. He experiences self-discovery and change, as determining factors of a successful *Bildungsroman*. The novel also educates the readers who follow closely and carefully the mistakes and successes of the protagonist and learn from them.

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