

# Politics and Leadership Challenges in Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*

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## Abstract

Literature mirrors the society that produced it. It is about man and the happenings around him as well as his inner conflicts. The writer draws his material from his observations and experiences. This paper entitled "Politics and Leadership Challenges in Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*", aims at exploring the sufferings, pains, disappointments, deprivations, corruption, tyranny and oppression that characterizes the society in the novel as a result of leadership patterns, which is the outcomes of politics of calumny by the ruling class. The leadership class is somehow estranged from the people because of the despotic nature of military leadership in most African countries. The novel also portrays the disillusionment of the people, the apathy of the rulers and the attendant consequences of the dejection, poverty and miserable conditions of the people. The novelist also exposes the political activism which unfortunately claims many lives. The data for this research was mainly from primary and secondary sources, while journals, books, and internet sources formed the secondary sources. The theoretical framework is Marxism. The novelist exposes the issues that undermine the lives and well-being of the masses and advocates honesty and good governance.

**KEYWORDS:** Oppression, Corruption, Tyranny, Poverty, Sufferings, survival, Good Governance.

## Introduction

Literature is a discipline that studies man, society and man's behavioral patterns. Through the works of literature the nature of the society is portrayed, that is, the good or ills of the society are exposed with the aim of either correcting, instructing, praising or educating the society. In fact, literature mirrors the society at any point in time, hence Ngugi waThiong'o in *Homecoming* says: "Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum. It is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by the social, political and economic forces in a particular society" (65).

Ngugi further in *Writers in Politics* states that:

Literature cannot escape the power structure that shapes our everyday life. That a writer has no choice, whether or not he is aware of it, his work reflects one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in a society. What he chooses is one or the other side in the battlefield. The side of his people or the side of the social forces or class that try to keep his people down. (8)

This means that the literary artist draws his inspiration from the events happening around him. And it is for the reason of highlighting issues and making people become conscious of them that literature works into the problems inherent in society and equips people with the requisite knowledge to solve their problems. These problems which arise are manifested in all aspects of African life, ranging from the political, social, economic to the cultural; but the most prominent of them all is the political problem which is a by-product of all leadership patterns of those in control of power. It is a situation whereby the leader fails to realize or achieve desired or set objectives. Of course, the ability to influence makes leaders highly sought after and valued by society. In African literary texts, greedy, tyrannical, despotic, self-centred and corrupt leaders are portrayed.

It is the aim of this paper, therefore, to look into the treatment of these problems of leadership as explored by the literary artist, but with special reference to the concepts of tyranny and oppression in the work of Helon Habila. The novelist tried to arouse the people's consciousness to the unhealthy nature of leadership patterns in Africa, especially the military regimes. These military leaders are portrayed to be neck-deep in inefficiency, corruption, squandermania, betrayal of the hopes of the masses, dictatorial tendencies, intimidation, inhuman treatment of the masses, etc.

Meanwhile, it is of note that a benevolent and effective leader coordinates the efforts of people within his environment towards goal achievement. The effective leader influences the behavior of his people and motivates them to achieve the set goals of the administration. But this is not the case as we shall find out in Helon Habila's novel, *Waiting for An Angel*.

The theoretical approach for this study is Marxism. Marxism is a political and economic theory of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels that interpret history as a continuing economic class struggle and belief that eventual result would be the establishment of a classless society and communal ownership of wealth of the nation.

Marxism is summed up in *Encarta Reference Library* as a theory in which class struggle is a central element in the analysis of social change in western societies. According to Swingwood Allen in his book *The Novel and the Revolution*, Marxism maintains that a Marxist writer is one who is conscious and fully aware of his own responsibility in the society. No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distanced from the oppressed (23).

Marxist analysis of novels falls on the relations among classes. In British and European novels of the nineteenth century, for example, class is a significant factor in the rise and fall of the fortunes of the characters; examples abound in the novels such as Charles Dickens' *Little Mouth, Dombey and Sons and Oliver Twist*; George Eliot and Anthony Makepiece Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* portray a panoramic vision of society with characters pressing to move up in social rank and status. These and other numerous novels from the eighteenth through twentieth centuries provide abundant territory for Marxist perspectives to investigate the ways political and economic forces conspire to keep social, ethnic and racial groups in power and brought to bear must often on the novel, drama and poetry, where issues of power, money and political influence are not nearly as pervasive.

*The Redford Glossary of critical and Literary Terms* by Rose Murfin and Supriya M. Ray define Marxist criticism as:

A type of criticism in which literary works are viewed as products of work and whose practitioners emphasis the role of class and ideology as they reflect, propagate and even challenge prevailing social order. Rather than viewing them as repositories for hidden meanings. Marxist critics view texts as material product of work and hence reading of production and consumption were. In short, literary works are views as products of work and hence reading of production and consumption were called economics (102).

The Marxist art, therefore, serves as a mirror with which the proletariats or the masses can see themselves and through which their social consciousness is developed.

Ngara Emmanuel in his book *Art and Ideology in African Novel* posits the term Marxist art to refer to "works which depict reality from a Marxist point of view. Works which reflect the social structure of society and which present social struggle from the point of view of a class and promote the ideals of socialism" (17).

This kind of art is geared towards a change in basic mode of production and this change in the mode of production will result in a change in the structure of social classes: the eventual overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the establishment of proletarian dictatorship. It is pertinent to note that during the years of proletarian dictatorship, this working class based literature took shape and evolved ideologically into a prominent position in world literature. Some have ascribed this form of literature to Marxist aesthetics and hereafter become popularly known as Marxist literature.

Cornel Ujowundu believes that Marxist criticism is a special brand of sociological criticism which deals with the methods of production. Its greatest proponents are Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in their theories on Dialectical Materialism. Marxism sees the need to write literature based on social struggle. It uses society in two ways: the economic class and the individualistic or antagonistic class.

### **Politics and Leadership Challenges in Habila's *Waiting for an Angel***

Helon Habila's debut novel *Waiting for an Angel* has seven interconnected episodes each named after the narrator, or a major character or incident. The novel also explored among other things the themes of suffering, pain, disappointment, tyranny and oppression, poverty, dejection and the attendant consequences for the people of Nigeria under a despotic leader.

The novel is set in Nigeria of the 1990s during the reign of military dictators. The use of real places and names of individuals established this fact. For instance, we see names of real places like Lagos, Jos, Abuja, etc. Real persons like Dele Giwa, Ken SaroWiwa, IBB, Abacha, Abdulsalam Abubakar, etc, even real events like the famous bloody post-June 12, 1993 riots, the release of political detainees by Abubakar in 1998, etc. The story is set in Nigeria in the 1990s during the military regimes of Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida, Sani Abacha and Abdulsalami Abubakar.

It tells the story of the sufferings, pains and disappointments of the people personalized in the major character Lomba, a young brilliant journalist though a school dropout. From Lomba's hard times in the prison (revealed by his diary of poems and letters meant to be sent to nobody), the history flows backwards in time, telling tales of Lomba's years in the university, about his first love Alice, forced to marry an army general (Ngai), about the university students' agitation which led to the closure of the school and how Lomba's friend Bola lost his parents and a sister in a fatal accident due to bad roads and went mad as a result, about a helpless Lomba who lives in Morgan Street as a school dropout, jobless, wretched and helpless, about James, the humiliated and traumatized editor of *The Dial* magazine who employed Lomba in the art department, who dared the military dictators, had his office destroyed and his passport seized. He equally convinced Lomba to cover the "peaceful" demonstration of the residents of Poverty Street. Also, through Kela, a fifteen year old boy, we learn more about the pains and disappointments of the residents of Poverty Street, Lagos; about the resistance leader Joshua, in love with his former pupil turned prostitute, about one-legged brother, who lost his leg in a fight with some soldiers, about Madam Godwill and Nancy her servant who are both victims of the hard times. Finally, about the demonstration by the residents of Poverty Street led by teacher Joshua and covered by Lomba, and which led to Lomba's arrest and subsequent imprisonment without trial. In fact, the novelist tells us about Lomba and his experiences in the prison. Here, the young man Lomba languishes in prison under the supervision of the merciless warders and in the poor condition of Nigerian prisons. At a time "in the middle of his second year in prison," he started a diary. He wrote poems and letters to keep himself busy. But he was discovered and

severely punished and thrown into the solitary cell. After this, the Superintendent, Muftau, made him write love poems which he (Muftau) gives to his lover, Janice. Later, Janice discovers that Muftau did not write those poems himself, she decided to visit Lomba and tells Muftau that she will not marry him unless he gets Lomba out of the prison and she says: “If you can’t do that, then forget you ever knew me.” But out of Muftau’s selfishness, he refused to help him (30).

Habila uses “The Angel” to expose the military dictatorship in Nigeria in the 1990s, the difficulties of life under dictatorship in Nigeria. Here, the narrator sits in a bar one evening waiting for an angel – the angel of death, Israfel – who comes in form of soldiers and shot the narrator. According to the *narrator*, “... it is not a soldier standing there. It is an angel.” (38). And as he bled to death he saw “a huge bird shape flying out of the bar and ascending with the sound of a thousand wings” (38).

The University students agonizing situation, led by Sankarah, stage a peaceful demonstration against the IBB’s military regime. As a result, the demonstration turns violent as the police try to repress them using tear gas and rubber bullets and later use real bullets. At last a student and a policeman die. Many students are wounded. Sankarah is arrested and the school closed. According to Adegbite, “it was bloody brilliant” (39). To *Studies in the African Novel*, Habila’s vivid, exciting and heart-wrenching debut novel opens a window into a world in some ways familiar with his sensuously depicted arrests, student lie, and the vibrant local characters, yet ruled in one of the world’s most corrupt and oppressive regimes, a scandal that ultimately drives Lomba to take a risk in the name of something, the pains, shattered hopes and expectations, the betrayal, the energy, sensitivity, despair and stubborn hope of a new African generation with a combination of gritty realism and poetic beauty, saying:

When I turn, it is not a soldier standing there. It is an angel. It opens its enormous wings and closes them again in a clapping motion. The air from the wings lifts me up and carries me all through the door. I land with a splash on the wet street, I am bleeding from the chest... (43-44)

According to *The Observer* newspaper in London, *Waiting for an Angel* “is graphic details of leadership problems in Nigeria under military” (16). The newspaper further states that Nigeria in the 1990s, the setting for the novel, was a police state of such sadistic violence, with human right abuses so staggering, that the country was expelled from the Commonwealth of Nations, and virtually every other country had sanctions against it. As the author says in the “Afterword” to this stunning novel: There was nothing to believe in the only mission the military rulers had was systematically to loot the national treasure, and their only morality was a vicious survivalist agenda. In which any hint of disloyalty was ruthlessly crushed (226).

“Every hint” of dissent and every suspicion of democratic thinking by many of the country’s most gifted writers were repressed and the military government by Sani Abacha wiped out thinkers.

The first portrayal of suffering, pain and disappointment in the novel was imprisonment of innocent people without trial; and how the writers explored the imprisonment of the protagonist named Lomba, who is a political prisoner in Nigeria. Focusing primarily on Lomba, a journalist and the frustrated novelist, who in the opening chapter is a starving political prisoner in a Lagos jail, Helon Habila jumps back and forth in time, introducing us in succeeding chapters to the lives of ordinary citizens of Lagos, men and women including Lomba himself, on Poverty Street, trying to maintain some semblance of hope of an increasing hopeless world, a world filled with disillusionment and disenchantment. This is shown as the novelist portrays the poor state of Morgan Street and the country in general, marked by low standard of living of the citizens. Women like Lomba's woman neighbours took to prostitution (85) while men like Nkem took to smoking marijuana and stealing (85). There is no equality – the problem of fuel scarcity as cars queue around filling stations for days waiting for fuel (87).

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 (92). There were hotels for sex and alcohol, and there were doorways and alley-mouths for marijuana and cocaine (92).

Brother, a poor tailor who lost his leg in an encounter with the soldiers and who dreams of becoming rich one day at the back of his shop, which is covered by garbage heaps and in front of the shop was a burst pipe – deliberately axed, which shot out water all day (96).

Lomba, jailed for two years without a trial as the novel opens, has gone beyond anger which he describes as “the baffled prisoner's attempt to recrystallise his slowly dissolving self and entered a state of tranquil acceptance of his fate (4).

When the jailer, Muftau, finds the poems and journal entries he has written and hidden, he persuades Lomba to write some love poems for the better educated woman he is courting. A brief ray of hope flickers when the woman recognizes Lomba's cryptic message and comes to prison to meet him.

As Ujowundu further states, Lomba's imprisonment appears as the first chapter, hence the reader experiences a sense of déjà vu throughout the reading of the novel as the action backtracks, forcing the reader to experience the event which led to the opening chapter and to wonder, if anything could have prevented Lomba's eventual imprisonment.

The second portrayal of suffering, pains and disappointment in the novel is explored through the wanton killings of innocent citizens. The author shows us the effect of this dictatorial government on ordinary people who populate the country. Though life is difficult and opportunities almost non-existent, the young people still have hopes and dreams.

A second friend whose parents have been killed in a car crash is so grief-stricken that he makes an intemperate and realistic speech, then is arrested, severely beaten and driven insane with no chance of getting his own novel published. Lomba himself takes a job, writing for The Dial, for

which he occasionally reports on political demonstrations, one of them a demonstration in which people peacefully protest the neglect of their neighbourhood.

We are dying from lack of hope. His from lack of hope. The unarmed protesters are suddenly attacked by 50 armed riot police, teargas is exploded, the women and children killed by cars speeding on the adjacent highway (174).

The third portrayal of sufferings, pains and disappointments as explored in *Waiting for an Angel* is human rights abuses, especially detentions without trial, depicting the everyday life and hopes and dreams of the participants. The leaders easily imagine what life must have been like during this time and can envision what his own life must have been under the same circumstances. But Habila adds further reality to his depiction of life in Nigeria under Sani Abacha by including some well-known historical events and their effects on Lomba and the other fictional characters and hanging of Ken SaroWiwa, the killing of Dele Giwa, the editor of *Newswatch* magazine by a letter bomb (151), and the shooting of the wife of Abiola, the opponent of Abacha who was jailed for challenging him. Their human rights were abused because of the people in charge of their right.

The novelist uses Muftau the superintendent at the prison where Lomba stays to reveal the selfishness and self-centredness inherent in human beings out of his wickedness makes Lomba write love poems which he gives to his lover, Janice. He could have helped Lomba out of the prison but he did not because of his selfishness. And when Janice asked him, he says, “I didn’t, I couldn’t, you know... I thought he was comfortable. And, he was writing the poems for you...” (31).

Muftau tells Lomba, “Don’t think because you are political detainee you are untouchable. Wrong, you are all rats, saboteurs, anti-government rats...”(14).

According to the narrator, “a lot of these political prisoners died in detention although only the prominent ones made the headlines – people like Moshood Abiola and General Yar’adua (32). In fact, the poor masses did not only wallow in poverty but they live in total fear - fear of the unknown. In describing the situation of things in the society, the narrator of the story entitled “The Angel” says that the people “lock their doors and turn off their lights and peer tearfully through chinks in their windows at the rain-washed post-coup d’etat streets” (37). Such is the fate of Nigerians under military regimes.

The hardship caused by the military rulers bring about poverty which in turn brings about moral corruption as the youth indulge in stealing, drug abuse and prostitution. For instance, Nkem, Lomba’s neighbor, has to steal to be alive and Hagar has to be a sex hawker to survive, while Brother and his friends took to smoking marijuana.

This poverty is another aspect of sufferings and pains. There is smell of poverty throughout the story. The few military generals loot the public funds, while the poor masses become even

poorer. It is written all over Morgan Street and its residents. Even thing about this street and the people living in it is poor – the bad roads, the miserable houses, the street full of huge hills of refuse that overflowed and blocked the footbaths, etc. No wonder they changed the street’s name from Morgan to Poverty Street. Lomba, Brother, Hagar, Nkem and even Alice are victims of poverty in the novel.

All these incidents of pain, sufferings and disappointments in the novel portray Habila’s powerful defence of the freedom of the press and a celebration of the life of those courageous writers who have refused to be silenced, even when faced with death. As he says; “Every oppressor knows that when 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 silent, to follow legitimate criticism wherever we find it”(186).

This moving study of idealistic young people refusing to give up even when faced with truths of their very lives is an unforgettable story of the human spirit waiting for an angel and sometimes meeting the angel of death.

In his review of the novel in *Rhymes With Orange*, S.I. Calhoun says:

Lomba is a young aspiring novelist who is struggling to jumpstart his writing career in the midst of chaos and rebellion in Nigeria during the 1990s. The brutal and corrupt Nigerian military government and their battle against pro-democracy demonstrations and sympathizers while simultaneously distancing themselves from other nations from the backdrop of this wonderful and poignant novel. Although Lomba does not actively join his classmates and colleagues in their dangerous protests for human rights and government accountability, yet he can’t help but be immensely affected by the political events unfolding around him: he is a bystander who quickly becomes a victim of the circumstances. Calhoun further observes that:

Written in non-chronological order, *Waiting for an Angel* keeps the reader on edge even though the ending is revealed in the first chapter. This novel is a fresh and evocative first-person narrative into the political instability of Nigeria and its effects on the everyday individual combining a mixture of historical people. This is an incredible, albeit horrifying circumstance. That Habila has created wonderful highly textured characters that are at once believable and evoke reader empathy and emotion, as written in a previous preview, it is recommended to read the Afterword first as it contains essential political context for this novel.

Furthermore, “Reed Business Information,” an Internet web under ‘clarksville.org’ says:

Nigerian author Habila’s debut novel is a noble account of how even the poorest and lowliest people must rise up against oppression regardless of the consequences. Habila tells the story of Lomba as he goes from student to failed novelist to journalist to political prisoner, trying to retain his dignity despite the corruption and violence that has contaminated every part of Nigerian society. As, one by one, those he loves or cares about are battered, in one or another by



the regime, Lomba realizes that he must take action, however small, in order to remain the history of Nigeria's brutal juntas, it is Habila's fictionalization that reveals the true casualties of oppression better than any news account or history.

Ujowundu in his systematic analysis of the novel says:

In fact, the novel opens in a Nigerian prison where Lomba, a young reporter, secretly writes poetry with a pencil and paper he's forbidden to have. When the superintendent discovers Lomba's writing supplies, he has an odd request; he wants Lomba to write love poems to his sweetheart. From Lomba's imprisonment, his story moves backward and a series of closely connected stories shows Lomba's life before his incarceration and the fateful choice – to report on a demonstration on Poverty Street – that leads to his arrest. Violence and abject poverty surround Lomba; his university roommate loses his grip on reality after the death of his family and falls victim to some brutal police officers. While his first love, Alice, forces herself to marry a rich man who pays her mother's hospital bills. Lomba tries to hide from the reality of the world he lies in until an activist named Joshua begs him to cover a demonstration he is leading. The oppressive atmosphere of Nigeria in the 1990s drives Habila's powerful novel.

All said and done, Habila's first novel captures the sufferings, the pains, the disappointments, the chaos and brutality of Nigerians in 1990s under the rule of despotic military dictator Gen. Sani Abacha. The story follows Lomba, a quixotic political student in the capital city of Lagos, who is trying to write a novel in his shabby tenement on Morgan Street (better known as Poverty Street) and covering arts for a city newspaper, *The Dial*.

Soon, Lomba's roommate is attacked by soldiers, journalists are arrested all over the city and *The Dial* offices are set on fire. Lomba decides to take part in a pro-democracy demonstration. There, he is arrested and imprisoned for three years. The novel's narrative moves back and forth in time, beginning with Lomba's life in prison and ending with the climatic events leading up to the arrest. Some chapters are written in the third person, others narrated by Lomba himself and still others by a high school student named Kela, who lives near Lomba on Poverty Street and crosses paths with him before the fateful demonstration.

Through their eyes, Habila paints an extraordinary tableau of Poverty Street (“One of the many decrepit, disease-ridden quarters that dotted the city of Lagos like ringworm on a beggar's body”), bringing their sounds, sights and smells to life with his spare prose and flair for metaphor. Kela's aunt runs the Godwills Food Genre Restaurant. Through his encounters with the patrons, as well as his activist English teacher, Kela (and readers) learn about Nigeria's bloody post-colonial history. Though somewhat marred by the abrupt, disorienting shifts among narrators and time periods, this is a powerful startling vivid novel.

## **Conclusion**

The novel under study portrayed the suffering, pains, disappointments and disillusionment of the people, as emanating from the leadership style of the ruling class. The insensitivity and lack of regards for the lives of the people were vividly explored. The novelists depicted the humiliating situations of the people struggling to survive in hostile environments and conflict-ridden societies.

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