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Trend and Style in Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*

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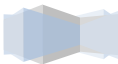
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Abstract

*The event of the mid 80's through the 90's in Nigeria is what Helon Habila captures in his novel *Waiting for an Angel*. The marriage of fiction with fact makes it a unique genre and attractive for literary scholars to explore the novel's mechanics and techniques. Consequently, this essay attempts to unravel some of Habila's narrative techniques in relation to his message. In doing so, we would concern ourselves with some of the obvious methods he has employed in the novel; dramatization, flashback, stories within a story etc. Though some of these techniques may not be too appealing to many due to the fact that the novel is not chronologically arranged, but that is what marks him out as Helon Habila.*

Introduction

The Mid 80's through the later part of the 90's marks a significant period in the landscape of Nigerian history, mainly because of the militarisation of the entire Nigerian society. From the subtle but repressive government of



Babangida to the crude and unbridled dictatorship of Abacha, were the periods characterised by the muzzling of the press and radical intellectuals by various agencies of the military. The 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.

These facts and events are what Helon Habila captures in *Waiting for an Angel*. Though it is a fictional novel, most of the events if not all are true to life. An x-ray of the incarceration of Lomba (pp. 3-32) the hero of the story, to the various strikes, riots and demonstrations in the novel are reminiscent of the jailing of Nduka Irabor and Dele Thompson of the *Guardian* Newspaper. Similarly, the various riots and strike actions that swept across Nigeria beginning from the 1991 petroleum subsidy riot that started at the University of Jos and climaxed with the petroleum workers strike of 1994 (PENGASSAN) and the various June 12th demonstrations across the country were also reflected in the novel. Closely linked to this, is the juxtaposing of true life events in the novel that have resemblance to their characters and institutions. Such events include the expulsion of Nigeria from the Commonwealth (p. 192), the assassination of Dele Giwa (pp. 196-197), the pro-democracy group; NADECO and the eventual assassination of Kudirat Abiola (p. 210). These were all lyrics of the era. And Habila's inventiveness to harmonize fact with fiction without undermining his message and technique marks *waiting for an Angel* as an overture of the period. This technique is commended by Akingbe (2010:31):

As a work of fiction, the novel makes it possible to identify with Nigeria's real world, the people and the actual events depicts in the narrative. This identification with real-life situation is one generic characteristic of fiction which distinguishes it from other narrative forms which are considered fictional.

If the statement of Akingbe above is true, it therefore means that *Waiting for an Angel* falls within the period that this essay seeks to address. Consequently, this paper will attempt to explore some of the narrative techniques Habila uses to highlight the evil of the era.



Trend and Style

Over the years it has not been easy for literary scholars to separate the medium from the message, the form from the content; an aspect that is as difficult as trying to separate the egg whites from the yolk. Be that as it may, the marriage of facts with fiction which Habila weaves together in *Waiting for an Angel* makes it more compelling for anyone to attempt to unravel this mystery. Palmer (1986:4) supports this argument when he says "it is of course important to pay attention to what the novelist has to say; but it is equally important to pay attention to the way in which he says it." This is why the uniqueness of Habila's style underscores the need for this essay to examine how his style is a trend in the novel. Though trend and style are inter-related, this is because while trend means what is common and in vogue, style is the way and manner a writer chooses to narrate his work. In the notion of Abrams (2005:312) he refers to style "as how speakers or writers say whatever it is that they say." And over the years many literary critics have come to agree that the totality of a novel's impact and meaning is a composition of subject matter, plot, structure, style narrative method and other facts of the novel. An aspect that Palmer (1986:5) acknowledges;

Technique affects all these; technique is the means by which the writer shapes and explores his experience, which is his subject matter. It is the means by which he develops his themes and finally evaluates the world he has presented. And the more appropriate the techniques are to the themes, the more expertly he will be able to explore them. Technique cannot therefore be neglected in the evaluation of a work quality.

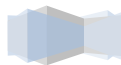
It is from this perspective of technique that we would now attempt to examine *Waiting for an Angel*.

Narrative

In discussing narrative, we are not just concerned about the narrative method first or third person narrative but the various devices that have been employed in *Waiting for an Angel* to narrate the story.

Dramatisation

A careful appraisal of the novel shows that Habila breaks away from the conventional chapterisation that is common with most novelists. Instead, he



presents his characters as chapters at different stages of the story to reveal their experiences and situations based on their personal idiosyncrasies. In using this method, Habila encapsulates two techniques in one. First, he is an omniscient narrator who tells a story, giving accounts of events and characters and making the reader see everything from the characters point of view. Secondly and most importantly this technique allows him to put the characters on the stage to enact their drama with the minimum of explicit comment from him. To confirm this fact let's examine Lomba's encounter with one of the warders in his cell (p. 9);

'I repeat. My question. Who gave you the papers?' He thundered into my face, spraying me with spit.

I shook my head. 'I have forgotten.'

I did not see it, but he must have nodded to one of the hounds. All I felt was the crushing blow on the back of my neck. I pitched forward, stunned by pain and the expectation of it. My face struck the door bars and I fell before the superintendent's boots.

This dialogue explains the fact that Lomba was not only telling his story but at the same time enacting it. This is why Percy (1921:8) believes that; "the art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be shown, to be exhibited, that it will tell itself. And this is what Habila did by using this technique.

Flashback

A lover of linear narration might find *Waiting for an Angel* not too appealing to explore, this is because the story is not chronologically arranged. The story opens with events that should have come at the end, coming at the beginning or earlier than expected. For instance, the story begins with Lomba in prison but only on p. 179 we were told he was arrested after the demonstration. And yet again, not only when we got to p. 219 which is the last page of the story that we found out that Lomba was just going to cover the demonstration. Habila's constant digression reveals his authorial power, (poetic license) but most importantly, his creative style is hinged in his ability to cohere the story through the technique of flashback.

In narrating the story of Bola, Lomba's friend, the story begins with Bola having a nightmare, the demonstration at the University and Bola's eventual departure for home, where he eventually learnt about the tragic death of his

parents in a ghastly motor accident. In trying to show how devastating this news was to everyone, both Bola and Lomba, Habila quickly links the reader with how Lomba came to know Bola's family and how close they have been since then through the technique of flashback (pp. 61-62). However, Habila's mastery of flashback becomes more evident when the story of Alice, Lomba's ex-girlfriend was put on stage. The plot of Alice's story is intrinsically woven together through the use of summary. For example on p. 79;

And when you looked and hoped and waited and finally realized that I was never going to come, that you just made a final, irrevocable choice – 'I do' – did you not break down and cry?

In this instance, Lomba was trying to recollect the last time he met Alice and how suddenly in prison he discovered that Alice is now married to her new lover Ngai. There is another example on p. 92;

What light and winged things promises are, fluttering away on the wind no sooner than they are uttered. I also promised to meet you the next day when I left you in the morning, a happy smile on your face. I had a happy smile too. I look back at my life, before and after that moment....

This excerpt was used when Lomba ran into Alice at Mercy Hospital at Ikeja. And Habila used it to link the reader with the last time Lomba and Alice met at the University and how suddenly they ran into each other at the hospital. This trend abounds in the plot of Alice. A lot of these summaries are used by Habila to show the reader the characters various experiences and situations. Novelists use summary when they wish to give important information which is necessary to the understanding of the novel but not worth dwelling on. A fact that Palmer (1986:12) agrees with, when he says summary "could be used for instance to fill in the background, to tell us what had happened in the past or what had happened in the intervening period."

Imagery

One of the best literary weapons of Habila in *Waiting for an Angel* is his ability to use words to create mental pictures in the minds of his readers. For instance, a playback into *Poverty Street* does not only reflect a micro of the Nigerian society, but brings to the fore of the reader the abject poverty that is



synonymous with people who live in slums and ghettos as depicted in the street and symbolised in the characters of Brother, Hagar, Joshua, Nancy etc. No wonder, Lewis (1948:17-18) believes that imagery “is a picture made out of words.” However, Habila’s descriptive potency and prowess is better conjured by the reader when he gives a vivid picture of the instrumentality of the Hang Man on p. 162, and how metaphorical this connotes how life was gradually being sniffed out of Nigerians during this traumatic era.

Similarly, on pp. 194-195 Lomba and James visit to the slave dungeon in Badagry where James showed Lomba the instrument that was used to padlock the mouths of the slaves, reveals how toothless and harmless the press was because of the way the military had ganged the press during this era. But beyond this, is the striking effect of these imageries to replicate historical truth (Ken Saro Wiwa’s murder and slave trade) to reflect the situation on ground, thereby creating the true particulars of the period in the eyes of the reader. An aspect that Brooks (1987:37) supports;

The writer does not select an abstract theme and then embellish it with concrete details. On the contrary, he must establish the details, must abide by the details, and through his realization of the details attain to whatever general meaning he can attain. The meaning must issue from the particulars; it must not be seen to be arbitrary forced upon the particulars.

Through this technique, Habila has been able to present to every reader of his book, a true picture of what transpired during this era.

Symbols and Satire

There are several symbols and satire in the novel, but sometimes there are no clear delineation in Habila’s use of symbols and satire. This creative mix creates a stylistic flavour in the minds of his readers. Superintendent Muftau and the prison symbolise the instrument of brutality and torture that the military uses to haunt their opponents as symbolised in Lomba and others. Yet, Habila makes a mockery of the situation when Muftau seeks assistance from the same Lomba that has been an inmate in his custody, that he has been torturing;

‘I promised my lady a poem.



She is educated you know. A teacher. You will write a poem for me.
For my lady.'

'You want me to write a poem for you? 'I tried to mask the surprise,
the confusion and, yes, the eagerness in my voice. He was offering
me a chance to write (p.17);

As much as this was an indictment on the military institution of the day, it clearly points to the fact that there were some sections of the military that were still looking up to the masses and civilians to rescue them from the clutches of dictatorship. And Lomba represents such, because of his stand against the social and political vices of corruption that is highlighted in *Waiting for an Angel*.

Stories within a Story

The hallmark of any writer lies in his ability to create a niche for himself. For example, Achebe is known for colouring his works with proverbs. In *Waiting for an Angel*, Habila shows his class as a master story teller. According to Aire (2002:31), "a true writer's artistry can often be judged by his ability to consistently match the style of new work with its particular theme and setting." If this is stating the obvious, then in *Waiting for an Angel* we were told seven stories in one. Through this technique, Habila creates an atmosphere where his readers come in contact with his characters; feel what they feel, hear what they hear and see what they see. By so doing, the mental and psychological state of each character is real to the reader. And in turn, the reader is in a better position to ascertain how real the lives and experiences of the characters are to the plot of the story.

Through this technique, Habila breaks away from the traditional norms associated with writers like Thomas Hardy who focus on a single character whose end is usually disastrous. On the contrary, Habila presents his readers with several characters to enable them judge the strength and weaknesses of his lead character, base on what they see of the other characters. A fact that Jowitt (2009:239) accepts "High-Level realist brings to their work a highly distinctive point of view and style, they may combine conventional modes of narration with some experimentation...."

Conclusion

In this essay, we have attempted to look at the various techniques employed by Habila. Though *Waiting for an Angel* has a loose plot, Habila has been



able to use the mastery of flashback and other devices to knit the story together. Moreover, it is through these techniques that character development is achieved by the author. For instance, through the use of story telling the reader explores the events and characters of Poverty Street as told by a teenager called Kela.

From Habila's style in *Waiting for an Angel* we can say that he is a master story teller. This is true because no matter the angle he opens up in his story he is able to knit them into one piece. Though his style might not be too appealing to upcoming writers, it sets him out as one of the best contemporary writers of this era.

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