



## **Historization of Setting and Textualization of History: A Comparative Study of Helon Habila's *Waiting For An Angel* and Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Helon Habila are among the “Avant Garde” of contemporary Nigeria fiction. This period of fiction according to Charles Nnolim falls between 2000 and 2005 and is characterized by its brilliance of articulation, simplicity of thought, the creative utilization of the resources of language as well as the unique control and sustenance of narrative power. James Okpiliya insists that these new voices are actually describing the world around them and the experiences of their formative years (3). In the light of this, it is worthy to note that Adichie and Habila are witnesses to a fractured society which characterises the Nigerian nation-state. The lenses of these writers have been focused on the socio-political landscape, especially on the fact that the nation had been held hostage by military dictatorship, poor governance and corruption, reactionary forces that are still plaguing the country.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In *Waiting for an Angel* and *Purple Hibiscus* Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Helon Habila enlighten readers on the atrocities, aberrations and misnomers that featured prominently during the military regimes of Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha and by extension, all military regimes especially in Nigeria. In addition to chronicling these events in their society, there is also an implicit call to action in these works. In other words, their art is a manifesto which aims to hasten necessary changes in the society. This summarises the assertion that:

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It is not enough to write (sing) a revolutionary song; you must fashion the revolution with the people... There is no place outside that fight for the artists or for the intellectual who is not himself concerned with and completely at one with the people (Okpiliya, 9).

In spite of the divergent critiques on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a novelist of international acclaim and repute, one thing that seems to be unanimous is the fact that she is a quintessential writer, an avant garde of the “new voices”, and a gadfly in the realm of social criticism. In this wise, the following dignifying epithets have been written on her ingenuity. Charles Nnolim for instance says:

With admirable narrative subtlety Chimamanda weaves an interesting but shocking story of... a pious monster... finally done in to create *space* (*Contemporary Nigerian fiction*, 14).

While Femi Osofisan asserts that:

...It is refreshing to find a new voice bursting out at last, to proclaim a new dawn, like-well, a purple hibiscus... (*Purple Hibiscus*, Back cover).

Commenting further on Adichie’s sobriety, *The San Diego Union* intones:

Adichie renders this coming of age story beautifully. Every character has dimension, every description resonates like cello music... Her story, lyrical voice earns her a place on the shelf squarely next to Gabriel Gracia Marquez, Alex Haley and Chinua Achebe ( 4).

Adichie’s strenuous strides at re-creating history have widely been acknowledged and the numerous prestigious awards she has testify to her creative ingenuity.

Helon Habila was born in the late 1960 in Gombe, to Habila Ngalabak and Alheri Habila. He obtained B.A (Hons) English at the University of Jos, having dropped out of his initial course of Engineering. After his successful graduation, he taught in the same university for a period of two year, before joining the service of Vanguard Media Limited, Lagos as Journalists. Habila was a beat a retreat to his career (English) when he ‘encountered’ *Aspect of the Novel* a prolific text of critical essays by E.M. Foster. This development, indeed, became a turning point in his life, as witnessed in his prolific writings. Like Chimamanda Adichie, Habila has been widely acknowledged in recognition of his literary ingenuity, Habila was awarded a two-year writer’s fellowship in England as Writer-in-Residence at the University of East Angila.

In carrying out a comparative study of *Purple Hibiscus* and *Waiting for an Angel*, these novels shall be examined using the following parameters: historicization and setting, language revolutionary optimism and characterization.

**(A) History and Setting**

The success of Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* is derived from their consummate ability to place their narratives in the context of historical experiences. This is so in the light of the fact that, Adichie and Habila essentially historicize discourse and textualise history. Events of the past and their ripple effects are fore-grounded in such a manner that they successfully interpret the present as being the function of the dialectics of human struggle, which by and large, is a continuum.

There seems to be a covert suggestiveness that collective action, when properly harnessed and utilized, can be used as a necessary tool to salvage decadent society and rescue same from the visible afflictions plaguing it. The precarious condition of the writers' society – Nigeria – caused by the incursion of the military (1985-93) is presented as an anomaly which only the collective resolve of the common people (peasants) to take their destinies in their own hands can reverse. That, perhaps, informs why Eugene, the 'Ogre', the domestic oppressor, is finally 'done in' in order to create space for the flowers around Kambili's compound to bloom, Kambili re-iterates this when she says:

We'll plant new orange trees in Abba when we come back, and Jaja will plant purple hibiscus, too, and I'll Plant ixora so we can suck the juices of the flowers (307).

To give credence to the actual setting of *Waiting for an Angel* (as a work of historical fiction), Habila comments:

What this story tries to do is to capture the mood of those years, especially the Adacha years: the despair, the... stubborn hope,... the airless prison-like atmosphere... this I tried to achieve like most works of historical fiction are achieved: by making recognizable historical facts and incidents the fibres with which the larger fabric is woven: Ken Saro-Wiwa, June 12, Dele Giwa, Kudirat Abiola... and of course the arrests (228).

Couched in these works of historicity is the dialectical enlightenment of the masses on the urgency involved in changing the status quo in their favour. They are confronted with the reality that the bourgeois class is an enemy that must be "sacked" if the walls that prevent them from fulfilling their destinies must be destroyed. Therefore, we observe a rather subtle relationship

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between the dialectics of the writers and their narratives. It is that which is reproduced by their conscious awareness of reality.

Clearly, the subtle re-capturing of incidents and events of the 1980s and the early 1990s perpetrated by two military Generals – Babangida and Abacha – is a veritable recipe for the upturning of the “blocks”. For example, whereas Adichie attacks our inflammable mien through a re-visit of a chequered past, Habila recreates, in a more obtrusive form the days of the “Jackal”. The end-result is to assault the sensibilities in order to elicit reaction(s).

When writers explore ‘historicism’ as a device, they invariably attempt to acknowledge that whatever circumstance a people find themselves at the moment is a function of a muddled past. This becomes only possible by benefit of history championed by the artful ‘chroniclers’ Adichie and Habila. For example, in a recent engagement at the pit Theatre of the Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), where the university authorities had invited her to read her works, *Purple Hibiscus and Half of a yellow Sun*, Adichie confirm that historicism is the thrust of her writings. She elaborated:

...For me, it is a historical issue and what has happened in the life of the Nigerian nation. We cannot run away from it, whether now or in the future. We... have to talk about... what has already taken place in the history of Nigeria... is there any nation in the world that doesn't discuss or refuses to refer to her past? (*The Nation*, 20).

Both *Purple Hibiscus* and *Waiting for an Angel* are a reminder of where Nigeria was some years ago; a distasteful experience that is impinging on the present, and which may largely define the future. And to further underscore the pivotal role which history plays in the life of any community, Ime Ikiddeh, 2005 contends, with a note of finality that, “The world moves on the current of history... And that is why the past matter...” (133). Ngugi was also canonizing history when he opined:

‘For what has been intimately bound up with might be: our vision of the future, of diverse possibilities of life and human potential has roots in our experience of the past’ (13).

### **(B) Language**

In *Purple Hibiscus* and *Waiting for an Angel*, the writers’ adroit use of language becomes the veritable tonic that echoes their subject-matter. Since language serves as a medium for the articulation of a writer’s thought-pattern, it becomes evident that the reason some works of art are considered obscure and ambiguous while others have their messages easily decoded, lies in the way and manner writers choose to utilize language. Perhaps, it is for this reason that Yvonne Atkinson, in her, “Language that Bears Witness”, supposes that:

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Language is more than a form of communication; it reveals the concepts that shape the significant and legacy beyond the world... language defines... styles and method of looking at life and the individual's place...(2)

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie poignantly depicts the picture of a society in 'visible affliction'. The subtlety of this narrative, according to Nnolim, is rendered "in a language that is devoid of stylistic mystification..." (58). The language of the writer is expressive of feelings of repression, frustration, protest as well as subdued emotions. For instance, Kambili compares the wall of difference that exists between her house and Auntie Ifeoma's thus:

What was Auntie Ifeoma talking about with her friend? I asked. I know I would not have asked before. I would have wondered about it, but I would not have asked (223).

Apart from occasional use of loan words from the Igbo vocabulary, Adichie targets the proletariat in the society, thereby making her narrative social art. Social art, says Nnolim is:

Art that contemplates its society, that is propagandist in the main, with tendency to proletarian concerns, and whose basic theme is the organizing of the death of the indigenous oppressor... (58).

Granted that Habila's language is generally elevated (steeped in poetic images and complex structure), the message is as obtrusive as it is poignant. This is more so that the historical facts that abound in the novel, *Waiting for an Angel*, tend to foreshadow the intent and purpose of the writer. Habila's diction is typical of a journalist-trained literary writer. That accounts for why he employs the use of synonymous words as well as profuse use of idiomatic and figurative expressions. For instance, he personifies 'Liberty' when he says: "And Liberty said softly, 'come. It is time to go' (33).

**(C) Revolutionary Optimism**

A cursory study of *Purple Hibiscus* and *Waiting for an Angel* would suggest the writer's demonstration that evil thrives and is sustained in society when 'collective action' takes refuge in complacency and resignation. By way of testing the force of unity of purpose against suppression and oppression in the society, we witness the uncommon resilience of the oppressed to take their collective destinies in their own hands. This foreshadows 'oppression' as the focal point of the works. In *Purple Hibiscus* for instance, there appears a bi-polar conflict of interest arising from a proclivity for oppression by a few ogres on the one side and an orchestrated resistance by the oppressed on the other. Eugene's attempt to rule his household with 'fist' (in violation of their natural rights) is studiously checked by the collaborative

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effort of Mama, Jaja and Kambili. At the level of society, Aunty Ifeoma resists the arbitrariness of foisting a Sole Administrator on the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, by identifying with the ideal of students' demonstration. She calls the bluff by 'going away' to the United States for better conditions of service and welfare package. Papa Nnukwu sticks faithfully to its traditional religious worship, his son's neglect of his (Papa Nnukwu's welfare as well as the resultant alienation notwithstanding. Even Ade Coker (the editor of *The Standard* rebuffs all entreaties against his reporting the gruesome murder of Nwankiti Ogechi.

With an unwavering fidelity to his thematic pre-occupation, Habila re-enacts events which signpost the invitation to revolution. Women demonstrate over the scarcity of petroleum products as, "The set to lacking and sawing, pushing and pulling at it, and soon the billboard was on the ground" (114). Joshua leads the demonstration by the oppressed living in "Poverty Street". Students demonstrate against the insincerity of commitment to the transition time-table by the IBB military regime. In expressing their disgust, the students fume:

Yesterday they changed the transition date again. IBB is deceiving us, he has no intention of leaving. It is our duty to push him out. We have decided to boycott lectures... until IBB and his Khaki-boys get out of the presidential villa...(50).

Interestingly, therefore, the resistance demonstrated by the oppressed class is in itself a 'revolutionary process of growth'. By their subtle works, Adichie and Habila imply that, a new socio-economic and political order is established through collective effort. That order can only be achieved when the "downtrodden" express dissatisfaction with reality by interrogating their lot and fighting for their rights in their bid to usher in a sane society. This is where Adichie and Habila succeed: by using literature in awakening the consciousness of the oppressed.

#### **(D) Characterization**

In a deliberate effort aimed at foregrounding the depth of oppression caused the people by the oppressor-class, the writers deliberately excite healthy dialogue in their narratives, using multiple characterizations to hasten the realization of the subject-matter. Expectedly, the interaction of the various characters, more than anything, determines the message in the novels. It becomes common knowledge that characterization is an important artistic asset which is domiciled in the novels, *Purple Hibiscus* and *Waiting for an Angel*, respectively.

The multiplicity of characters is employed by Adichie and Habila to articulate the dimension of oppression in the society, and how each of the personalities feels the same pinch of the aberration. It is against this

background that characters in the novels are seen united in purpose. This development provides a platform for the unceasing struggle by the oppressed to oust the oppressors, whatever means possible. Perhaps, that is the reason why the 'subject-matter' of any conversation tilts towards the same thing – expression of disgust about the strife and a way out of it.

Even though Kambili and Lomba are both protagonists-narrators in *Purple Hibiscus* and *Waiting for an Angel* respectively, constant dialogue is initiated to articulate the rot and decay in society. The characters in the novels are well-developed through the instrumentality of dialogue. This is a repudiation of the tainted charges made by Eurocentric critics against the African novel. Kambili, for instance, grows from naivety to maturity. She cannot express her feelings as well as ask questions on puzzling issues, as we observe in this content:

What was Auntie Ifeoma talking about with her friends? I asked. I knew I would not have asked before. I would have wondered about it, but I would not have asked (223).

Even Lomba – the protagonist-narrator in *Waiting for an Angel* responds adequately to the dynamic of time. On his arrest and subsequent detention (as a prisoner of conscience), he does not find any difficulty in adjusting and acclimatizing to the prison situation. Lomba informs thus:

I express myself. I let my mind soar above these walls to bring back distant, exotic bricks with which I seek to build a more endurable cell within this cell(3).

The responsible dialogue that dominates the two novels as seen among Kambili, Jaja, auntie Ifeoma, Amaka, Papa Nnukwu, Father Amadi, Mama etc. in *Purple Hibiscus* and Lomba, Bola, James Fiki, Joshua, Gladys, Emeka, etc. in *Waiting for an Angel*, points to the place of character and characterization in bringing to the fore the message and meaning in a text.

In spite of the fact that both novels are sociological in their narratives, it is clear that while in *Purple Hibiscus*, the 'collective struggle' to oust the domestic oppressor (Eugene) by his wife and children yielded dividend with the death of Eugene – an act that paves the way for the '*Purple Hibiscus*' to bloom, the same cannot be said of *Waiting for an Angel*, where organizers of 'public demonstrations' against the reign of terror in the country are arrested, tortured and incarcerated. Lomba, the journalist and protagonist-narrator is thrown 'behind the bars' for during to cover one of such demonstrations. He is put in preventive detention and ends up being a prisoner of conscience. Even though Nigeria later 'celebrated' the shameful demist of General Sani Abacha, the writer does not state it in explicit terms thereby leaving readers in suspense. Rather, he avails us of the privilege information in the

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‘Afterword’ (epilogues), which strictly speaking represents additional information provided to facilitate the understanding of the main text.

Another noticeable difference between the two novels is evidence in the narrative techniques. While Adichie chooses the ‘ab initio res’ (the novel begins from the beginning, develops through crisis, leading to the resolution/denouement), Helon Habila explores the ‘in medias res’ technique, as seen in the narration. Above all, whereas, Adichie uses the first *person point of view*. Habila uses both the first person and the omniscient point of view.

### CONCLUSION

This paper takes a comparative study of Chimamanda Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* and Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel* against the background of examining the discourse within the framework of socialist vision/social art, which Ikechi Adinu, in his “Revolutionary Aesthetics in Osofisan’s Morountodun..” says, “demonstrates the prevalent social reality of the dialectical contradictions in the socio-political and economic set-up in Nigeria” (4). Adichie and Habila, through their consummate abilities to recreate history, have successfully mirrored a Nigerian society in somewhat ‘visible afflictions’, occasioned by the military regimes of Generals Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida (1985-1993) and Sani Abacha (1993-1998); a development that changed the course of history and retarded an enduring march to greatness.

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