

**Of history and imaginative re-creations in Helon Habila's
*Waiting for an angel***

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Abstract

*Fiction has been the means through which the writer makes his/her experiences known. The writer is a lens through which the past is recovered or reconfigured and, as well, offers the means to its understanding. It represents an elucidation of social reality. It is also in this sense that literature is seen as a national biography, recounting the social conditions of certain periods in a nation's history. It is within the above milieu that the research highlights the gap, nature, and extent to which the novelist Helon Habila through characters, styles, plots, settings, and events, portrays the interaction of fiction and history in *Waiting for an Angel* (2004). The research also provides the understanding and interpretation of the selected work in its use of historical facts and imaginative re-creations. The study also investigates the different scopes of history prevalent in the selected novel as regards its political, cultural, economic, religious, social, and aesthetic patterns. New Historicism is the theoretical framework majorly used as it advocates the reading of a literary text and having in view its era. The implication is that each text is said to assume proper function when set side-by-side with the history it textualizes, that is history codified. Methodologically, this study is Content Analysis based. Some critical works on the writings of the novelists by other critics were used as secondary sources. It*

was discovered that some critics disagree with the interplay of fiction and history, but this work reveals the various dimensions this interplay can be achieved and how the selected writer has re-creatively blended fiction with historical facts.

Keywords: *Literature, Fiction, History, Imagination, African*

Introduction

In African Literature, African writers generally appear to be more interested in bringing out varying degrees of human realities by making frequent allusions to their people's customs and traditions. They record communal activities such as festivals, ceremonies, ritual practices, beliefs, and occupations. Ernest Emenyonu believes that "In a world like ours, the culture and life-ways of different countries must be given full airing so that national sentiments could be built upon the foundation of understanding" (46).

The literature of a particular community can be defined as the total of all works of imagination either in oral or written form, in prose or in verse which has helped to reflect and project the life and culture of that community in the areas of narrative fiction, drama, and poetry. Literature draws on human experiences and tries to reflect the same and communicate them back to humanity in an ordered and artistic form. This is because the human condition is the reality on which literary artists depend for their writings. Kolawole Ogungbesan is of the view that "A writer is a member of society and his sensibility around him. These issues form a part of the substance of life within which his instinct as a writer must struggle" (5-6).

Fiction, one of the genres of literature, is a product of the imagination of its writer, though it may be based on a true story

or situation. It encompasses an act of creative invention so that reality is not typically assumed or affected. Science fiction, fan fiction, flash fiction, mysteries, romance, thriller, fantasy, and crime fiction are all genres of fiction in the form of prose, especially short stories and novels. In fiction, the author invents the story and makes up the characters, the plot, the dialogue, and the setting. A fictional work does not claim to tell a true story, instead, it immerses the reader in the experience that he/she may never have in real life, and introduces him/her to various types of people one may never visit in any other way and takes him/her to places he/she may have never been to. Fiction can inspire us, intrigue us, scare us, and engage us with new ideas. It can help us see ourselves and our world in new and interesting ways. Fiction is free to depict events that never occurred. The writer creates an imaginary story and is free to deviate from reality. The truth that applies to history may or may not apply to fiction.

Historicity is an essential part of history, which helps us to know about the past through historical accounts of myths, legends, and tales of the people, which have proven over the years to be the bag of knowledge, information, and fertile sources of material for novelists. This brings us fully to the idea of historicity, which is the historical actuality of persons and events, meaning the quality of being part of history as opposed to being historical myths, legends, or fiction. Historicity focuses on the true value of knowledge of the past and, as well, is seen as the characteristic of having been in history.

Some critics like David Harvey, Martin Heidegger, Oswald Spengler, M. Bergson, and Alfred North Whitehead argued that historicity is an aspect of all-natural events that take place in space and time. Others like Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Reinhart Koselleck, David Hume, and R. G Collingwood argue it

as an attribute reserved for certain human circumstances, in agreement with the practice of historiography. Herbert Marcuse explains historicity as that which “defines history and thus distinguishes it from ‘nature’ or the ‘economy’ and signifies the meaning we intend when we say of something that is ‘historical’” (22). M.A.R Habib also contributes to the idea of historicity when he states, “Historicism has been characterized by several features. Most fundamentally, there is an insistence that all systems of thought, all phenomena, all institutions, all works of art, and all literary texts must be situated within a historical perspective” (265).

Various periods in world history have been associated with some dominant literary trends; these literary trends do not exist in a vacuum. They are a result of life experiences. These experiences are portrayed literarily as artistic truth and historical truth. An artistic truth applies to every situation of life imagined, while historical truth appeals to a specific situation of life that is factual. It is a known fact that most experiences in history account for some major literary trends. To this end, most of the literary outputs have been received to be worthy examples of novelists’ hybrid of fiction and history. This is hinged on the fact that there have been bids to articulate social and historical reality and, as such, harness the intricate recourses of fiction and history as socio-historical aesthetic imperatives in the human discourse.

Various periods in world history, also, have been associated with some literary trends which have effectively discussed or related humanity to the ideas of fiction and history. According to Terry Eagleton, “Literature draws strength from actual life, it deals with the joys, sorrows, poverty, plenty and above all, death to which man is subjected and which is man’s enemy” (33). To this effect, this research work is based on the accounts of

historical spheres in which the selected writer has drawn his sources from the Nigerian military autocracies of the 90s.

Furthermore, the concept of fiction as historical in nature or deriving value from historical reality is the result of the theory of its origin because a good fiction writer or novelist should possess some sense of history as espoused by T.S Elliot. Here, fiction and historicity are interlinked discourses and what they have in common is the fact that they are based on knowledge concerning the human mind. Their method of approach is the specific understanding of human valuations, of the way people react to the challenges of their natural, social, political, and economic environment. Therefore, historicity has traditionally been seen as a real past or factual account, while the subject of fiction is considered fictional. Patrick Brady comments:

History... refers to a “real” past, a belief or set of beliefs about that past, and purports to report the “truth” about that “real” past. The historical novel, on the other hand, like the autobiographical novel, refers to a “real” past but neither aims nor claims to reproduce it with scrupulous accuracy. (17-18)

Fiction and historicity are more alike discourses as they communicate with humanity because they tend to evaluate and analyze how humanity reacts to the events in their environment or the role they play in such events. This brings to mind the idea of the faction which is the blend of fiction and facts as used by any creative writer. Faction, in short, as regards this research embraces historicity. This is because history is also a fact. Michiko Kakutani of the New York Times, in a review called

Faction, “an unfortunate genre of writing that evades the responsibilities of both history and fiction. While it trades on the news value of a story, it obeys none of the rules of journalism; while it exploits the liberties of fiction, it demands the little exercise of the imagination” (1).

Thus, the researcher in this study analyzes Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel*, and examines how his work is simultaneously understood through cultural and historical contexts; how it is influenced by historical facts of the time in which it was produced, as well as the social sphere in which it moved, the books and theories that may have influenced it, especially the author’s country’s recent or pre-independence history.

Statement of the problem

A historian and a fiction writer create essentially the same thing: a narrative. Part of the difference seems to lie in their motivation, their intent, and their ultimate goal. A historian will try to approach history and his work with at least an objective of adhering to the truth, with no injection of fiction or creativity as far as this is possible. A fiction writer may have the same goal. But in this case, the possible motivations are endless and may be very different from the true objective a historical writer has. In modern African literature, the interplay of fiction and history has been complementary as well as problematic. Its problematic dimension is that some critics disagree with the blend of these categories (fiction and history); hence, the problem of this study is the gap and interactive possibilities and dimensions between fiction and historical facts as well as their interaction, interpretation, and understanding in *Waiting for an Angel*. And analyzing how the selected novel as regards events, characters,

contexts and styles, settings and techniques reflect historical facts and project literature shows how the novelist employs literary aesthetics and elements to clothe history realistically, authentically yet imaginatively.

Theoretical framework

For this study, the theory of New Historicism majorly framed the study. The New Historicism is a term coined by Stephen Greenblatt in 1982 when he collected some essays and then, “out of a kind of desperation to get the introduction done, he wrote that the essays represented something he called a ‘new historicism’, which became popular in the 1980s, reacting against both the formalist view of the related texts to the economic infrastructure. (Habib, 266)

As a literary theory, New Historicism identifies the authenticated events, characters, people, and patterns in a situated context. Habib explains further,

New historicism saw the literary text as a kind of discourse situated within a complex of cultural discourses—religious, political, economic, aesthetic—which both shaped it and in their turn, were shaped by it. Perhaps what was new about the procedure was its insistence, drawn from Michel Foucault and poststructuralism that "history" itself is a text, an interpretation, and there is no single history. (266)

It also rejects any notion of historical progress or teleology and breaks away from any literary historiography based on the study of genres and figures. In the same way, the “culture” in which

New Historicism situates literary texts is itself regarded as a textual construct. Hence, New Historicism refuses to accord any kind of unity or homogeneity to history or culture, viewing both as harbouring networks of contradictory, competing, and un-reconciled forces and interests.

New Historicism views literature as one discourse among many cultural discourses, insisting on engaging with this entire complex in a localized manner, refusing to engage in categorical generalizations or commit to any definite political stance. It looks at literature in a wider historical context, examining both how the writer's times affected the work and how the work reflects the writer's times, in turn recognizing that current cultural contexts colour the critic's conclusions. This advocates the reading of a literary text in its era. The implication is that each text is said to assume proper function when set side-by-side with the history it textualizes, history having been codified. No privileging of text over the history it textualizes or vice versa. No back-dropping. This equal weighting of literary and non-literary texts to reveal the truth is what Louis Adrian Montrose terms "the historicity of texts and textuality of history" (qtd. In Abrams 219). It means that history is taken to be "textualized". Therefore, New Historicists consider "historical" accounts as equally interpretable as literary texts, since both are seen as "expressions of the same historical moment" (Barry 173).

As a literary theory, New Historicism owes its impetus to the work of Foucault. As Habib puts it, "Foucault based his approach both on his theory of the limit of collective cultural knowledge and on his technique of examining a broad array of documents to understand the episteme of a particular time" (267).

Discussion

There is every indication that the event of the mid '80s through the '90s in Nigeria is what Helon Habila captures in his novel *Waiting for an Angel*. His novel reveals the pain of one whose country has been affected badly by the ills in his society. His aim is apparent as he fuses fiction and historical facts to expose corruption, despotism, and oppressive governance during that time. In this novel, he narrates the catastrophe which plagued the country then. The marriage of fiction with history which is obvious in *Waiting for an Angel* makes it unique.

The unification of fiction and historical facts makes it easy for anyone to understand the state of society under the military regime. Eustace Palmer in the bid to identify the mode or technique or means employed by a writer in telling his message in his work 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 how he says it (4)."

Habila presents, in a series of accounts, the real-life events in the Nigeria of '90s when General Muhammadu Buhari's overthrow of the civilian government in 1983 was announced by Brigadier Sani Abacha, an event that foreshadowed the next two coups, for when General Ibrahim Babangida overthrew the Buhari regime in 1985, and it was again Sani Abacha who announced the coup. Babangida's regime sunk the country further into corruption and poverty. By the early 1990s, against a background of Union strikes, students' demonstrations, and uprisings in the oil-producing Niger Delta, Babangida bowed to pressure and held elections. On June 12, 1993, after what was widely considered one of the most orderly elections thus far held in Nigeria's history, Babangida annulled the election results before the candidate M.K.O Abiola's victory could be announced.

In August 1993 after general outrage from the citizens of Nigeria and the international community, Babangida reluctantly handed over to Ernest Shonekan, a civilian he had appointed to head the “interim” government, set in place to eventually transition to an elected government. Eghosa Osaghe explains that Shonekan was left with a “very hostile environment – continued strikes, demonstrations, lack of legitimacy and fears of war” (262). He was also left with angry president-elect Abiola, who continued to insist upon his legitimate claim to the presidency. Nigeria was an example of what Tejumola Olaniyan calls “the post-colonial incredible” (2).

In November 1993 Abacha again announced a military coup. This time it was himself that he announced as the head of state. He was then identified with acts of brutality before the world: most infamously was the hanging of the famous activist and writer Ken Saro-Wiwa, along with eight other Niger Delta activists on trumped-up murder charges. When Abacha died, having suffered a heart attack while in bed..., new hope sprang upon Nigeria (Kunle and Daniel, 1). In the years that followed, Helon Habila self-published his “collection of organically related short stories”, *Prison stories*. In 2002, the work was published as a novel, *Waiting for an Angel* by Norton Publishers.

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 the hero of the story and his interactions with other characters, 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 and other historical facts. In the novel, the character James, the owner of *Dial*, a publishing company, prints a front page with the headline that screams

“Abacha: the Stolen Billions”, the publication gets his office destroyed by arson and an arrest warrant put out for him (201). Habila’s major aim is to fuse historical facts with fiction, by using his creativity and perspectives, to expose his perception of Nigeria’s historical background during the mid-80s and 90s.

As stated, *Waiting for an Angel* is set around the series of events that ushered in the years of terror during the time General Sani Abacha ruled Nigeria. The mood Habila depicts in the novel is one of despair and terror. It is within this “paranoid context of persecuted print” that Habila situates his articulation of the African writer’s social mandate (Wright 73). The author summarizes the corruption in the country from Lomba’s perspective:

Here in prison loss of self is often expressed as anger. Anger is the baffled prisoner’s attempt to re-crystallize his slowly dissolving self. The anger creeps up on you like twilight edging on the day. It builds in you silently until one day it explodes in violence, surprising you. I saw it happen in my first month in prison. A prisoner had come out of a bath-stall and there was the warder before him, monitoring the morning ablutions. Suddenly the prisoner leaped on him, pulling him by the neck to the grounds, grinding him into the black slimy water that ran in the gutter from the toilets. He pummeled the surprised face repeatedly until other warders came and dragged him

away. They beat him to pulp before throwing him into solitary. (Habila, 3-4)

The novel presents, in a series of various characters' accounts, the sufferings, and dehumanization experienced during the military regime. Chapters in the fiction are titled with the names of the characters. These characters show the extremity of the bad government, especially how average Nigerians suffered a disintegration of humanness resulting from the struggle to survive the suppression of the government. Ngozi Chuma-Udeh, in her view, says it is what one might term a "unity in diversified plots" of the real-life situations in the Nigeria of the 90s (361). The captioning of chapters with the names of characters is a narrative structure used to re-enforce the prevailing brutal nature of the government. Each character reveals the intricacies of that period when the rulers of the country became hideous monsters and vampires seeking to devour any form of opposition. The government became an unfathomable, inaccessible enigma offering nothing but pain and sorrow to the masses.

Lomba is the main character of the novel whose life is explored from many different angles throughout the multi-voiced narration. He is detained in prison simply because he is a journalist who writes against the bad government. The government erects more prisons all around the country; innocent citizens are captured as political detainees without trial, a strategy to stop them from challenging the government. Thus the Prison Superintendent tells Lomba: "I read. All. I read your file again. Also. You are a journalist. This is your second year. Here, awaiting trial for organizing violence. Demonstration against. Anti-government

demonstration against the military legal government” (Habila, 14).

Lomba tries to defend himself. He replies: “I did not organize a demonstration. I went there as a reporter” (Habila, 15). The Superintendent doesn’t believe him, “That is not my business. The truth will come out at your trial!” Lomba Continues, “But when will that be? I have been forgotten. I am not allowed a lawyer, or visitors. I have been awaiting trial for two years now...” (Habila, 15)

The Superintendent, who knows how corrupt the government is, tries to gratify Lomba when he says, “Do you complain? Look twenty years I have worked in prisons all over this country. Nigeria... sometimes it is better this way. How can you win a case against government? Wait. Hope.” (Habila, 15)

Now he lowered his voice, like a conspirator: “Maybe there, there’ll be another coup, eh? Maybe the leader will collapse and die. He is mortal; after all, maybe a civilian government will come. Then, there will be amnesty for all political prisoners. Amnesty ... (Habila, 15)

The conversations between Lomba and the Prison’s Superintendent show that the confinement of innocent people like Lomba does not only afflict those who are put behind bars; the Superintendent is as much a prisoner of his hopes and fears as any of the captives he presides over. As Lomba’s imprisonment is synonymous with the people’s loss of voice: it elaborates, completely, how impotent the people and their voice are in the face of the extreme victimization by the government. The extent of the government’s suppression brings to our mind the horror of the period when the masses were denied a voice, as the leaders of the country were in

confrontation with integrity and truthfulness. The journalists and the writers were the most wanted quarryies. They were the most dreaded enemies of the government. They were systematically hunted down like rats and minced into pliable conditions.

Chuma-Udeh, in the line revealing the people's loss of voice in the novel, says,

The censorship of printed works was just as absolute. The bowdlerization gave no space for one to utter or pen down a word, be it of dissonance or harmony on the socio-political conditions in the country. The government aimed at quelling any discordant voice with every available force. At the slightest tone of dissension of opinion, a citizen was pounced on by rabid fiery-eyed 'law enforcement' workers. Once in the government net, they were placed in conditions where their squirms and squeaks resounded into nothingness-top-security prisons. Habila's novel related, therefore, a period in the history of the nation when even the slightest hint of opposition meant imprisonment and death. Like a pastime, the military government whose leader was supposedly, one of Nigeria's most recent military despots, wiped out any hint of dissent and every suspicion of egalitarian philosophy from many of the country's intellectuals. (363)

The conversations between Lomba and the Prison Superintendent also show that the only way by which anti-government writers are freed is by amnesty which can only be granted if there is another coup. Through Janice, the girlfriend of the Prison Superintendent, Lomba's fate and helplessness, which also extends to all the anti-government writers and journalists, is made known:

...and you know that he is never going to be tried. He would be kept here forever, forgotten". Her voice became sharp and indignant.... How can you be so unfeeling? Put yourself in his shoes. Two years away from friends, from family, without the power to do anything you wish to do. (Habila, 30)

The fate and the extent of hopelessness are also made known when Lomba, himself, tells Janice,

...there was a little to be done for a political detainee especially since about a week after that meeting, a coup was attempted against the military leader, General Sani Abacha, by some officers close to him. There was an immediate crackdown on all pro-democracy, then prisons all over the country swelled with political detainees... (Habila, 31-32)

Mary Whipple, in explaining Habila's sense of history says that the author "shows us the effects of the dictatorial government on the ordinary people" (1). The people are helpless, but they are

not ignorant of their ruthless leaders. Whipple further argues that “Habila’s novel is a powerful defense of freedom of the press and a celebration of the lives of those courageous writers who have refused to be silenced even when faced with death” (1). Whipple’s position is that Habila’s novel presents those people who resisted the military dictatorship.

In trying to also explain the historical sense of *Waiting for an Angel*, Niyi Akingbe asserts that the novel,

Underscores the reign of terror orchestrated by successive military administrations in Nigeria especially the military regimes of Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha. The novel is a documentation of the atrocities of the military in all facets of Nigerian life between 1990 – 1998. The narrative structure, victimization, and brutality in the novel are presented from the viewpoint of Lomba who serves as the novel’s central character. (27)

In the same vein, Chielozona Eze states that the novel portrays lawlessness and insecurity in the country and that the unwritten but very feasible code of conduct was the immeasurable human rights abuses that,

the whole globe cried out against. Life in the whole country was like one whole compact form of the prison yard. The prisons were a miniature representative of life in the entire nation. Just like inmates in any of the numerous jails in the country, the masses were helplessly weighed down by

stringent autocratic laws. Every day survived and became a victory against the junta. Impotent anger gnawed at every soul in the country like a devouring cancer on the human membrane. (362)

He comments further:

Lomba, the chief character was a core idealist and his views of the government were as horrific as that of every other of the silenced voices in all the rooks and crannies of Nigeria. His cohabitants of Morgan Street or Poverty Street represented the entire masses denied a voice and franchise. He took his job of covering Dial newspaper as the only means of speaking for his people... he felt greatly responsible for the fate of his neighbours and appoints to himself the onerous job of speaking for them no matter how feeble a voice. He watched helplessly as his close associates are crippled and mangled by the authoritarian regime. He became conscious of the fact that he must take action, no matter how ineffective to maintain his battered soul. His decision to take part in a demonstration with his neighbours was a result of this form of belief that he could speak up for them. His arrest and imprisonment, therefore, signified the

helplessness of the masses in the face of absolute rulers. (366)

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 (PENGASSAN) strike of 1994, and the various June 12th demonstrations across the country, also reflect in the novel. Closely linked to this, is the juxtaposing of true life events in the novel that have a resemblance to their characters and institutions. Such events include the expulsion of Nigeria from the Commonwealth (Habila, 192), the assassination of Dele Giwa (Habila, 196-197), the pro-democracy group, NADECO, and the eventual assassination of Kudirat Abiola (Habila, 210). These were all hallmark events of the era. And Habila's inventiveness to harmonize historicity with fiction without undermining his message and technique marks *Waiting for an Angel* as a lens through which one can view the period. This technique is commended by Akingbe:

As a work of fiction, the novel makes it possible to identify with Nigeria's real world, the people and the actual events. This identification with real-life situations is one generic characteristic of the fiction that distinguishes it from other narrative forms which are considered fictional. (31)

The sufferings of the nation under the indirect and direct forms of oppression are metaphorically re-enacted through the life of the writer, Lomba. Lomba becomes a synecdoche for the populace as a whole, modeling the move from lethargy and disillusion to psychological resistance to environmental

instabilities. These can be seen in the streets plagued by poverty, rot, and filth. The picture of “Poverty Street” is, “one of the many descript disease-ridden quarters that dotted the city of Lagos like ringworm on a beggar’s body” (Habila, 120). “Poverty Street”, in the novel, is a metaphor for the state of Nigeria where all sorts of crimes, corruption, decay, and squalor can be seen. In “Poverty Street” we have roads such as Egunje Road. “Egunje” is a Yoruba word for a bribe, and “Olokun Road” is the shabbiest and the poorest of all the quarters in “Poverty Street” (Habila, 121). Next to Olokun Road is the University Road. The University Road is the flux point for all vices on the street: there are hotels for se and alcohol and there are alleys for marijuana and cocaine. The sex workers were mostly young university girls (Habila, 121). Habila’s portrayal of University Road is an attempt to expose the government’s failure in developing academia. This also affects the youth who instead of becoming the leaders of tomorrow, as expected and presumed, turn to sex workers, alcoholism, daydreaming, and detachment. Even the teachers expected to direct the youths are hopeless; a good example is the English teacher, Joshua Amosu, who spends every day of his life in Poverty Street doing nothing.

Despite the conditions of the people, as seen in the streets, the military makes use of maximum force and torture to oppress them which, most times, leads to death. This can be seen in the case of Lomba; he narrates his ordeals while in prison, “All I felt was the crushing blow on the back of my neck. My face struck the door bars. I fell before the superintendent’s boots ...” (Habila, 9).

Habila identifies the military as an unjust authority whose language is that of oppression. “His gun is unslung, the barrel points casually in my direction” (Habila, 49). The soldiers barked

at him “Get out” (Waiting, 49), in his attempt to run, another shouts: “Stop or I shoot!” (Habila, 49). Habila is trying to show the senselessness of the military. In another instance, he says through Lomba: “Can’t you see what’s happening? The military has turned the country into one huge barracks, into a prison. Every street out there is crawling with them; the people locked their doors, scared to come out. They play with us as if we are puppets” (Habila, 50).

The country’s economy also has become very bad, there is fuel scarcity in a nation that produces and exports crude oil but there is none for local consumption. James notifies Lomba about it when he is interviewing him. He says:

Look out there, see the long queue of cars waiting for fuel some of them have been there for days.... And we are major producers of oil.... This is just an instance if you care to look, you will find more: ethnicity, religion, and poverty. One General goes, another one comes, but the people remain stuck in the same vicious groove. Nothing ever changes for them except the particular details of their wretchedness... (Habila, 108)

Lomba’s inability to complete his novel tells of the disorder and chaos in the society he lives in and in the consciousness of the masses due to the military government’s misuse of power:

For the past two years, I had been locked in this room, in this tenement house trying to write a novel. I looked at the papers spilling out of a thick folder on my table. The words

and sentences joined end to end, looked ominously like chains, binding me forever to this table. I felt a deep, almost fanatical loathing for them. Two years, and still no single sentence made sense to me. Standing by the window, staring at the manuscript, I felt with emphatic clarity that if I sat down picked up my pen, and added a sentence more to this jumbled mass, I'd die. The uncompleted novel would grow hands of Iron and strangle me to death. (Habila, 82)

The Prison Superintendent even confirms this, when he says “Twenty Years! That is how long I have been dealing with miserable bastards like you. Let this be an example to all of you” (Waiting, 9). These feral actions often result in loss of self. Lomba confirms: “Now I realized that I had no self. That self had flown away the day the chains touched my hands” (Waiting, 23). This loss of self is caused by the long years of incarceration. In the case of Bola whose family has been crushed by a military truck, the loss of self takes the form of dementia. Bola’s psyche is injured, his dream is shattered by the military, and hope is lost. In his demented state, Bola shouts “The military has failed us! I say down with Kakistocracy! Down with meritocracy! Down with Kleptocracy” (Habila, 168).

The suffering experienced by the people in the country heightened as the military regime seems not to repent. Food and resources become scarce. Schools are shut down. All the other characters like Lomba live in a world of fear and terror. The novel shows helpless characters being beaten and silenced by the military government. Most of the characters take recourse to marijuana and alcohol and live in their dream-like world where

things are possible for them. An example is the character, Brother, who dreams of his escape from the poverty evident in society,

I go throw send-off party. My send-off from a life of poverty. I go repaint every house for his street. I go hire labourers to sweep everywhere till everything de shine like glass. All of us go wear asoebi, fine lace, and Italian. The military Government and the local government's sole administrator – all go come here.... I go pay Teacher Joshua to write my speech for good colo English, no be dis kin yeye English wey dem de teach children for school now. We go eat and dance and smoke fine imported Igbo from Jamaica, the type Bob Marley used to smoke. Then finally I go stand for TV people dem for final last handshake with poverty. “Oga Poverty”, I go say, “we don finally reach the end of the road. We don dey together since I was born, but now time don come way you and me must part. Bye bye. Goodnight. Ka chi foo, Odaro, Sai gobe. (Habila, 127-128)

This gives us a glimpse of how the characters live unfulfilled lives and how their dreams and visions are disrupted by the suppressive government. Also, Nigeria under military rule is x-rayed by Habila as he presents hapless characters who in the course of life and for no fault of theirs are condemned to a life of

penury as victims of circumstance under a government of absolute power and corruption. One of the characters, Joshua tells his Student, Kela that people become dreamers when they are not satisfied with their reality, and sometimes they don't know what is real until they begin to dream again. (Habila, 128)

There is a massive breakdown in the country's system. Infrastructures crumble and decay as poverty takes hold of the masses' lives. Not only does the decay of infrastructure breed unemployment and poverty, but the governmental neglect of public clinics and road safety also lessens overall life expectancy, a trap in which even the middle class is caught. It is on this platform that the people, out of anger and discomfort, plan a peaceful demonstration. But before the Peaceful demonstration in Morgan Street, Auntie Rachel warns Joshua that such demonstrations are never peaceful. She cautions him to be careful and to run at first sight of trouble, I can feel it in my bones (Habila, 166).

At the administrator's office, Joshua speaks out when they are not allowed an audience. He says:

...we have the right to complain to him, even though we didn't vote him into office ... And in a sense, this address is an accusation against this entire regime. We, the honest, peace-loving, and paying people of Morgan Street are tired of waiting for the government to come to us. That's why we came. We came to sell you, sir, that our clinic is down and abandoned; we came to tell you that we don't have a single borehole on Morgan Street... our schools are overcrowded and our children have to

buy their seats and tables because the ones there have not been replaced.... We don't know who Morgan was — some colonial administrator perhaps, a reminder of our hopeless, subjected state. No. that is too grand for us. We are poor, neglected people... we do not know who Morgan was, but we do know what poverty is, we have it daily.... This is our decision: that our street, presently known as Morgan Street, ceases from this moment to be known by that name. It shall from the moment be known as poverty street!
(Habila, 170-171)

The demonstration shows the helplessness of the masses and the insensitivity of the government towards them. The author uses Joshua's speech to indict the military government as a nuisance and anathema to society. The demonstration is peaceful until a squad of about fifty armed police descends on the protesters. It is thus captured aptly in the novel:

The people, scared witless, hemmed in on all sides, stupefied by choking tear gas, ran out in all directions, like quails beaten out of their hiding places, coupling and falling. Agile youths attempted to scale the high Secretariat wall but were swatted down by police batons, like mosquitoes, to fall into the open gutter, shaking and wilting with pain and terror. Those that were able to reach the top had their grasping hands out

to laces by the barbed wire on top. Others, mainly women and children attempted to run across the road, only to be knocked down by speeding vehicles. (Habila, 174)

Habila, in exposing the horrible and inhumane situation under General Sani Abacha, delves into the psychological disposition of many characters to point out the traumatic effects caused by the military government. He reflects on the actual kinds of physical and psychological oppression that took place in Nigeria. Through Bola, the students' resolutions are made known. They all become tired of the government. They organize themselves for a peaceful demonstration. The students think they are dealing with people with a conscience. When they protest, a fire attack is launched at them. Few are killed, and many are hounded. The military men invade their hostels, to loot and rape the girls. The school is closed down until further notice. The experience makes Lomba quit school. Bola gets home to learn of the accident involving his mother, father, and two sisters. Lola, the younger sister who sustained minor injuries is the only survivor. Families are destroyed; the hopes and aspirations of the characters are shattered (Habila, 166-170).

Bola, as a result of the psychological imbalance, goes to the street, shouting on top of his voice against the government. As expected, he is arrested, beaten, and dumped in a psychiatric hospital. All of the characters, in the novel, live with broken dreams, dreams that have been twisted out of their control by the environment in which they live. Likewise, their ability to act seems to have been drained away.

Habila traverses the country and tells the story from the point of view of different characters, in different locations and different situations, but all express one thing in common: the general

feeling of injustice, hunger, brutality, and terror all around them. The whole citizens shiver and moan during the military era that takes the country many years back; the era that sows the real seeds of corruption and stays long enough to fertilize them to grow. Joshua and Moa try to let Kela see from their point of view the devastating situation caused by the government:

Look, we are living under siege. Their very presence on our streets and in government houses instead of the barracks where they belong is an act of aggression. They hold us cowed with guns so that they will steal our money. This is capitalism at its most militant and aggressive. They don't have to produce any superior goods to establish a monopoly. They do it by holding guns to our heads. Let me tell you why they hanged Saro Wiwa... Where is Abiola? In Prison! They will continue subjugating us, killing all dissenters, one by one, sending them into exile, till there is no competition left to oppose them. (Habila, 158)

James, towards the end of the novel, summarizes the whole situation of the country to Lomba:

You won't find a publisher in this country because it'd be economically unwise for any publisher to waste his scarce paper to publish a novel nobody would buy... the people are too poor... too busy trying to stay out of the way of the police and the army to read. And of course, you know why

paper is scarce and expensive- because of the economic sanctions placed on our country. But forget all that. Say you found an indulgent publisher to publish your book... you'd want to enter it for a competition- and what is the most obvious competition for someone from a commonwealth country? Of course, the Commonwealth Literary Prize. But you can't do it...Because Nigeria was thrown out of the Commonwealth of Nations early this morning. It was on the BBC... (Habila, 192)

James goes into exile; Lomba is later captured and thrown into prison where we meet him when the novel opens. General Abacha dies and the suffering citizens are liberated.

Obikeze and Obi capture the scene:

However, Abacha ... suddenly died on the 8th of June 1995. His death which Nigerians refer to as the 'coup from heaven' brought so much joy to most people as his iron grip on the nation was loosened forever by the cold hands of death. This brought to an end a regime that is reputed to be the most tyrannical, brutal, vindictive overtly sectional, blood thirsty, deceitful, corrupt, and intellectually hollow in the nation's history. (218)

In the “Afterword”, Habila makes a statement that defines his total sense of history and how and why he has used it in his fiction to expose the vices inherent during the military rule:

It was a terrible time to be alive, especially if you were young, talented and ambitious, and patriotic... you cannot listen to the radio without hearing your country vilified, you cannot read any international paper without seeing how much lower your country has sunk on the list of nations with poor human rights records. Every day comes with new limitations, and new prisons ... but the funny thing is that the military first entered Nigeria politics as a messiah... (Habila, 223)

He concludes thus: “What the story tries to do is to capture the mood of those years, especially the Abacha years: the frenzy, the stubborn hope, but above all the airless prison-like atmosphere that characterized them” (Habila, 225). It is the events of the mid-80s through the 90s in Nigeria that Helon Habila captures in his novel *Waiting for an Angel*. His novel reveals the pain of one whose country has been affected badly by the ills in his society.

Conclusion

Clearly, this research has shown that history and fiction can intersect and blend in many different ways as artistically explored by the selected novel, and most importantly in the depiction of the central character(s). The author attempts to represent the daily reality of these characters, which he characterizes as interpretable from multiple perspectives. In essence, the novel is the author’s

discourse about the past, and it shows his relationship with that past. As White points out, we can only access history through language, and its discourse must be written before it can be digested (5). In this line, a historian refers to facts about the past, portrays beliefs or sets of beliefs about the past, and purports to report or outline the past by adhering to the truth. In doing so, readers do not relate to the complete actual happenings of the past which embraces the emotions, loss, happiness, joy, businesses, relationships and interactions, sex or celibacy, and all other involvements of a particular people in a given past. That is to say, a historian doesn't involve the intricate day-to-day lives of the people and their relationships with one another, which is an important aspect of any society, in what he/she has recorded. On the other hand, historical fiction merges historical reality with imagined reality, that is to say, the writer takes from the facts and re-imagines them, thereby involving the exact day-to-day lives of the people who own the past. The creative output of a writer is well appreciated when we comprehend its relevance to the other two worlds, the writer's world (his experiences) and our world (the society). This is the view this study has intricately elaborated and pointed out. In this manner, emotions, loss, happiness sex, joy, and all other attributes of human interactions and relationships are relayed to achieve a striking goal in the reader's mind and the development of a society.

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