

Helon Habila's Style and Writing Techniques in *Waiting for an Angel*

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Abstract

The event of the mid 80's and 90's in Nigeria is that Helon Habila captures in his narrative *Waiting for an Angel*. This essay attempts to untangle some of Habila's narrative techniques in relation to author's work.

Key Words: Style, Narration, Techniques

Nigerian Literature in English has witnessed an impressive expansion for more than five decades of its existence. Nigerian writers are concerned with issues that are contemporary and topical. This paper encompasses the new attitudes, desires, values, and anxieties of the contemporary Nigerian writer. The writing style of contemporary writers differs from the former generation writers. One of the finest creative writers of recent generation Helon Habila is appreciated greatly for his artistic ability.

Faction writing is an artistic practice involving the melding or interweaving of both the product of imagination and real life events and situations. Contemporary writers have popularized the trend of faction writing. In this genre, there is preponderance of real characters, factual events and in fact, the real history. In Nigeria, Kole Omotoso is considered as the pioneer of this kind of writing. The first appearance of faction as a dominant feature in contemporary Nigerian fiction is attributed to Kole Omotoso with his publication of *Just Before Dawn* in 1988. It is also found in Soyinka's *Isara* (1989) and even in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1988). Omotoso's *Just Before Dawn* is an

account of the failure of Nigeria to realise itself as a country. It goes further to ascribe the failure of Nigeria to the way the British constructed it along the North-South divide.

Habila's own experiences of being part of the history of his nation motivated him to bring out the realities in Nigeria, through his first novel, *Waiting for an Angel* (2003). In this novel, there is a strong sense of history, blended with the artistic imagination and real life events and situations. It is a literary phenomenon in which the writer raises weighty questions about the Nigerian State: questions that border on the pressure of fear, planned aggression, isolation, censorship in a dictatorial regime, the struggle for liberation and hope in despair, probably the period of Gen. Sani Abacha. It shows the harsh and unsettled atmosphere.

The novel is about a journalist, named Lomba and his gruelling encounter with Nigeria's military dictatorship in the 1990's. The first story narrated by Lomba begins on July 1997. Lomba is in prison and decides to keep a diary of events in his life. Through Lomba's diary one can get an idea of what were the happenings in Nigeria during the period of Gen. Sani Abacha. The reader is also informed about the decision of the University students to boycott lectures until Ibrahim Babaginda and his clique hand over power to the civilians after a transition to civil rule programme that spanned seven years leading to the annulment of a presidential election result won by a business mogul, Chief M. K. O. Abiola.

The last entry in Lomba's diary ends with Janice, the prison Superintendent's mistress who has pleaded with the prison Superintendent to release Lomba. Suddenly one day General Abacha is toppled and Abdulsalami, another General opens the gates of freedom for Lomba and other political prisoners. Again, this is a historical account. In fact, the story of Nigeria cannot be complete without an inclusion of General Abacha's activities in between 1993-1998. Abacha had jailed a lot of patriots, including Habila, OgagaIfowodu and Akin Adesokan for their alleged roles in the fight against the military dictatorship in Nigeria. It is this account that Habila brings to the forefront into his novel. The killing of Dele Giwa, the crusading editor of the *News Watch* magazine is also referred in the novel. Thus real events and issues of Nigerian history are part of Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*.

Waiting for an Angel catalogues the strange and traumatic experiences of Nigerians in Abacha's reign of terror between 1993 and 1998. It is a historical period when Nigeria became a pariah in the comity of nations and life became unbearably difficult for its citizens, as scores of politicians and journalists were herded into detention and those who were not lucky to survive the period were murdered by the minions of the military junta.

As a work of fiction, the novel makes it possible to identify Nigeria's real world, the people and the actual events depicted in the narrative. This identification with real life situations is one generic characteristic of fiction which distinguishes it from other narrative forms which are considered fictional. The novel chronicles in great detail Abacha's repressive regime within the framework of memory. The novel is grounded in the recollection of the disruption of social and political life in Nigeria during Abacha's military rule, and it thus features a reportorial narrative style that painstakingly portrays the minutiae of the characters' surroundings and experiences.

Helon Habila the creative writer is vehemently appreciated for his artistic ability. He is a gifted writer with a knack of compiling a good literary work by employing various styles and techniques which make the writing effective and appealing to the readers. His writing is evocative and engaging. His writing style is narrow in focus, but broader in scope. Habila masterfully illuminates the tangible and the abrupt period of humiliation by deploying several techniques in his novels. His novels are confidently crafted and absorbing, in parts totally gripping, chronicle of human aspirations, tragedies, love, friendship and perseverance of the human spirit.

The true theme of a work of art is brought out by using literary techniques. Writers, who want a change in the society, create awareness about the existing social evil and inspire people to think and find a solution. Social and ethical issues are woven in their writings, with an attempt to expose the defects and seek to provide a solution. By recording the consciousness of their time, they present the living portrait of the society with the use of literary techniques in their work. An aspect that Palmer regarding technique acknowledges is:

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. (qtd. in Anthony)

The style of a work is an important aspect in literature. It is as essential as the use of literary techniques in a work. It describes the ways that the author uses words: the author's word choice, sentence structure, figurative language, and sentence arrangement, all work together to establish mood, images, and meaning in the text. Style describes how the author describes events, objects, and ideas.

The very first novel *Waiting for an Angel* is one of the masterpieces of Helon Habila with a unique narrative style. It is a powerful narrative of different stories that come together to form one big story. In this novel, Helon's narrative is stimulating. The characters are real, true to life, who lives the day to day bustling life in Nigeria. Habila's this work is deceptively simple on the outlook, yet culminates together in the end miraculously. Together, there are seven stories which are linked together. The novel captures many themes such as: life in prison, poverty, student life and protests, incarceration of journalists, difficulties faced by writers.

Symbolism is an important aspect of a literary work. Symbolism implies an indirect or a suggestive method of communicating to the reader some idea or feeling which the writer doesn't wish to express directly to the reader. Habila has made abundant use of the symbols in the novel, *Waiting for an Angel*. Places, localities, environment and even persons stand as a symbol in the novel. It has meaning over the literal meaning.

Lomba the protagonist of the novel symbolizes a victim who stands against social and political corruption. During Lomba's college days he suffered under military atrocities. He discontinues his college because of military atrocities and he later starts his life as a journalist. As a journalist, he decides to stand against the violence prevailing in the country. He released news regarding the corrupt society and cruel rulers. He also stands as a symbol of hope in the novel. Lomba's words prove it, when he exclaims one day: "GOING BACK

HOME in the slow- traffic, I closed my eyes and contemplated my future, but after a while I sighed and placed everything in God's hands. What mattered right now was staying alive" (*Waiting for an Angel* 118). Even in prison he didn't lose hope, he fights against the brutality through writing and find solace.

Habila makes use of several different techniques in the novel *Waiting for an Angel*. By employing various literary techniques Habila highlights the experience of the people during Gen. Sani Abacha period and their expression of hope even in horrifying situations. It gives richness and colours to the work and it also gives deeper meaning and conveys the idea of the novel more clearly.

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