

**RESISTANCE IN THE TIME OF TYRANNY: THE EXAMPLE OF HELON HABILA'S
*WAITING FOR AN ANGEL***

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Abstract

This study explores the theme of resistance in Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*, a novel set against the backdrop of Nigeria's military dictatorships of the 1990s. Through its fragmented structure and layered narratives, the text depicts the struggles of individuals who confront authoritarian rule not only through overt political activism but also through subtle acts of defiance, intellectual engagement, and the pursuit of truth. The protagonist, Lomba, embodies the conflicted yet persistent spirit of resistance, employing writing and journalism as tools to challenge oppression. By analysing key characters, narrative techniques, and the historical context, the study highlights how Habila transforms personal suffering and silence into a forceful critique of tyranny. *Waiting for an Angel* emerges as both a literary and political act of resistance, demonstrating how fiction can document injustice, affirm human dignity, and inspire social transformation. In doing so, the novel aligns with broader postcolonial literary traditions that critique despotism and underscore the resilience of the human spirit under repressive regimes. The study concludes that Habila's novel not only reflects Nigeria's socio-political realities during military rule but also underscores literature's enduring role as a form of defiance against authoritarian power.

Keywords: Dictatorship, Resistance, Defiance, Suffering, Oppression.

Introduction

Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* stands as a powerful literary intervention into the harsh realities of Nigeria's repressive military regimes of the 1990s. Through the perspective of Lomba, a journalist imprisoned without trial, the novel exposes systemic oppression and widespread human rights abuses under the governments of General Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha, both notorious for suppressing free speech and political opposition (Solomon Edebor, 2013: 24–34; Ikechukwu Asika, 2011: 275–298). The text is widely acclaimed for its social commitment, demonstrating how fiction functions as a tool of resistance while illuminating the resilience of oppressed people struggling to reclaim their humanity.

While some scholars link tyranny primarily to economic upheavals, Habila emphasizes political consciousness and storytelling as essential instruments of resistance (Ali Erritouni, 2010: 144–161). His vision resonates with Niyi Osundare’s idea of the African writer as a “righter,” with *Waiting for an Angel* exemplifying the moral duty of socially conscious writers to document injustice and instigate transformation (Gabriel Olugbemi Olumide, 2013: 18).

Building on this context, the present study investigates resistance in Habila’s novel as both a literary and political construct. It analyses acts of defiance ranging from Lomba’s subversive writing under incarceration to the everyday resilience of ordinary people. Resistance against authoritarianism, often depicted in literature as a “weapon of the weak” (James C. Scott, 1985: 29), is vividly illustrated in the novel’s critique of surveillance, censorship, and brutality. As Tejumola Olaniyan (1995: 45) notes, Nigerian writers of this era employ narrative strategies that “challenge hegemonic discourses and affirm alternative histories of resistance.”

By situating *Waiting for an Angel* within this postcolonial framework, this study demonstrates how Habila’s narrative transforms individual suffering into collective defiance, presenting literature as both an act of endurance and a rallying cry for change.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs Sociological Literary Theory to analyze Helon Habila’s *Waiting For An Angel*, focusing on how literature reflects, critiques and resists social and political oppression. Sociological literary criticism as explicated by scholars like Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton, views literature not as an isolated aesthetic objet but as a cultural artifact embedded within social, political and historical contexts (Raymond Williams 1977: 12 and terry eagleton 1976: 16). This theory examines how literary texts both shape and are shaped by societal structures, ideologies and power relations.

According to Raymond Williams, literature serves as a, “form fo social practice”, embodying the conflicts, contradictions and aspiartions of its time (Raymond Williams 1997: 15). Applying this framework to *Waiting For An Angel*, the novel is interpreted as a response to the authoritarian regimes that dominated in the late 20th century.

Sociological literary criticism also draws from Marxist and postcolonial perspectives, emphasizing issues of power, class struggle and resistance. (Terry Eagleton 1976: 23; Edward Said W. 1993: 45). Helon Habila’s *Waiting For An Angel* by depicting the socio-political realities of military dictatorship and the suppression of dissent, align with this tradition, showing how systemic injustice impacts both collective and personal identities.

Thus, the theoretical lens of Sociological Literary Theory facilitates a critical examination of *Waiting For An Angel* as a literary manifestation of resistance, revealing how the author uses narrative strategies to contest oppression and articulate the yearning for political freedom.

Literature Review

Several scholars have explored the intersection of literature, resistance and authoritarianism in African contexts, providing a valuable critical foundation for this study. In his examination of Nigerian literature during periods of military dictatorship, Emeka Okonkwo (2013: 102) maintains that authors such as Helon Habila, “give voice to the silenced and document the human cost of political repression”. He asserts that Helon Habila plays a crucial role in preserving the collective memory of authoritarianism, using literature as a form of resistance that subverts dominant historical narratives.

Ernest Emenyonu (2010: 56) identifies literature as a mode of political expression, using *Waiting For An Angel* to demonstrate how fiction engages with themes of resistance, “illustrates the tension between individual agency and oppressive state power”. Ernest Emenyonu draws attention to the ways in which Helon Habila’s characters illustrate various expressions of resistance, from subdued endurance to bold confrontation, thereby deepening the exploration of resilience in African storytelling.

Jennifer Smith (2015: 79) expands the crucial context by aligning Helon Habila’s novel with the larger heritage of postcolonial African protest writing, “the literary depiction of tyranny and resistance is a crucial site for understanding the socio-political dynamics of postcolonial states. This analysis foregrounds the importance of understanding *Waiting For An Angel* within its political context, beyond its fictional dimensions.

Chinua Achebe (1975: 43) foundational analysis of literature in its social context asserts that African writers have customarily, “functioned as custodians of cultural conscience, particularly in times of political crisis”. Through its focus on incarceration, the stifling of expression and acts of rebellion, Helon Habila’s perpetuates this tradition, making it a relevant text for examining how literature resists oppression.

The use of a sociological approach to literary criticism creates a strong analytical basis for investigating how *Waiting For An Angel* confronts themes of despotism and defiance, revealing the broader socio-political impact of literature amid oppression.

Literary Resistance Under Oppression: An Examination of Helon Habila's *Waiting For An Angel*

Helon Habila's criticism of Nigerian society is relentless in his novel *Waiting For An Angel* (2002). The novel creates a gallery of tortured souls and the depressing reality of the polarities of privation and opulence in Nigeria. Despite the trouble experienced by the people in this novel and in Nigeria, Helon Habila offers encompassed creed for change. The main characters in this novel reflect the political chaos and social disintegration prevailing in Nigeria.

Waiting For An Angel is the first published novel written by Helon Habila. The novel describes the inequality, hypocrisy, betrayal of the people. Many of the events depicted in the novel have their basis in historical and social conditions. The novel is a damning indictment of the oppressive military and civilian rulers who took over the reins of leadership of Nigeria after the struggle for freedom from British rule. Tension is rife in the novel. In addition to denouncing these oppressive features, the writer shows the revolutionary ideas of the people.

Helon Habila captures the characters assuming real names, places and events to give the reader proper understanding of the novel. Helon Habila stylishly weaves his plot that makes the reader move back and forth in time.

This deeply political novel, shifting perspectives and timeline of the novel, reinforces the sense of dislocation and disorientation of Nigerians who are now at the mercy of irresponsible rulers.

Waiting For An Angel is Helon Habila's portrayal of a decaying country dominated by political power and bad governance. Helon Habila describes a country tortured by oppression, corruption, exploitation and negative politics. Helon Habila's characters are subject to exploitation: the strong and the weak are identified.

The military regime in the novel is a metaphor for the Nigerian people. Nigeria is reminiscent of a barren and bloody enclave. Helon Habila offers a range of solutions to Nigerians plight that are advancing resistance as a means of ending the cycle of bad governance in the country. Helon Habila believe Nigerians should build a new, prosperous country free of oppression.

This research shows the power of literature and the effects of writing under repression as characters like Lomba, Joshua, and James assume roles of activists charging for a better society. The novel is divided into seven interconnected narratives that show atrocious features of the military incursion into the rulership of Nigeria.

Moreso, this study captures the tyrannical regimes of Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha (27th August 1985 to 8th June 1998) described by Adeola Oguntimi (2002:60) as “the darkest periods of military misgovernance in post-independent Nigeria”. The title *Waiting For An Angel* is ironic. An Angel is a spiritual being sent by God but in the context of this novel, we notice that the Angel is an evil personified sent to destroy its prey. Therefore, the oppressed people are all waiting for an angel that will soothe the pains experienced by the people. According to Uchenna Okafor (2021:8), “.... The angel is actually a savior to a people suffering the pangs of bad rulership”.

Using resistance literature as a template to show Lomba is a victim of the dictatorial regime, his dreams of becoming a graduate and novelist is shattered by a protest march, leaving high percentage of protesters dead. Lomba takes solace in writing showing the effects of literature. Lomba's imprisonment can be likened to the countless activists jailed during the military rulership of Nigeria.

The dreams of Lomba were cut short after the protest in school and the death of Bola's (his friend) family members. Lomba did not complete his university education. He was later employed by The Dial Magazine as a journalist, where his writing revolves around politics. Through his job as a journalist, he presents his views about the political situation of Nigeria:

This is just one instance. If you care to look, you'll find more: ethnicity, religion, poverty. One General goes, another comes, but the people remain stuck in the same vicious groove. Nothing ever changes for them except the particular details of their wretchedness. They've lost all faith in the government's unending transition programmes. (108)

By arresting Lomba, Lomba becomes a symbol of the suffering and hope under military regime. This study shows the depth of inequality in Nigeria. This novel is a testimony that literature has an abiding concern for social and political commitment, reflecting and recreating social and political events in African societies with Nigeria as a reference point. Therefore, African literature is tied to the experiences of the people, as stated earlier, that African literature is dominated by slavery and colonialism. Indeed literature reflects the society. Therefore, the general aspect is that literature is a reflection of contemporary issues of the society like leadership problems, exploitation, class struggle, environmental exploration and exploitation, infrastructural decay. Thus, there is a relationship between art and life as literature deals with people and their experiences in a given society. Therefore, the African writer with resistance ideology in words of Chinua Achebe (1970: 37):

.... committed to the revolutionary struggle of their people for justice and true independence. They are committed to a new society which will affirm their validity and accord them identity as Africans as people they are all working actively in

this cause for Christopher Okigbo died. I believed our cause is right and just. And this is what literature in Africa should be about today – right and just causes.

The dark period of military rule in Nigerian history had a great impact on the population. It has drawn the attention of many writers who immortalize this painful chapter through literature. Helon Habila keeps a close eye on these events. These horrible events play out frequently in cities and towns across Nigeria.

Postcolonial Nigeria in the eyes of Helon Habila's *Waiting For An Angel* is a failed state. Despite the above mentioned challenges, the characters build and develop their friendship. The author's message here is to encourage people to form bonds within society to enable them to defeat their enemies:

No. 20, Poverty Street (or Morgan Street - this story in a way is about how the street came to be called Poverty Street and about the people I met in my one-year stay there, people like Joshua, Brother, Nancy, Auntie Rachael, Lomba, Hagar, and all the others who through their words and deeds touched my life and changed it irreversibly) (120)

The friendship between the oppressed characters proves to be a learning experience for them and leads them not only to discover and experiment their challenges but also to understand the danger that exists as acclaimed by Abubakar *et al* (2020: 2789), "People on Poverty Street live poverty, talk poverty, eat poverty and sleep poverty. For this people, like Lomba's experience of prison, there is no solution except hope".

This novel depicts graphic details of leadership problems in Nigeria under military rule, the setting of the novel shows crisis ridden, oppressive state march with uncontrollable violence resulting to staggering human rights abuse leading to severe sanctions against Nigeria including expulsion from the Commonwealth of Nations. As the author says in the "Afterword": "It was a terrible time to be alive, especially if you were young, talented and ambitious – and patriotic We lived with guns to our heads" (233 and 226).

Lomba's heroism is noteworthy despite the tragic events around him: Alice dumps him for another man due to his poverty stricken life, Bola suffering insanity following the death of his parents, Lomba therefore opts for a job with *The Dial Magazine*. Lomba is not cowed by the terrible situation. Rather, he is hopeful of a better future. According to Lucky Negedu (2014:41):

Habila has not only reflected the struggles of the African masses but also provided the way forward, affirming that not even death should stop people from rejecting

oppression. The author shows that it is only when people do this that freedom can be guaranteed.

This researcher clearly places Helon Habila on the pedestal of a committed writer. Like other committed writers, he paints Nigeria's hopeless situation in his literary engagement. Alas, it should be stated that he also advances resistance as a means of ending the subjugation of the people. E.O. Apronti's (1978:84) admonition to writers is insightful:

But the writer cannot escape from the responsibility of serving his people. Literature must find a place in the revolution that must sweep our part of the world. This calls for a re-examination of the *themes* that people write about, of their *outlook* on society, of the language they choose to write in, and of the *manner* in which they put their works across.

Helon Habila's *Waiting For An Angel* is a moving story of revolutionary young individuals refusing to give up amidst the travails of military rule. All these pains, sufferings and disappointments in the novel, in the words of Sylvanus Onyeachulam (2022:8) 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".

Bola is the second important character in *Waiting For An Angel*. He is a young undergraduate and a friend to Lomba who lost his parents and brother in a road accident caused by a bad road and a military truck parked in the middle of the road. After the death of his parents and his sister, Bola became a revolutionary activist. He was arrested and severely beaten, leading to his mental derailment and subsequent admission into a psychiatric hospital. Certainly, the death of his parents and sister influenced his resistance ideology. He rightly believes that their death were a result of decadence in the society. Note that before the death of his parents, Bola was shown as an innocent, naïve character incapable of joining the protest march against the military junta, but he became aware of his predicament after his tragic loss:

The military has failed us. I say down with khakistocracy! Down with militocracy! Down with kleptocracy! His right hand, clenched in a fist, pumped up and down with each declamation. According to Wole Soyinka "The man dies in him who stands silent in the face of tyranny". (68).

Through the character of Bola, we see the evil features of military tyranny. Joshua is another important character in the novel. He is a teacher specializing in English Language and Literature. He initially taught Kela in a private lesson. He is a lover of books and an embodiment of knowledge acclaimed by residents of Poverty Streets. Joshua was part of the leaders of the protest march. He

believes that resistance to unjust government is a noble engagement. His lover (Hagar) died during the protest while escaping from the rampaging military officers:

In the past month, the gathering in Joshua's room had become more vocal ... The gathering became more vocal as they became more political. They become more political with the coming of Mao Then one day, in November, after my exams, we heard about Ken Saro Wiwa's hanging....

This country is in dire need of a revolution. (156 – 157).

Note Joshua's lamentation:

Yesterday we quarreled. She didn't want me to lead the demonstration. She even agreed to go away with me if I stayed away. I guess she knew

But I had to do it. I know some of the people there today didn't even know what it was all about. They thought it was fun to march and carry placards and sing but some really understood. And I couldn't let them down. (177 and 178).

The character of Brother is also important. Through Brother, we feel and understand the oppressive military regime. Brother was initially a bus driver before he lost his leg to a soldier's bullet during June 12 1993 post-election riot.

Mao, like Joshua is a lover of books but radical in his thinking. He is an admirer of Chairman Mao, the Chinese philosopher. Mao is shown as confrontational in his ideas of resistance. He stated, "According to Frantz Fanon, violence can only be overcome by greater violence". (158). Mao is fond of Ken Saro Wiwa, leader of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), who was hanged together with his fellow activists on November 10, 1995. Ken Saro Wiwa's death infuriated Mao, he concludes:

Let me tell you why they hanged Saro Wiwa. He was the only one who understood the economic aspect of the struggle. It is the money. He told Abacha, I know how much you and the foreigners are making – the billions you are drilling out of our soil. Give us some of it. They killed him because he threatened their monopoly, got it?... They'll continue subjugating us, killing all dissenters, one by one, sending them into exile, till there is no competitor left to oppose them. (158).

Alice is a student and Lomba's love interest. Alice could not accept Lomba's love interest because of the circumstances. As Alice's mother suffers from acute breast cancer, his father abandons her and her sick mother, Alice married Mr Ngai, who provided money for the upkeep of herself and her mother. Through Alice, Helon Habila is of the view that economic subjugation is also used to pauperise the people:

Don't be. It is true. It is the money. Are you shocked? Do you know how much it costs to keep my mother here for a day? Twenty thousand naira. This is the best

cancer hospital in the country. Twenty thousand, and she has been here over a month now. Where do you think the money came from – my father? My father has left us. Over one year now. He is in Abuja with his new wife. Ngai pays for everything – everything, including this dress I am wearing. Now do you understand? (100).

The character of Kela is important in *Waiting For An Angel*. Through him, Helon Habila is of the opinion that despite our negative past, we can reinvent our lives. At the introduction of Kela in the novel, Kela is a young boy who came to live with his aunt in Lagos. Kela was sent to Lagos because he failed his Senior School Certificate Examination and was caught by his father smoking marijuana. To his father, sending him to Lagos is a sort of punishment.

In Lagos, Kela became a better person shaped by the people in Poverty Street as well as the environment. Kela was highly influenced by Joshua, his teacher:

My exam result came out a week after the curfew had been lifted. I passed all eight papers. I had A1 in Literature – but I'd have been happier if Joshua had been there to see it. My father sent for me a week before Christmas. He wanted me home for Christmas. (184).

So, the earlier naïve, dull Kela become a changed person due to the love, care and support of the residents of poverty. Kela is a testimony to the fact something good can come out of Poverty Street. James is the editor of *The Dial* magazine, he is instrumental to the resistance and revolution in *Waiting For An Angel*. Through his magazine, he exposes the evil of the military regime. James is vocal and virulent in his attack against the military rulers. Note James advise to Lomba, “The time has come when a few bruises, even deaths, don’t matter anymore. That’s why I think you should go. To encourage him and show him he is not alone”. (193).

As a patriotic activist, James is not afraid of his write-up against the military junta. He is rebellious, revolutionary and committed to the struggle of emancipating the people from the shackles of bad governance. To James, we all must stop, “gewgaws of slavery” (195) because, ..., “every oppressor knows that wherever one word is joined to another word to form a sentence, there’ll be revolt. That is our work, the media: to refuse to be silenced, to encourage legitimate criticism wherever we find it” (195 – 196).

Due to the poor state of the educational sector, the students organize a protest march against the military government. Note the roles of the student leaders including Sankara. Sankara is forceful with his resistance ideology, “We are tired of phantom transition programmes that are nothing but grand designs to embezzle our money! Down with the junta According to Martin Luther King, “it is the duty of every citizen to oppose unjust authority”. (49).

The protest inside the university campus was bloody; many students were raped, killed by the rampaging rapacious military officers:

We were going there to stage a peaceful demonstration, that was all. They appeared from nowhere in their trucks, shooting tear gas and rubber bullets at us. At first, we scattered, but we rallied ourselves and returned. They were not much, just a truckful of them. – about thirty persons. We broke their windscreen with stones, and we also seized their truck, but reinforcement came for them, this time with real bullets. One student was shot in the leg. When we saw the leg shattered and bloody, we decided to call it a day. But the bastards followed us to the hostels, chased us to our rooms They went from room to room, breaking down doors and looting. When we heard the girls screaming ‘rape’!.... One student died. He was shot in the head, a chemistry student. The Area Boys captured a policeman and doused him in petrol and set him ablaze. (71 and 73).

The protest in Poverty Street is an example of the resistance of the people against a repressive military regime. Visiting the Sole Administrator, the residents of Poverty (Morgan) Street express their disgust to the bad state of their street and bad governance affecting them:

We, the honest, peace-loving and taxpaying citizens of Morgan Street, are tired of waiting for the government to come to us. That’s why we came. We came to tell you, Sir, that our clinic is run-down and abandoned; we came to tell you that we don’t have a single borehole on Morgan Street and we have to go to other streets to fetch water, our schools are overcrowded, and our children have to buy their own seats and tables because the ones there have not been replaced since the schools were built ten years ago! (170).

Rather than solve the problems of the residents in Poverty Street, security operatives were unleashed on the people, resulting in injuries and death of the people:

For the one week that the curfew lasted, Poverty Street became a ghost town – the shops remained closed, even the schools and the Women's Centre did not open. But a lot of people had reasons for remaining indoors: almost every house had one or more persons nursing a wound or a fracture sustained at the demonstration. Two people, apart from Hagar, died: Michael, my friend, who was also knocked down by a car, and Eniola, a pregnant asthmatic who was asphyxiated by tear gas. (179).

The Dial magazine is useful to the resistance of the people. The magazine stands between the people and the government. Management and staff members of *The Dial* magazine was harassed, arrested and detained unjustly. *The Dial* magazine office was set ablaze:

They see the fire from about two blocks away. The smoke rises thickly in a stiff, steady scream, like an Obelisk as if conveying the essence of a burnt offering to the heavens Both floors of the duplex are on fire The office is gone. (199 and 200).

Helon Habila aptly captures the dark days of military rulership of Nigeria. The days of terror, oppression, fear, exploitation, dehumanization, death, imprisonment, kidnapping of perceived critics of the regime. According to Ngozi Chuma-Udeh (2015:210):

Death perpetually lurks by the corner as a totem of authoritarianism. That was the reason for the friend asking to know when he would die. Another friend of Lomba's whose parents were killed in an avoidable car crash, was so grief-stricken that he made impetuous and unreasonable vocalizations, this earned him an arrest and a thorough bashing by the security. He was taken into custody and was so ruthlessly trampled that he lost his sanity. He was then released to roam the streets – a raving, stark mad man.

Through Lomba, Joshua, Sankara, Mao, Bola, and Brother we see resistance at its best, masses resisting and revolting for a better Nigeria.

Conclusion

The novel's characters embodying diverse forms of resistance from silent endurance to open rebellion showcase literature's vital role as a vehicle for social criticism and political consciousness.

Eventually, this research reaffirms the necessity of analyzing literary texts not only as artistic creations, but as dynamic social documents that challenge dominant narratives and inspire resistance. By anchoring *Waiting For An Angel* within a more comprehensive tradition of protest literature, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how African writers navigate and contest political repression through their literary texts. It is through such critical engagements that literature continues to serve as a beacon of hope, encouraging future generations to confront tyranny with courage and creativity.

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