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Radical Consciousness and Class Struggle in Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*

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Abstract
In this study entitled "Radical Consciousness and Class Struggle in Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel",* the writer tries to portray the socio-political situation in post-clolonial Nigeria with specific references to class struggles, the exploitation of the masses, their alienation to governance and their resistance in the face of oppression. The research adopts Marxism. This is because it provides a useful framework for explaining how economic and political structures shape radical consciousness and resistance among the characters. The study contends that radical consciousness in the novel emerges as a response to the systemic inequality and oppression faced by marginalized group with the protagonists' journeys serving both personal awakening and broader reflections of societal unrest. This study contributes to the understanding of how literature functions as a tool for political and social critique and how the narrative of *Waiting for an Angel* engages with the ongoing struggles for injustice and transformation in Nigeria. Conclusively, the study enriches our understanding of the role of literature in articulating the radical consciousness necessary to confront and challenge entrenched socio-political inequalities.
Keywords: Radical Consciousness, History, Materialism, Marxism, Nigeria Novel

Introduction
Most African countries are sites of official corruption, power mongering, electoral malfeasance, tyranny and oppression,

intolerance, victimization, betrayal, sabotage, exploitation, ritual/wanton killings and all kinds of humiliation and human degradation on the citizenry , especially those who advocate a functional model of society, the radicals, progressives and Marxists. The word "radical" as an adjective refers to basic, going to the root or origin, extreme, fundamental, thoroughgoing etc. As a noun, it is used for a person who holds or follows extreme principles; an extremist; one who advocates fundamental or drastic political reforms or changes by direct and uncompromising methods; a fanatic; a fire-eating revolutionary, usually of the far left. *Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary* sees a radical as one marked by a considerable departure from the usual or traditional, one disposed to make extreme change in existing views, habits, conditions institution" (970).

Thus, radical consciousness or radicalism has also been defined in various ways by literary artists, social scientists and the likes. Radical consciousness may be understood as a heightened awareness of the social, political and economic conditions that shape human existence. It involves the ability to recognise oppressive social realities, interrogate the structures that produce them and develop a critical response to conditions of inequality and exploitation. Nwafor in his comment on *Ezeigbo's Trafficked* asserts "no seed grows into harvest of joys without the planter's diligent labour of love" (92).

In literary discourse, radical consciousness therefore moves beyond passive awareness to a critical engagement with the realities represented in a literary text. Literature can consequently become a means of awakening consciousness by exposing social contradictions and drawing attention to the experiences of individuals and groups affected by oppression. In Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*, the experiences of poverty, political repression, unemployment and social deprivation create conditions through which such consciousness emerges. The novel thus

presents consciousness not merely as an individual psychological experience but as a critical response to the contradictions and inequalities within Nigerian society.

Radicalism is also defined as human sentiment that may be expressed in three ways:

i. abusing objects of moral indignation;
ii. undertaking or encouraging destruction of systems, social set-ups and other objects considered obnoxious; and
iii. carrying out democratic reconstruction of society based on socialist humanism.

In Peter Waterman's African Social Studies, radicalism in contemporary African literature seems closely and deeply penetrating to our immediate imagination. For him, radicalism in African literary context defines itself in trilateral terms as:

i. an opposition to imperialism (political dominations and economic exploitation);
ii. a concern for the African masses; and
iii. a preference for socialist, economic and political strategies.

Olu Obafemi in *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature 2* lends credence to Waterman's view in his exploration of the growing radical tendency in recent Nigerian theatre:

> This development manifests itself in the young playwright's commitment to the employment of this revolutionary potential of theatre to sharpen social awareness, adopt an alternative approach (socialist to be precise) to the obsolescene they find in the body politic of present day Nigeria; and presenting recipes for social change... These young playwrights reject the tragic vision of their predecessors' work which they attribute to their harping upon animist metaphysics... There emerges a rejection of social vision which opts for individual heroism (1 18-19).

However, Marxism which is more or less synonymously related to radicalism is a special brand of sociological criticism that deals

with the methods of production. Marxism sees literature as social struggles. For Marx, Marxist is socially aware of history, hence he is interested in a progressive literature and what may be its shortcomings, because he is concerned with understanding the social causes of literature. In Marxism, society is seen in two ways the economic class and the individualistic or antagonistic class. The economic class talks about the "factors of production and the economic superstructure". The antagonistic class refers to "the rulers and the ruled, the exploiters and the exploited; the task master and the journeyman" (William, 120).

As Nwafor noted in *Democracy at Crossroads*; "Marxism is a political and economic theory propounded by Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels that interprets history as a continuing economic class struggle and belief that eventual result would be the establishment of a classless society and a communal ownership of wealth of the nation" (150). Marxism states that the deep-rooted forces acting in history, that is, the struggle between sections of society for the means of life, transform the way of life of any given society. In other words, people's relations as they work together to exist or subsist, which includes psychological wellbeing, food, clothing, shelter, affects all facets of existence and survival. This transformation affects literature in a given society because literature must reflect these interrelationships.

Marxist criticism distinguishes between two kinds, literature of critical realism and literature of socialist realism.
Literature of critical realism perceives the injustices in society, cries aloud against it, condemns it, but offers no solution for the social problems.
Literature of socialist realism perceives this injustice, cries aloud about it, condemns it, and goes a bit further to offer solutions to these problems by means of arms struggle. It presents the masses as heroes, and also presents them as taking up arms against

oppression. Thus, the peasants rebel and fight against the oppressive system.

Marxism places a lot of premium on literature as an instrument for social change. It prefers a literature that utilizes the common people to work out its artistic purposes. It must speak the idiom and language of the common people, reflect their views, emotions, and lifestyles. The writer must draw heavily on the workers or peasants culture. He must create a new kind of art, not a bourgeois art, but common people's art in order to create a new society— a society of equality.

So central to radical/Marxist criticism of African literature has been the definition of literature as essentially a vehicle of class struggle. As Omafume F. Onoge says in *Maxisim and African Literature: A Prospectus*:

> Maxist criticism is necessarily sociological. This sociology nature as Anatoly Lunacharsky, On *Literature and Art,* once argued, is what immediately distinguishes it from all other types of literary criticism. However, its sociology is rooted in the materialist understanding of cultural consciousness (471).

Marxist critics have always insisted that in class societies, this contingent relationship of intellectual production and consciousness on material economic relationship is mediated by the class structure, by way of class interests and class psychology. In class societies, culture, art and literature take on a class character. Literature in such circumstances is fully implicated in the class struggle. It can either evince a consciousness that seems to conserve the society on behalf of privileged interests or exude a revolutionary consciousness congruent with the objective interests of the oppressed class which is engaged in the struggle to change the social status quo. Nwafor and Mba in *Majels* maintain that "literary work is used to x-ray inner feelings by representing the

voice of the common people using fictitious characters who had suffered terribly at perplexed and brutal situations meted on them" (245)

Given the revolutionary understanding of the dialectical relationship between literature and social struggle, Marxist critics do not conceive of literary criticism as an abstract academic activity with abstract justifications. Marxist critics are necessarily class partisan. They do not camouflage this partisanship. Marxist critics also recognise that the very analytical categories which constitute the vocabulary of literary scholarship are themselves historical products. The Marxist writers' dream is for a community where all can be free from the exploiting capitalist essence of the colonial social order. From their standpoints, they have been able to indicate whether or not the representations and evocative images which infuse the social universe imagined in a writer's poem, story or play are progressive, reactionary or reformist. But since Marxists hold that the working masses are the true makers of history, the images of the masses contained in their works are crucial signals of a writer's political standpoint. Meanwhile, radicalism in the novel finds expression in its Marxist-oriented ideological content and form. And prominent among radical-cum-Marxist novelists in Africa are: Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Festus Iyayi, Helon Habila, Ousmane Sembene, Ayi Kwei Armah, Meja Mwangi and Tanure Ojaide. These writers share the Marxist worldview that sees man's actions as necessitated by economic determinism, class and history.

Helon Habila is among the African writers who are at the forefront of revolutionary writing. As a member of the new generation of African writers, Habila has distinguished himself through his commitment to addressing social and political issues affecting contemporary African societies. He is credited with enriching the tradition of Marxist and revolutionary consciousness in the African novel through the publication of *Waiting for an Angel*. The novel

reflects his concern with the oppressive structures that hinder social progress and human development in postcolonial Nigeria. Although Habila's vision is shaped by his unique ideological perspective, his authorial and textual ideology clearly demonstrates a commitment to social justice, political liberation, and the struggle against oppression.

Through *Waiting for an Angel*, he exposes the realities of military dictatorship, political repression, poverty, and the denial of fundamental human rights. The novel advocates resistance against authoritarian rule and highlights the need for collective action in the pursuit of a more just and equitable society. In this way, Habila's work reflects elements of Marxist and revolutionary consciousness, emphasizing the necessity of challenging exploitative structures and transforming society for the benefit of the marginalized masses.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is Marxism. Marxism is a political and economic theory developed by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels which views history as a continuing struggle between social classes and advocates the eventual establishment of a classless society and communal ownership of wealth. Marxism emphasizes class struggle as a major factor in social change. According to Swingewood Allen in *The Novel and the Revolution*, "a Marxist writer is one who is conscious and fully aware of his own responsibility in the society. No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distanced from the oppressed" (23). This suggests that Marxist writers are concerned with social inequality, oppression, and the liberation of the disadvantaged.

Marxism recognizes that modern society is highly stratified and that conflict between social classes can lead to radical changes in society. According to Ngara Emmanuel in *Art and Ideology in the African Novel*, "social stratification and inequality are a historical

part of our society and these are what Marxist writers are continually fighting against in our society" (31). Marxist literature therefore exposes social inequality and advocates changes that can improve the conditions of the oppressed. Ngara further explains that Marxist art depicts reality from a Marxist perspective, reflects the social structure of society, presents social struggles from the viewpoint of a class, and promotes socialist ideals (17). Similarly, Swingewood states that in a class society, literature serves the interests of particular classes and that proletarian literature is directed towards the creation of a classless society (84).

Marxist art therefore serves as a means through which the oppressed become conscious of their social conditions. It portrays class conflict, inequality, exploitation, and the struggle for social transformation. Marxist literature also emphasizes characters that represent ideals of social change and resistance to oppression. Thus, Marxism is relevant to this study because it provides a framework for examining class struggle, social inequality, oppression, exploitation, and the conflict between the privileged and disadvantaged classes as represented in Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*

Military Incursion and Post-Independence Disillusionment in Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*

Helon Habila's debut novel *Waiting for an Angel* has seven interconnected episodes each named after the narrator. The novel also explored among other things the themes of suffering, pain, disappointment, tyranny and oppression, poverty, dejection and their attendant consequences of the people of Nigeria under a despotic leader. The novel is set in Nigeria of the 1990s during the reign of military dictators. The use of real places and names of individuals established this fact. For instance, we see names of real places like Lagos, Jos, Abuja, etc. Real persons like Dele Giwa, Ken Saro Wiwa, IBB, Abacha, Abdulsalam Abubakar, etc, even real events like the famous bloody post-June 12, 1993 riots, the release of

political detainees by Abubakar in 1998, etc. The story is set in Nigeria in the 1990s during the military regimes of Ibrahim Badamosi Babaginda, Sani Abacha and Abdulsalami Abubakar.

It tells the story of the sufferings, pains and disappointments of the people personalised in the major character Lomba, a young brilliant journalist though a school dropout. From Lomba's hard times in the prison (revealed by his diary of poems and letters meant to be sent to nobody), the story flows backwards in time, telling tales of Lomba's years in the university, about his first love Alice, forced to marry an army general (Ngai), about the university students' agitation which led to the closure of the school and how Lomba's friend Bola lost his parents and a sister in a fatal accident due to bad roads and went mad as a result, about a helpless Lomba who lives in Morgan Street as a school dropout, jobless, wretched and helpless, about James, the humiliated and traumatised editor of *The Dial* magazine who employed Lomba in the art department, who dared the military dictators, had his office destroyed and his passport seized. He equally convinced Lomba to cover the "peaceful" demonstration of the residents of Poverty Street.

Also, through Kela, a fifteen year old boy, we learn more about the pains and disappointments of the residents of Poverty Street, Lagos; about the resistance leader Josua, in love with his former pupil turned prostitute, about one-legged brother, who lost his leg in a fight with some soldiers, about Madam Godwill and Nancy her servant who are both victims of the hard times. Finally, about the demonstration by the residents of Poverty Street led by teacher Josua and covered by Lomba, and which led to Lomba's arrest and subsequent imprisonment without trial. In fact, the novelist tells us about Lomba, his experiences in the prison. Here, the young man Lomba languishes in prison under the supervision of the merciless warders and in the poor condition of Nigerian prisons.

At a time "in the middle of his second year in prison," he started a diary. He wrote poems and letters to keep himself busy. But he was discovered and severely punished and thrown into the solitary cell. After this, the superintendent, Muftau made him write love poems which he (Muftau) gives to his lover, Janice. Later, Janice discovers that Muftau did not write those poems himself, she decided to visit Lomba and tells Muftau that she will not marry him unless he gets Lomba out of the prison and she says: "If you can't do that, then forget you ever knew me." But out of Muftau's selfishness, he refused to help him" (30).

Habila uses "The Angel" to expose the military dictatorship in Nigeria in the 1990s, the difficulties of life under dictatorship in Nigeria. Here, the narrator sits in a bar one evening waiting for an angel—the angel of death, Israfel—who conies in form of soldiers and shot the narrator. According to the narrator, "it is not a soldier standing there. It is an angel." (38). And as he bled to death he saw "a huge bird shape flying out of the bar and ascending with the sound of a thousand wings" (38).

The University students agonising situation, led by Sankarah, staged a peaceful demonstration against the IBB's military regime. As a result, the demonstration turned violent as the police tried to repress them using tear gas and rubber bullets and later used real bullets. At last a student and a policeman died. Many students were wounded. Sankarah was arrested and the school closed. According to Adegbite; "it was bloody brilliant" (39). To Cornel Ujowundu in his work on *Literature and Ecology:*

> Habila's vivid, exciting and heart-wrenching debut novel opens a window into a world in some ways familiar with his sensuously depicted arrests, students lie, and the vibrant local characters, yet ruled by one of the world's most corrupt and oppressive regimes, a scandal that ultimately

> drives Lomba to take a risk in the name of something, the pains, shattered hopes and expectations, the betrayal, the energy, sensitivity, despair and stubborn hope of a new African generation with a combination of gritty realism and poetic beauty. When I turn, it is not a soldier standing there. It is an angel. It opens its enormous wings and closes them again in a clapping motion. The air from the wings lifts me up and carries me all through the door. I land with a splash on the wet street; I am bleeding from the chest... (119-123).

According to *The Observer* newspaper in London, *Waiting for an Angel* "is a graphic detail of leadership problems in Nigeria under military" (16). The newspaper further states that Nigeria in the 1990s the setting for the novel, was a police state of such sadistic violence, with human right abuses so staggering, that the country was expelled from the Commonwealth of Nations, and virtually every other country had sanctions against it. Consequently, every hint of dissent and every suspicion of democratic thinking by many of the country's most gifted writers and the military government by Sani Abacha wiped out thinkers.

The first portrayal of suffering, pain and disappointment in the novel was imprisonment of innocent people without trial; and how the novelist explores the imprisonment of the protagonist named Lomba, who is a political prisoner in Nigeria. Focusing primarily on Lomba, a journalist and the frustrated novelist, the novel discusses the starving political prisoner in a Lagos jail, Helon Habila jumps back and forth in time, introducing us in succeeding chapters to the lives of ordinary citizens of Lagos, men and women including Lomba himself, twinge on Poverty Street, trying to maintain some semblance of hope in an increasing hopeless world, a world filled with disillusionment and disenchantment.

This is shown as the novelist portrays the poor state of Morgan Street and the country in general, marked by low standard of living of the citizens. According to the novelist; "Women like Lomba's woman neighbours took to prostitution" (85) while "men like Nkem took to smoking marijuana and stealing" (85). There is no equality—"the problem of fuel scarcity as cars queue around filling stations for days waiting for fuel" (87).

According to the narrator;

> Poverty Street's real name was Morgan Street, one of the many decrepit, disease-ridden quarters that dotted the city of Lagos like ringworm on a beggar's body (92). There were hotels for sex and alcohol, and there were doorways and alley-mouths for marijuana and cocaine (92).

He further describes some of the characters thus;

> Brother, a poor tailor who lost his leg in an encounter with the soldiers and who dreams of becoming rich one day at the back of his shop, which is covered by garbage heaps and in front of the shop was a burst pipe—deliberately axed, which shot out water all day (96).

In the words of Habila;

> Lomba, jailed for two years without a trial as the novel opens, has gone beyond anger which he describes as "the baffled prisoner's attempt to recrystallise his slowly dissolving self and entered a state of tranquil acceptance of his fate (4).

So, when the jailer, Muftau, finds the poems and journal entries he has written and hidden, he persuades Lomba to write some love poems for the better educated woman he is courting. A brief ray of hope flickers when the woman recognises Lomba's cryptic message and comes to prison to meet him. As Ujowundu further states, "Lomba's imprisonment appears as the first chapter, hence the reader experiences a sense of deja vu throughout the reading of the novel as the action backtracks, forcing the reader to experience the event

which led to the opening chapter and to wonder, if anything could have prevented Lomba's eventual imprisonment" (124).

The second portrayal of suffering, pains and disappointment in the novel is explored through the wanton killings of innocent citizens. The author shows us the effect of this dictatorial government on ordinary people who populate the country. Though life is difficult and opportunities almost non-existent, the young people still have hopes and dreams. When Lomba and a friend have their fortunes told by a poet, one of the young men asked to know the day of his momentous, a day he is assured he will know when the time comes and goes.

A second friend whose parents have been killed in a car crash is so grief-stricken that he makes an intemperate and realistic speech, then is arrested, severely beaten and driven insane with no chance of getting his own novel published. Lomba himself takes a job writing for The Dial, for which he occasionally reports on political demonstrations.

The third portrayal of sufferings, pains and disappointments as explored in *Waiting for an Angel is* human rights abuses, especially detentions without trial, depicting the everyday life and hopes and dreams of the participants. The leaders easily imagine what life must have been like during his time and can envision what his own life must have been under the same circumstances. But Habila adds further reality to his depiction of life in Nigeria under Sani Abacha by including some well-known historical events and their effects on Lomba and the other fictional characters and hanging of Ken Saro Wiwa, the killing of Dele Giwa, the editor *of Newswatch* magazine by a letter bomb and the shooting of the wife of Abiola, the opponent of Abacha who was jailed for challenging him. Their human rights were abused because of the people in charge of their right. To this Nwafor and Mba in Majels assert that "Saro Wiwa affirms that his people live in the middle of death. Saro

Wiwa's fight for social justice and minority rights made him a man of the people" (224). The novelist used Muftau the superintendent at the prison where Lomba stays to reveal the selfishness and self-centredness inherent in human beings. The act of wickedness prompts Lomba in writing love poems which he gives to his lover, Janice. He could have helped Lomba out of the prison but he did not because of his selfishness. And when Janice asked him, he says, "I didn't, I couldn't you know … I thought he was comfortable. And, he was writing the poems for you ..." (31). Muftau tells Lomba, "Don't think because you are political detainee you are untouchable. Wrong you are all rats, saboteurs, anti-government rats…" (14).

In the novel, the narrator was a political prisoner who spent more than two decade in prison. After release, he was found wondering the streets of Johannesburg hopeless as if his soul is in a perpetual prison. The novelist insists that "a lot of these political prisoners died in detention although only the prominent ones made the headlines—people like Moshood Abiola and General Yar'adua" (32). In fact, the poor masses did not only wallow in poverty but they live in total fear— fear of the unknown. In describing the situation of things in the society, the narrator of the story entitled "The Angel" says that the people "lock their doors and turn off their lights and peer tearfully through chinks in their windows at the rain-washed post-coup d'etat streets" (37). Such is the fate of Nigerians under military regimes. The hardship imposed by military rule engenders poverty which in turn contributes to moral decadence as some youths resort to theft, drug abuse, and prostitution. For instance, Nkem, Lomba's neighbour, has to steal to be alive and Hagar has to be a sex hawker to survive, while Brother and his friends took to smoking marijuana.

This poverty is another aspect of sufferings and pains. There is smell of poverty throughout the story. The few military generals loot the public funds, while the poor masses become even poorer. It

is written all over Morgan Street and its residents. Even-thing about this street and the people living in it are poor – the bad roads, the miserable houses, the street full of huge hills of refuse that overflowed and blocked the footbaths, etc. No wonder they changed the street's name from Morgan Street to Poverty Street. Lomba, Brother, Hagar, Nkem and even Alice are victims of poverty in the novel. All these incidents of pain, sufferings and disappointments in the novel 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. As he says: "Every oppressor knows that when one word is joined to another word to form a sentence, there will be revolt. That is our work; the media, to refuse to be silent, to follow legitimate criticism wherever we find it" (186).

This moving study of idealistic young people refusing to give up even when faced with truths of their very lives is an unforgettable story of the human spirit waiting for an angel and sometimes meeting the angel of death. Soon, Lomba's roommate is attacked by soldiers, journalists are arrested all over the city and *The Dial* offices are set on fire. Lomba decides to take part in a pro-democracy demonstration. There, he is arrested and imprisoned for three years. The novel's narrative moves back and forth in time, beginning with Lomba's life in prison and ending with the climatic events leading up to the arrest. Some chapters are written in the third person, others narrated by Lomba himself and still others by a high school student named Kela, who lives near Lomba on Poverty Street and crosses paths with him before the fateful demonstration.

Habila paints an extraordinary tableau of Poverty Street ("one of the many decrepit, disease-ridden quarters that dotted the city of Lagos like ringworm on a beggar's body"), bringing their sounds, sights and smells to life with his spare prose and flair for metaphor. Kela's aunt runs the Godwills Food Genre

Restaurant. Through his encounters with the patrons, as well as his activist English teacher, Kela (and readers) learn about Nigeria's bloody post-colonial history. Though somewhat marred by the abrupt, disorienting shifts among narrators and time periods, this is a powerful startling vivid novel.

Conclusion

Helon Habila's novel *Waiting for an Angel* portrayed realistic details of military leadership. Habila's subject is political corruption, and as well as corrupt practices of the privileged, oppression of the poor, money and power tussles, which are clear manifestations of indiscipline. This is seen in Muftau, the superintendent of the prison. These leaders are shown to be excessively corrupt and exercising brute force in the political scene.

Habila sees his society as being completely mindless of the sufferings of the poor. He made use of stereotype characters to depict the theme explored in the novel. His choice of characterization in the novel, made the theme of the poor and lower classes struggling to survive in a hostile environment and a conflict-ridden society. From the social ills x-rayed, one can definitely say that the continent is sick and diseased from head to toe. Unfortunately, where and when the cure is going to come is yet uncertain. Thus, from the political class to the military leaders, down to the civil society, what we have seen in the societies portrayed are shattered hopes and disillusionment as a result of the existence of moral vacuum, political, social and economic problems.

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