

The Nation, its Struggle and Perceptions of the Ethnic Novel in Helon Habila

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Abstract

Literature continues to retain the gaze of its spectators with regard to its social value, as not just creation but as representation, in its mimetic quality. It is under this aegis that it addresses the problem of this paper. A treatise on the state of the nation in most parts of the globe would be incomplete without mention of the postcolonial discourse as the effects of decisions from colonial times are continuously perpetuated. Nations have proceeded to polemicize continuously, the notion of nationhood and its sustenance. The question of how best to cohere this unity and develop as a nation has continued to plague many societies. This paper will thus expound on the challenges faced in the quest for sustenance of nationhood by the societies in the novels of Helon Habila. In this course, an explication of the causes, nature and effects which the lack or achievement of this nationhood has on the societies will be made. The features of the texts which indicate their uniqueness as ethnic novels will also be highlighted. Consequently, the paper will take as its objects of study: *Waiting for an Angel*, *Measuring Time* and *Oil on Water*.

Introduction

Politics, although a modest discipline in Nigerian universities is a phenomenon which has far-reaching effects and influence on other aspects of societal life and expression. The ubiquitous nature of the phenomenon, politics, is explained in part by the influence which it wields over the creation of curricula, what it allows to flourish as knowledge, and the significance of these on the society. Disciplines which interrogate this phenomenon in a bid to expose, extol and challenge its aspects which require such activities are various. Such disciplines mostly belong to the humanities and social sciences. While some of these activities of exposure, extolment and challenges work to transform the state of this politics, others work to enlighten the people in society. All of these activities have been done going back several centuries in the history of societies.

Literature and Gravitas: Interface

Gravitas, the ancient Greek word for matters of grave or serious consequence, was used to denote the carriage of men occupied with matters of state, politics, government and public morality. It also serves as a name for these serious tasks. As literature meditates on any and every phenomenon, it also meditates on gravitas, hence, its (literature's) relationship with politics and society. The study of politics as Political Science (one of the social sciences) affects and is reflected in almost all disciplines of learning in Nigeria. Literature is no exception as decisions which govern society affect its spread, expression and being. In this vein, writers of African descent have often been recognized more for their depiction of sociological issues in their works than almost for their art itself. This is because in the tradition of relevance to society, these writers seek to reflect the situations of their societies in their art.

Literature from the period of the classics and through history has been recognized for its ability to affect society even though some schools of thought are of the idea that it should be created and studied for its inherent value, without reference to any external phenomena. However, the idea that literature is relevant as a discipline related to and in a way determinant of societal events continues to get free rein. The basis of this idea is got from Plato; who in his *Republic* advocated for the expulsion of the poet from society as he was of the opinion that the poet influenced the society negatively by spreading falsehoods. Following this, the social value of literature was further set by the Greek philosopher, Horace, in the first century BC. It is in this vein that literature has been known to contribute to reality by describing and enriching the necessary competency that daily life requires.

In the representation of social values, literature tends to demonstrate the peculiar traits, culture and beliefs of the society which it is concerned with replicating. This is the impetus of the idea of ethnic literature. Hence, Breyten Breytenbach asserts that: "a writer, any writer... is the questioner and the implacable critic of the mores and attitudes and myths of his society" (166). With regard to the ethnic traits' interwoven-ness with social issues of the day, Ngugi wa Thiong'o states that: "literature cannot escape from the class power structures that shape our everyday life. (Hence) ... every writer is a writer in politics (2).

Narrowing this idea to a specific boundary, David I. Ker reiterates it:

It is interesting to access the validity of West African novels as social documents, for if literature is relevant at all it is because we can obtain some picture of society and of life from it. However in order to determine how accurately certain social types and their behaviours are reproduced in a work of fiction, we must have knowledge of the structure of the society gleaned from other sources than purely literary ones. (Emmanuel 227)

It is in relation to this that an attempt will be made in this paper to interrogate the phenomenon of nationhood and its various facets in the works of Helon Habila which are seen here as ethnic novels. It will do this using the phenomenological approach.

The nation in literature and Nigeria

The need for nationhood continues to be a repeated discourse in the sociopolitical scene of most African countries, one of which is Nigeria. This is because the people who make up these nations did not have the luxury of moving from the stage of ethnic and tribal unities to wider borders (Ahmed- Gamgum 1). They had little recourse to demonstrate allegiance to people from other ethnic groups until their freedom as a group was threatened by colonialism and direct imperial rule.

With the absence of a „common enemy“, these people have come to realize their differences and thus feel little or no allegiance to the new nations which were formed after independence. This is the case with Nigeria. This sentiment is shared by Michael Mann who says that: “perhaps the biggest cause of conflict is the borders which were arbitrarily created by colonial rulers.... These ongoing conflicts detract from the ability to focus the massive amounts of attention required to develop post-colonial nations. It also creates a natural rift in everyday life, from education to culture and even language” (2).

Anthony Smith describes a nation as “a named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths, historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members” (Guibernau 127). The legal rights mentioned here, bring into the definition the element of „statehood.“ This element is argued by some scholars to be separate from „the nation“ as nations exist without having the status of a state; in a phenomenon known as “nations without states.” However, it suits the purpose of

this paper and will serve as a working definition for the term. Several elements are given by Smith as necessary for the coherence of a nation. They include: shared geographical space, history, culture, legal rights and obligations as well as a common economy with territorial mobility for members (Guibernau 133). These elements, particularly those of shared legal rights and obligations, act as pointers to the idea of statehood in a nation, thus providing the political angle needed in this paper.

A number of scholars such as Etienne Balibar, Ingmar Karlsson, and Immanuel Wallerstein, have argued that nationhood precedes statehood. This is the case with Nigeria as what was present in its past, included nations in empire and kingdom forms. These units bore ethnic allegiance with little or no extraethnic loyalty before they were co-opted into the state system and their unity, imposed by a higher military power, under the colonial aegis. The problem however, lies in the fact that unlike other nation-states which have been able to develop and share common traits, after becoming a state, it is difficult for Nigerians to develop national allegiance. Thus, this paper will consider the stages leading up to nationhood or nation-state. The nation-state is preceded by the Personal State, theocratic rule, oligarchy, city state, territorial empire, trading empire, the military state and the tribal state. On another scale, it involves the importation, interpretation and application of the idea of the nation in three phases: the structural, the cultural and the psychological phase. These phases are what allow for the idea of nationhood and the unity it entails to develop and become accepted in the consciousness of the people. Although nation-states did not develop in this particular order, they often entailed the transition from feudal to more organized and wider establishments such as the tribal and military state which then gave way to the nation-state. The rise of the nation-state involves the consolidation of territorial units by bureaucratic absolutism through the means of violence. After the achievement of nationhood which involves the structural phase as the boundaries and unities of the state are set, other phases are required to come after it. They are the cultural and psychological phases of the establishment of a nation and have to be perpetuated for the nationalization process to become complete. The people thus concerned have to develop and nurture the mindset of being „one“ as a unit, in order for the nation to continue existing.

Having expounded on the idea of „nation“, it is necessary to consider the reasons which account for their failure. In addition to the reasons of forced and sudden unity which have been mentioned, Vuk Vukovic gives others.

The problem... lies in the role of politics.... If political institutions are organized as extractive and concentrated in the hands of a narrow elite, then economic institutions will only serve the purpose of the ruling elites extracting the maximum wealth for themselves. If they are organized as inclusive, power being dispersed among the many rather than concentrated among the few, then this institutional environment will create incentives of inclusive economic institutions, where innovation and creative destruction will ensure the creation of sustainable economic growth and development. (Vukovic 324)

In light of these, the questions which this paper aims to answer are: what happens after the nation has been formed? Does it move forward as a united whole and if it doesn't, why? The focus will be on the societies in Helon Habila's novels.

Imagined Communities and the Fragmentary Nation in the Works of Helon Habila

Chijioko Uwasomba in his consideration of literature's appropriation of societal occurrences as its task of the day and Habila's writing, opines that:

With Habila, his narration is visibly and clearly about Nigeria with its... stifling contradictions. These ... novels like some before them, by other Nigerian writers formalize the search for nationhood and demonstrate that writing is a powerful tool for collective action against social power. Hence, there are real historical dates, historical names and events within, especially in *Waiting for an Angel*. (Uwasomba 207)

With this consciousness of representation, Habila in his novels presents the ethnic flavour peculiar to not only the Nigerian nation but also the specific locale of the setting of each novel. It is the presence of this ethnicity that allows and further intensifies the depiction of the nation in these novels. In these novels: *Waiting for an Angel*, *Measuring Time* and *Oil on Water*, the nation as depicted in each is failing. It already exists in the first and last novels and it is only in *Measuring Time* that a pre-national and even precolonial community is seen. However, the nation still appears and a major part of the events of the story happen within this nation and because of it.

In *Waiting for an Angel*, scenes change from the beaches of Lagos to the derelict Poverty Street with characters like Brother, Joshua, Kela, Lomba and Mao. These characters not only demonstrate the cultural diversity which is found in Lagos, but their struggles depict the hardship and prevalent spirit which permeated the nation during the military era. The okra soup which Nancy pours on Brother's head, the role of teacher Joshua in the close-knit community of Poverty Street and the idea of Kela leaving home to enroll for lessons and rewrite his West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination all smack of the Nigerian experience. The names of the characters like Kela who goes to Lagos from Jos and Lomba, Bola's "northern friend" suggest Nigeria. The presence of two civil war veterans: Brother and Aunt Rachael's late husband in the story, contributes to the ethnicity of this text as the civil war is a memory which looms over the country.

The presence of the military in politics in the novel and the attendant corruption and human rights abuse which characterize this rule are failures of the nationalizing process. Asika I. Emmanuel, agrees with this idea as he also blames the problems of lack of attainment of nationhood on the military. "Habla exposes the situation of terror, anguish, victimization, molestation and slavery meted on the citizens of Nigeria during the military era in politics" (283). This de-civilizes and sets the nation decades backwards as a large portion of the human resource of the country is jailed unjustly or exiled with those remaining cowed by brutality and terror. Mineral and human resources are also exploited and utilized by the soldiers around the country while the ordinary people suffer. It thus becomes a nation bereft of intellectuals as these are silenced and threatened along with the shutdown of institutions of learning, the print and broadcasting media. Niyi Akingbe subscribes to this view of the military and corruption as debilitating to the unity and nationalizing process of the State. He says: "Habla's narrative of Nigeria is grounded in the problematics of nation and nationalism. Nigeria... is portrayed as a country drifting precariously towards disintegration" (30). Akingbe also posits that ethnicity is an additional factor at play in the denationalizing process.

The artificiality of the Nigerian state is raised in the narrative of Nigeria by Habla in his account of the annulment of the June 12 presidential election won by Chief Abiola, a Yoruba politician from the southern part of Nigeria. This was an annulment carried out by the regime of General Babangida from the northern part of Nigeria.... Abiola's narrative of political persecution depicts Nigeria as a web of disparaging ethnic

nationalities yoked together by the colonial system, where the dominant ethnic group with superior numerical strength in the armed forces could lord it over other ethnic groups. (31)

Habila himself in the afterword of the novel, states this. “It was a terrible time to be alive... you cannot read any international paper without seeing how much lower your country has sank on the list of nations with poor human-rights records. Every day comes new limitations, new prisons... but the funny thing is that the military first entered Nigerian politics as messiahs” (223, 224).

Consequently, it will be argued that political, social corruption and the presence of the military in politics are the factors which led to the failure of the nation as depicted in *Waiting for an Angel*. With violence and corrupt militarized politics, it is inevitable that the psychological and cultural idea of nation is absent from the minds of the people who make it up thus making for a fragmentary and an unwholesome State.

Measuring Time is a re-writing of the history of the Nigerian nation from the viewpoint of minority groups and hitherto silenced voices. Habila here explores the lives of characters like Mamo and La mamo, who dominate the incidents in the text and whose voices amongst those of others are used to narrate the events in the story. These characters in one way or the other, help to depict the situation prevalent in the Nigerian nation.

The ethnic flair of northern Nigeria and the Nigerian nation as a whole is seen in the text. The central character and others around him are of northern Nigerian descent. Mamo and La mamo, Lamang and Iliya, Aunty Marina and Jumai, Asabar and Alhaji Danladi are northern names of mostly Hausa origin. The hilly landscape, description of the heat and dressing of the characters also contribute to paint the picture of the place. The religious clashes described in the text involving Christians and Muslims are also reminiscent of what goes on in numerous states in northern Nigeria. Ethnicity is therefore used here as a crutch to enable the story go on in more vivid light.

Nigeria is portrayed as a byword for selfishness and corruption. In addition, the violence associated with elections, religious and cultural intolerance are given as factors which cripple the nationalization process. Other causes of the failure of the nation include: the lack of vision and a well-defined mission by the political ruling class. The story chronicles the exploitation and disservice done to the people by first the colonial rulers, the traditional rulers and then the post

independent politicians and military. The Mai and Waziri who are symbols of traditional authority in the novel are presented as docile and conniving. The military leaders who are soldiers-turned-politicians are no better as they make life more difficult for the people by exploiting their available resources and depriving them of basic freedom. When they leave office and a civilian government takes over power, things do not change for the people. It is in this vein that Jonas E. Akung concludes that a continuation of such a trend will allow for even greater disintegration of the nation as “military usurpation of political power, the Civil War, electoral fraud and corruption have done great harm to the Nigerian polity” (150).

The failure of the nationalizing process in this text leads to numerous negative outcomes. Hardship, despair and death are what follow in the wake of the failure of the nation to achieve its potential. It affects in one way or the other, the lives of all the characters in the text. Habila puts it succinctly when in describing the lot of Jumai, Asabar’s wife, he says: she adjusts her “expectations with the typical equanimity of the peasant woman...though she was only twenty, she already looked tired and dirty, and her eyes had developed the sort of dull, uncomprehending film through which most of the village women viewed the world around them” (218). Thus, Mamo loses his father and brother, Zara loses her sanity, Asabar loses the use of his legs and body and Iliya, his dream of educating the youths of Ketu. Things fall apart and all the people can do is hope for a better future as the enaction of “The Coming” at the end of the story suggests.

Oil on Water, is also an ethnic novel and a commitment text. Based on events in the life of Rufus, a budding journalist who embarks on an inquest into the kidnap of Isabel Floode, wife to an oil company engineer, it is yet another demonstration of the failure of the nationalizing process. The nation has failed in this text as it does not integrate the people of the Niger Delta who own the story into its confines. Habila captures the realities of disillusionment, displacement, sickness, lack, and resentment which characterize the Niger Delta people’s lives through the narrative of Rufus. Rufus, though quite young, is among the few in the region other than Naman the priest, Boma, his sister and the water worshippers in Iriokefe who have hope for a better future. This is in spite of the present colossal failure which reveals problems facing the unity and conception of their society as a nation.

In capturing the inside realities of the people of the Niger Delta, Habila presents Lagos, Port Harcourt, and other locales in the region which demonstrate ethnicity. Not only do the names like Boma and Tamuno bespeak the language of the people, their affinity with water comes through in the story. This is seen in Boma's drowning story, the expert knowledge of the creeks which the militants have and the people's reliance on water for their livelihood. The way of life, the entire social situation of environmental degradation, oil theft, bunkering, kidnapping, army brutality as well as the despair and seeming hopelessness of the people's situation are fully engaged, thus leaving room for little doubt that the story is indeed about the Niger Delta people of Nigeria.

The undermining of minority groups as is the case with the Niger Delta people by the Federal Government of the nation is one of the basic problems which works against the achievement of nationalist sentiment in the country. This practice bespeaks non-inclusive politics, a great attenuating factor of nationhood as given by Vuk Vukovic. Resultant effects of this neglect and exploitation are seen in the text. "The village looked like a deadly epidemic had swept through it...chickens...all dead and decomposing, the maggots trafficking beneath the feathers...the atmosphere grew heavy with the suspended stench of dead matter" (8, 9). It continues all over the place as Rufus notes:

The next village was almost a replica of the last...in the village centre we found the communal well...a rank smell wafted from its hot depths and slapped my face; I reeled away, my head aching from the encounter. Something organic, perhaps human, lay dead and decomposing down there, its stench mixed with that unmistakable smell of oil. At the other end of the river where we had left our boat the patch of grass growing by the water was suffocated by a film of oil, each blade covered with blotches like the liver spots on a smoker's hands. (10)

Consequently, in a State where the people of a particular region, in this case a vital revenue generating region, is neglected and marginalized, it is inadvertent that lack of coherence and unity occur in the shell of the nation. Hence, it effectively shuts the people out of the federalism and nationhood which they ought to be part of. The revenue of the country is no longer shared in such a way that some percentage goes to each region according to its contribution to national economy and level of production. Rather:

After the 1967-70 Nigerian/ Biafra civil war, new states were created and, family lands were taken over by the Federal Government. The 1999

constitution of Nigeria as amended represents this thus: *The entire property in and in control of all minerals, oil and natural gas in, under and upon any land in Nigeria or in, under or upon the territorial waters and the exclusive economic zones of Nigeria shall vest in the government of the federation and shall be managed in such a manner as may be prescribed by the National Assembly. (Clause 44).* Thus this brought to an end the derivation sharing principle and introduced the domination and marginalization of the Niger Delta. (Simon et al 384)

In the light of this, Habila not only gives various instances of the human and environmental degradation in the region, but also demonstrates the displacement of the people of this region who have been neglected and exploited. Chief Ibiram and his wards become migrants, moving from one part of the river to another as they have been forced to abandon their village and other settlements due to environmental pollution and the sickness and death which accompany it. Consequently, “the neglect of the region has led to environmental degradation, pollution, loss of traditional occupations, rise in social vices like gun-running, kidnapping, militancy, oil theft as well as health hazards to mention a few” (Simon et al 384).

The novel depicts government complacency majorly with the expatriate oil companies and its cooperation with them in using the military to clamp down on the people who would otherwise protest the unjust treatment and exploitation of their resources. Rufus is caught between the crossfire of the soldiers and Niger Delta militants. The treatment which he gets from both the soldiers and militants is hardly different. These soldiers have no mercy for the people of the region and they treat the old man Tamuno and his young son Michael the same way they treat resisting militants, mercilessly, even though they are not militants. There are no clean-up operations to reduce the negative effects of oil exploration on the environment by the companies. Additionally, the government on its part does not put pressure on these companies to do the right thing. The people do not have any psychological feeling of belongingness to an entity called nation as even the little tribal sentiment they have becomes eroded by the betrayal of their leaders who have been bribed. For this reason, the people have little choice but to turn to oil theft, bunkering and militancy as a form of protest and as a means of survival. While the young people engage in militancy, older men and children sell the stolen petrol like Rufus’s father does. In this text therefore, the nation has failed

and the causes of this failure are given to include corruption, greed, neglect and displacement, amongst others.

Conclusion

The three novels which have been reviewed demonstrate Habila's commitment to society as they are all reflective of the Nigerian society. They portray the writer's meditation on the ethnic peculiarities of not only the regions where the stories of the texts are situated but also, the peculiarities of the Nigerian nation. The explication of the concept of nation in the texts reveals that nationhood in the societies depicted in the texts is under serious threat. The corruption ubiquitous to the nation finds expression as one of the factors which slows down and hinders the proper nationalizing of the country's subjects in the texts. The presence of the military in politics is also seen to hinder this process. Thus, for *Oil on Water*, corruption, unconcern and lack of a uniting vision on the part of the government are seen as the major causes of the lack of attainment of nationhood. *Measuring Time* on the other hand, enumerates corruption of politicians as well as military rulers in tandem with ethnic intolerance as factors which denationalize the society. And, in *Waiting for an Angel*, it is a case of corruption, greed as well as the obvious presence of the military in politics that result in the disillusionment of the people and their loss of faith in the nation.

Consequently, Habila in his novels has been able to demonstrate that corruption, the presence of the military in politics and ethnic intolerance as the three major factors which enfeeble the achievement of nationhood in the society. Thus, it would seem that it is only a revamping of these attitudes and a repudiation of such practices that would result in the strengthening of a nation.

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