



New Historicist Dimensions in Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the New Historicist dimensions in the Nigerian novel with a focus on Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*. The Nigerian history as seen by Habila has not validated many assumptions and needs to be revised. This revision of history by Habila puts the Nigerian history in proper perspective. The new historicist dimensions in this novel include: history, culture politics and the military. It is the position of this paper that the Nigerian writer should begin to write about Nigeria's most recent history. It is the exploration of this most recent history in Habila's *Measuring Time* that this paper sets out to examine using the tenets of new historicism. This theory examines primarily the historical as well as cultural aspects of the text. It also sees the text as an associate unit of other texts and it is in the network of these texts that meaning is realized. This most recent history as seen in this novel includes religious crises, corruption, the military usurpation of political power and electoral fraud. The paper reveals that if Nigeria would get her elections right and put right leaders in place, there would be a multiplier effect on other sectors of the polity and the wellbeing of the citizenry would be improved. The paper opines that the failure of Nigerian leaders to manage their affairs should not be blamed only on colonialism. Both the leadership and followership have a duty not to fail.

Keywords: colonialism, corruption, culture, dictatorship, historicism, politics.

1. Introduction

The Nigerian novelists over time have sought to establish a synergy between the past and the present. This has become imperative because it is only through this synergy that they can reconnect the past to recreate the future. Recreating the past is not a mere expression of nostalgia or a false attempt at an African utopia, but a bold effort at cultural reconstruction. Which will to a reasonable extent, show where the nation went wrong and see how it can be put in the path of correction.

The new Nigerian novelists do not see the Nigerian culture only from the standpoint of narcissism, but from a critical point of view. This attempt at critiquing, and building bridges across time has been what mark of the new novelists.

This paper is not intended to delve into unnecessary controversies which have been the bane of African critics but to establish a link that binds the younger generation of Nigerian writers with the past as seen in the works of Habila. Why has the past become such a veritable motif of the Nigerian novel? Political, social, economic, scientific as well as historical events now shape the Nigerian novelist's imagination and narrative patterns. The



past has also sharpened Nigerian writer's horizon for a better perception of the modern society. For instance, dictatorship whether in civilian or military is one factor that has continued to condition the temperament and imagination of the Nigerian novelist.

These new writers have explored this historical factor in their works. They include: Akachi A. Ezeigbo's trilogy: *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996), *House of Symbols* (2000) and *Children of the Eagle* (2002), Okey Ndebe's *Arrows of Rain*, Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow* (2006); Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* (2002), among others. The contemporary Nigerian novels seek to present an authentic view point of the Nigerian experiences. Explaining this point Osita (2001:295-300) argues that:

The novel of authentic Nigerian experience draws from the ballad or folk literature, proverbs, legends, myths, rituals and institutions which are stamp of our peculiar experiences. It is in relation to these categories that authenticity is to be measured... from there flows the distinct tradition of the Nigerian novel... The novel of Nigerian reality must therefore encompass in its literature that pervasive ontological property of what it takes to be a typically Nigerian experience or world view.

Osita's position is that the Nigerian novel must have a philosophy as well as ideological viewpoint. Similarly Erim (2001:302) argues that:

One common feature in the Nigerian novel is the constant recourse to oral tradition – riddles, proverbs, myths... the novelist draws a great deal from oral sources to locate the content of their works.

This recourse to oral tradition is to provide a vital link with the past. It offers an opportunity for an assessment of the past and reconnects it to the present in order to project the future. This cultural recreation in literature and its evaluation in historical perspective is the major thrust of New Historicism. Similarly, Onukaogu and Onyerionwu (2009:108) explain that the Nigeria's "chequered historical process" is one source that the Nigerian novel has gained from. They further explain that the Nigerian novel has taken an "intensive and extensive exploration of the experiences, as varied as they are, that make up the nation's sociopolitical history" (p.109) A major issue that we need to ponder on is: why history has remained so imperative to the Nigerian novelists. Akwanya and Anohu (2001:8) attempt to offer explanations to this. According to them, "the Nigerian novel was moving into an area in which it was history that was consigned to forgetfulness, which all awareness focused on the objectionable in contemporary experience". The contemporary Nigerian novelists attempt to re-awaken this history that seems threatened or has been "consigned to forgetfulness". This re-awakening has been the concern of the younger generation of Nigerian novelists, but from a different view point.

The Nigerian novel draws its theme from the cultures and traditions of the Nigerian people. Taiwo (1976) sees the Nigerian novel "as an attempt to translate traditional customs, beliefs and attitudes into an entirely new context"(2). Here we see the cultural element as a defining criterion of the Nigerian novel. The cultural and traditional elements have been used by the Nigerian novelist to explore contemporary issues. Also, the Nigerian Civil War has featured prominently in the contemporary Nigerian novels like: Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Soza Boy*, Chimamanda Ngozi, Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*, among others. The military usurpation of political power has also been a major feature in the new Nigerian novel. Examples are:



Adebayo William's *The Remains of the Last Emperor*. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Okey Ndebe's *Arrows of Rain* among others. Another area of interest of the contemporary Nigerian novel is the environment and ecology with particular emphasis on the Niger Delta. Novels such as: Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow* (2006). Helon Habila's *Oil on Waters* (2010) explore the effect of oil exploration on the environment. There is also the issue of religious crisis and fanaticism as we see in Liwhu Betiang's *Beneath the Rubble* (2009) and *The Cradle on the Scales* (2011). All these are reactions to the social realities in Nigeria which the Nigerian novelists have occupied themselves with.

2. New Historicism

This theory was developed in the 1980s and came mainly as a reaction to New Criticism's text-alone approach. New Historicists believe in the importance of the literary text, but situate it within its historical context which they think provides more and explicit meaning compared to the text-alone approach. The historical context will include the author's life, intentions and temperament. This theory does not necessarily deal much with historical facts, because historicists have come to wonder whether the truth about what really happened can ever be purely or objectively known. History is not seen as something moving towards the present and not with specific eras with *zeitgeist* – spirit of the time. One major thing about New Historicism is the breaking of barriers separating history and literature, since it is difficult to reconstruct the past correctly without bias. New Historicists are always aware of historical change and social dynamics that inform their theory.

The theory is rooted in the works of Michel Foucault, a French philosopher and historian. Foucault sees history as power, not as repressive power as seen by Karl Marx, but as complex forces that influence events that happen. New Historicism owes more to this ideology by Foucault. According to (Abrams 2005:190) "New Historicism attends primarily to the historical and cultural conditions of its productions, its meaning, its effects and also of its later critical interpretations and evaluations". Here the literary text is not seen merely as a reflection of an historical epoch, but an artifact "situated" within the totality of institutions, social practices, and discourses that constitute the culture of a particular time and space. ...the literary text interacts as both a product and a producer of cultural energies and codes (Abrams, 190-1). One major feature of note about new historicism is that it embraces previous theories like Marxism, Post Structuralism, however New Historicism does not view the literary text as an autonomous body, but as a body of associate texts; these associate texts will include culture, religion, business and politics, among others. It is the relationship among these associate bodies that forms the major tenets and temperament of this theory. As Abrams points out, the literary text is "thoroughly" embedded in its context, and in a constant interchange with other components inside the network of institutions" (p.192). These networks of institutions will help in the realization of the author's meaning or meanings. This could pose a problem of 'subjectivities' that may alter the meanings based on the critic's biases. In this dimension Lynn (1994) avers:

So we cannot directly observe history, nor be scientific or objective about its facts or remolding, because history must be interpreted; our reading of it is as subjective as our reading of any other texts (128).

These biases and subjectivities are some of the limitations of the theory. However Lynn holds that: "the new historicist would feel free to study medical texts, economic texts, optic texts, rhetoric texts and any other texts that might help to explain...the literary text" (*Text and Context*, 129).



However, Bressler (1994:129) argues that “New Historicism challenges the supposed objectivity of history, redefines meaning of a text and asserts that all critics must acknowledge and openly decline their own biases when interpreting a work”. New Historicism sees history as been subjective and that not all histories can stand the test of time. From the various positions above, it could be concluded that New Historicism holds that the literary text is not a mere reflection of an historical epoch, it is embedded in other texts and the critic must as a matter of expedience see other texts as means through which the meaning(s) of the text can be found.

This paper is an attempt to place Helon Habila’s *Measuring Time* within the orbit of this theory.

3. Measuring Time

The novel explores the story of the making of the history of Keti village, the failed political career of Lamang and his several attempts to rejuvenate his failed political aspirations and his eventual death. The story centres on Mamo, Lamang’s son and his attempt to re-invent the history of Keti, his failed relationship with Zara and LaMamo’s Mamo’s twin brother exploits as mercenary in the Chad and Liberia wars.

Mamo’s attempts to re-write the history of Keti are the major thematic concern of this novel. As stated in the blurb, the novel tries to chart the Nigeria’s turbulent history with all its ups and downs. Habila is of the view that rather than dwell on the traditional history, writing about the recent history of Nigeria could help shape the polity and chart a new course as opposed to lamenting the failed past. The novel also explores the missionary history in Nigeria. In understanding the missionary history, it is pertinent to note that it was the precursor to colonialism in Nigeria. Secondly, the novel tries to expose the root cause of religious violence in the Jos Plateau region. The first Mai the village head of Keti is a Christian, but the subsequent Mai could not uphold to the Christian tenets of one man one wife. The Mai gets converted to Islam to accommodate his many wives. This single factor triggers religious intolerance in the region. Habila’s position appears to be a castigation of Christianity which according to him, imposes on Africans Western belief system without taking into consideration situations peculiar to traditional Africa.

According to Merritt (2007:2), “*Measuring Time* is also the concern of historians, politicians and soldiers...” Merritt’s position is that in the making of the Nigerian nation, these groups must as a matter of expedience be taken into consideration. The political class has failed because of lack of vision and a well defined mission. There is looting, corruption, poverty, poor management of resources, inflation, high cost of living among other social, economic and political vices. Lamang becomes the epitome of a failed political class. He heads the league of election riggers. Electoral fraud is one of the phenomena that marred the recent political history of Nigeria. When Mamo runs into Asabar his cousin and political thug to his father, in a place where he and his group are thump-printing ballot papers snatched from a polling unit, the following ensues:

“What are you doing?”

“We are voting already”. Asabar said with a laugh. The three echoed his laughter as they dipped their thumbs into a blotter of ink before pressing them on the white square space next to the rooster logo on the ballot... “so what are you going to do with the cards”?

“You do not want to know”? Asabar said but then he went on almost eagerly. “we will take them to the polling station and put them in the ballot boxes. That is how you win election” (*Measuring Time*, 170).



Electoral fraud is Nigeria's most recent history. This history must be checked if the nation must move ahead. Mamo cannot convince Asabar of the magnitude and grave consequences of rigging. Asabar represents the masses who have mortgaged their consciences, those who are ready to sell their nation for a pittance. Lamang and Asabar represent real dramatic personae who have contributed to the vicious circle of poverty in Nigeria. Lamang represents failed leaders and Asabar represents the blind political followership in Nigeria. Through the projection of these concerns, Habila appears to hold the view that the main cause of the political backwardness in Nigeria has been marred elections. As he did in his earlier novel, *Waiting for an Angel*, where he traces the political crisis to the failure of the political class, in *Measuring Time*, he re-echoes the same tone. The election crises of 1962, 1983, 1993, 2007, and 2011 are all recent histories that Habila re-echoes here, when Mamo said, "Of course, he knew that election-rigging was the norm" (p.172). Here, the blame is not laid on colonialism and slavery, but on the inability of Nigerians and Africans to effectively manage their political affairs.

When his father fails, Mano describes him thus: "He came home early in the morning, alone in a taxi... looking very small" (p.177). And "Mano continued to watch his father gradually lose his swagger" (p.78). And "after the decline came the fall, and when it did, it was sudden—and literal" (p.179). Finally Lamang "dies in degrees" (p.99). Lamang's rise and fall exemplify our political elites who seek vain glory through vaulting ambition and who would go to any length to actualize their individual selfish ambition to the detriment of the entire citizenry. The fall of Lamang ends his ritzy life style which is the trademark of the Nigerian politician.

New Historicism looks at all the facets of life that contribute to the making of the text. The political text in *Measuring Time* does not end with the political class; but it also includes traditional authority. The Mai who is the symbol of the traditional political authority is docile and senile and lacks ideas and a definite ideological perspective. The Waziri, who is the traditional Prime Minister, becomes the de facto Mai directing affairs for his own selfish interest. The durbar he organizes is meant to raise money to sink boreholes in order to make clean water available to the people, but the money goes into private pockets and consultancy services with fake contractors. These and many others make up the political and economic texts of the novel.

To address this issue is to raise the consciousness of the people, who have become cynical and actively passive. This consciousness makes or gingers the revolution at the end of the novel. However, it could be argued that it has rather come too late when the damage had already been done. LaMamo in the eyes of Mamo becomes the hero of the revolution. Mamo's consciousness makes him write a new history which will include "the lives of ordinary people" (Merritt: 2).

The historical text in *Measuring Time* is also very pronounced. History is the base-rock upon which the literary text is built. From the Anglo-Saxon period till date, the literary texts have always chronicled the history of the people. The Nigerian novel in particular could be called the historical novel. The centrality of history to the Nigerian novel cannot be undermined. Merritt further concludes that "*Measuring Time* confirms Habila as an exceptional voice in African literature. His great skill is to imbue the individual and the locals with panoramic, historical significance. Colonial history, tribal myth, 20th century politics..." (Merritt: 2).

Habila tried in this novel to recreate Nigeria's most recent history. In re-recreating this history, he takes the Marxist approach which makes him to insist that the ordinary people are the real heroes in the making of history. Mamo becomes Habila's voice as he tries to revise Drinkwater's version of *A Brief History of Keti People*. Drinkwater's version of Nigeria's history distorts many facts and needs to be revised to put facts straight and in proper perspectives too. In doing this, Habila traces the origin of the Mai from Boldok who was a Christian to Hamidi or EL Nafati. EL Nafati changed religion because he was not expected to keep many wives for it was



against the Christian doctrine, but in Islam he could keep his wives. Habila does not agree with the older generation of Nigerian novelists that cultural demolition was done by colonialism alone. However, if it was so it becomes the place of Nigerian writers to rework this cultural demolition and put things in the proper perspectives. One of these is Mamo's attempt at revising Drinkwater's book *A Brief History of the People of Keti*. According to Cummins (2007:3), "Mamo's ostensibly unpromising interest in Drinkwater – in order to show that the white man's impact on Keti can end up meaning more to the villagers than mere cultural loss or defeat". Mamo becomes a revising historian, rewriting the history which will place more emphasis on the common man. Habila also made attempts to make known some of the causes of the religious crises that have plagued Northern Nigeria in recent years. He maintains that the solution is not to trade blames, because the trouble started with blames. "For many hours later the trees and rocks rang with the shrills sounds of Christians and Muslim praying and so great was their rivalry that neither group was willing to quit before the other"(p127).

Another historical text that the novel explores is soldiering. The place of the military in the social, economic as well as the political life of the Nigerian nation is very well accentuated. Habila tries to tell the story of the soldiers. He highlights three categories of soldiers as represented by Uncle Haruna, George and LaMamo. Haruna represents the category of soldiers who get conscripted into the army to fight a war of blame which they had no idea about. In this group is also Uncle Iliya. Describing the senselessness of the war, Uncle Iliya says:

'My war ended in 1968. I was shot in the arm. He lifted his empty left shirtsleeve. "I spent the remaining months of the war in a military hospital in Kaduna. It was a terrible time. I saw more deaths and more suffering than I had seen in the second world war'(p.40).

But Uncle Haruna was not that lucky. The war had killed and destroyed the human psyche in him. "But by now it is clear that there was something wrong with uncle Haruna – he didn't seem to be able to remember much" (p.41).

Habila traces the problem to the military usurpation of political power and the pogroms in the North "everywhere the Igbos were being hunted and killed" (p.42). Habila takes time to tell the story of the civil war and its devastating consequences on the people and blames it on the soldiers. He uses Toma or One Leg to tell these stories. What Habila does here is to debunk the earlier writers' concentration of the loss of culture to colonialism. He holds that it is not only colonialism that is responsible for the collapse of African institutions but, that the Africans are also guilty as charged.

Military usurpation of political power led to the 30 months civil war in Nigeria and wars in other most African states. Uncle Haruna is a victim of the war. Haruna's loss of self as a result of the long stay in the war front as he becomes incarcerated in the swamps is the same as Lomba's loss of self in Habila's earlier novel, *Waiting for an Angel* as a result of long incarceration in prison.

LaMamo on the other hand represents the Nigerian army who gets involved in senseless wars in neighboring African states. Through LaMamo's letters, Habila adopts an epistolary form. This form allows him the opportunity to tell the story with first hand information without much authorial intrusion. Habila paints vivid pictures of the senseless killing which are done by Africans and not by the colonial masters. It is this aspect of history that Habila believes the Nigerian novelist should occupy himself with.

LaMamo wrote to Mamo thus:



I've been in Liberia for over two years now and many things has happen and not too many of them good. For instance if you remember my friend whose family was killed... is death... all the house are empty it seems so much fighting has been done, the village is empty and its smell of dead bodies, we even saw half-buried corpses in the bush (p.129).

This and many more of these scenes are replete in the novel. We see brutality, killing and maiming by those who are saddled with the responsibility of protecting the hapless citizens, but rather they have become their tormentors. "Tragedy struck us when soldiers came to the clinic and started shooting. They killed one of the white doctors and many defenseless patients"(p.131). As a journalist, Habila becomes emotional, as he remembers the fate of Nigerian journalists who got their hands severed because they reported the atrocities caused by the war in Liberia.

LaMamo later returns home and leads the revolution that ousted the Mai and his cohorts. LaMamo's role in the novel gives it its revolutionary aesthetics. LaMamo has the revolutionary spirit which Mamo lacks as he grumbles under self defeats.

Another set of soldiers that Habila satirizes is the likes of George and the nameless military administrator. This set of soldiers is senseless, visionless and lack any definite ideological perspective. George abandons Zara but goes about to organize a birthday bash for his girlfriend. George says to Mamo: "Did you see that? The stupid bitch would rather have unprotected sex than suck my dick"(pp.242-3). This incident happens when Mamo catches George making love in a car.

To take us away from theater of absurd, Habila introduces some love scenes which sometimes are unskillfully described.

Now his hands were inside her gown, running up and down the broad of her back...
Almost shaking with desire he threw off his trousers and his shirt and he pulled her to him, burying his face in her breast. She sighed and guided him in (p.105).

After this experience Habila makes Zara and Mamo relive their sexual experiences. The relationship between them blossoms as long as they are in the village. Later the story centres on this failed relationship. There is also the love relationship between LaMamo and Bintuo, the failed relationship between Zara and Captain George. Zara's love for Mamo is merely for sexual pleasures to cover the void left by the failed marriage with George, while Bintuo's love is real. In drawing the love relationship between Bintuo and LaMamo, Habila seems to be echoing Ernest Hemingway's Catherine and Henry in *A Farewell to Arms* that the world will be at peace when there is love: geographical boundary notwithstanding.

4. Conclusion

This paper has examined the new historicist dimensions in Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*. These include: history, politics, religion, soldiering and culture. It attempt at redefining Nigerian history. However, it is the place of the Nigerian creative writer to reconstruct the past and the present in proper perspectives in order to project the future. This, in addition Habila does not share the view of older Nigerian novelists that colonialism has been solely responsible for Nigeria's woes, rather, Nigerians themselves are also culpable. Military usurpation of political power, the Civil War, electoral fraud and corruption have done greater harm to the Nigerian polity than to colonialism. These constitute the most recent history that this paper explores



In barely a decade, Habila has established himself as a great voice in the Nigerian literary scene. Habila has a rare gift of blending facts with fiction without sounding like a historian. He has done this in *Measuring Time* with journalistic precision. There is also the use of the epistolary form. Through LaMamo, the story moves in and out of Ketu. Finally it is the position of this paper that if the Nigerian nation must move in a proper direction, history must be reviewed to see where the nation had gone wrong.

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