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Military Dictatorship in Nigerian Novels: A Study of Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* and Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (Pp. 275-289)

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Abstract

In all parts of the world, writers play very prominent and significant role in the social re-education, re-orientation and re-direction of their societies. Literature functions and helps to shape our attitudes to life which brings change in the society. This function implies that a writer must have some real sense of vision and commitment to live up to expectations as a writer. Writers are the soul of a society, the voice of conscience whose role is to champion the goal and task of leading the people unto a glorious and prosperous future. Writers reflect the hard socio-political as well as religious and economic realities of the people. The aim is on one hand to re-direct the society unto its peace, unity, harmony and peaceful co-existence and on the other hand, to save the past events from a humanistic point of view for the generation yet unborn, unlike the historian who deals only with facts and figures. This will help to give the future generation a vision that will help them access their past and determine their future. This paper concentrated on one of the peculiar events in the history of our country, Nigeria, the era of

military dictatorship. The works of Chinua Achebe and Helon Habila, Anthills of the Savannah and Waiting for an Angel respectively were selected and studied. The focus is to determine and explore how these writers captured and creatively documented their individual feelings during that era of blood, tyranny, oppression, brutal killing, terror and alarming rate of corruption, the era of military dictatorship in Nigerian politics.

Introduction

Fiction is often regarded by many as an imaginary work of art which is not real but purely an invention from the author's fountain of creative ingenuity. The Latin word 'fictio' from which 'fiction' had originated means 'counterfeiting'. Therefore, some people have been misled to believe that fiction is simply a 'counterfeiting account' of a presupposed real life event or rather a distorted pictorial presentation of a life that is imaginary which often has little or nothing to do with the reality of our world of flesh and blood. But it has been proven by several scholars and critics that fiction is a reflection of our real life situation, people and events from which we learn and see several truth and facets of our human existence. Writers only select materials from our real world and blend them into their fictitious works.

It is the search for this truth in fiction that makes this paper to delve into the works of Chinua Achebe and Helon Habila to expose military dictatorship in the politics of Nigeria which is the bedrock of the novels. Military dictatorship ranks among the events in the history of many African countries that can never be forgotten nor its attendant injustice, brutalities, exploitation and backward blows dealt on the growth of the African nations be extinguished.

Military Incursion in Nigerian Politics

On January 15, 1966, Nigeria passed through a very crucial event of her life, an event that changed her physiognomy and the course of her history forever. It was the first military coup that usurped the civilian government of Alhaji Tafawa Balewa. The coup led by major Chukwuma Nzeogwu and others saw to the death of the premier of the Northern and Western regions among other top military officers and senior politicians. Although the coup failed and the ring leaders apprehended, it saw Major-General J.T.U Aguiyi Ironsi, into power as the first Military Head of State and General Officer Commanding the Nigerian Armed forces. This coup led to a counter-coup in July 1966 that saw General Gowon into power. It was this regime that gave rise to the

unspeakable Biafran-Nigerian war in which millions of people lost their lives in the three years of unstoppable gun fire and war. Coups beget coups and so the country became a land of coups.

According to Obikeze, Obiajulu and Obi, Emeka:

It could not be wrong to call Nigeria a land of coups. The country has been ruled by seven military rulers and has had a much higher number of coups both successful, unsuccessful and “arrangee” ones. (180).

This paper is not a historical discourse or an exegesis of military rule in Nigeria and we would make no attempt to trace and recount the number and dates of coups and counter coups in Nigeria as well as the ‘Lion Heads’ that emerged successfully as the acclaimed Head of States still dripping of blood.. No attempt will be made in this paper to highlight the programmes and leadership styles of these ‘blood tasty military men’, that will be the concern of a historian. One can deem it necessary to highlight only the critical comments of authors and individuals on the influence and resultant effects of military incursion in the politics of the country. Among these comments, efforts are made to glean and present only the critical comments that will throw more light on the topic under discussion.

Employing ideas and comments from non-fictitious work is to balance the latter views and standpoints of the novel as they portray the miasma of human life alongside the brutal and corrupt mindset of these military men that veered the country to the brim of economic collapse, moral decay and political instability for in the words of David I. Ker:

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 (26).

In line with the above, we shall examine some critical comments from sources gathered from non-fictitious works. From the bulk of available literature we see just like several creative artists presented, the agony of the masses that waited for death to come; that forced their ways into self imposed

exile; that littered the prisons all around the country; that could boast of nothing to show for the economic viability of the country; that could no longer express themselves for fear of the blood thirsty demons; that were ostracized and discriminated by the outside world as people that eat and speak corruption; the agony of hunger, death and starvation is what the novels rose to expose.

An anonymous Rtd General quoted in Guardian Newspaper Interview as quoted in Obikeze, Obiajulu and Obi, Emeka has this to say about military in politics:

With the benefit of hindsight, I think the military's involvement in politics hasn't been the blessing it was supposed to be. Looking back at the situation of the country today, it would have been better we didn't venture into government. We are blamed for every imaginable crime in the land now. The military which used to be respected and spoken about with awe are now being attacked with contempt. I now subscribe to the views of those who believe that 1966 coup could have been avoided. We were supposed to right the wrongs of the politicians. But we over stayed. Now we are being blamed for the wrongs we set out to right. It is a terrible thing (168).

One can quickly add that the 'terrible thing' is what these military men did to the country and her dear citizens at large as we will soon see in the writings of Helon Habila and Chinua Achebe.

According to Ake C:

The ascendancy of the military is one of the great tragedies of Africa, for the military is nothing other than a highly specialized apparatus of violence whose salience begins when sociability has become impossible and when civilized values no longer apply, when we must take to the battle fields. That is why military rule is inherently and inevitably de-civilizing.

Thus, military dictatorship is still believed and upheld by many as the worst thing that has ever happened to the politics of our nation as well as many African nations once held under the claws, brutalities and tyranny of these

'khaki' leaders. This is what these novelists among few other stand to expose for future generations to see and most importantly learn.

Military Incursion in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*

Anthills of the Savannah is one of Achebe's novels where he x-rays the ugly experience of coup'd'état and military incursion the affairs of the nation as it relates to Nigeria experience. As a writer in contemporary Africa, Achebe took upon himself the laborious task of dusting off the ashes of the past to deal with the problems and events of his modern day nation following independence and end of colonialism.

In the novel, Achebe examines the ugly situation of events in the country in the hands of the military whose manner of government is oppressive and hostile. He paints the ugly picture of military involvement in the helms of leadership of a country known as Kanga which allegorically represented his dear country, Nigeria. *Anthills of the Savannah* deals with the problems of the present day society during the era of military dictatorship when the civilians were over thrown on the charges of gross indiscipline looting and corruption.

Achebe condemns military incursion in politics through coup'd'état, with the aim of sanitizing the nation from the hands of the civilians. The military took over power with the motives to right the wrongs of the civilians which to Achebe is a total failure that did more harm than good in society. He frowns at the idea of over throwing civilians in the bid to restore sanity in government and says in the novel:

Experience and intelligence warn us that man's progress in freedom will be piecemeal slow and undramatic. Revolution may be necessary for taking a society out of an intractable stretch of quagmire but it does not confer freedom, and may indeed hinder it ... society is an extension of the individual the most we can hope to do with a problematic individual psyche is to reform it. No responsible psycho-analyst would aim to do more, for to do more, to overthrow the psyche itself, would be to unleash insanity. We can only hope to re-arrange some details in the periphery of the human personality any disturbance of its core is an irresponsible invitation to disaster ... (99).

Achebe, saw military leadership as a woe rather than the blessing it claimed to be. He told a story of a man who is dreaded by all and sundry because he is a military leader. Even his commissioners could only suggest things that delight his head or they will be shown the walls of the prison for disobeying him. The people are made to suffer and no one is allowed to utter a sigh of despair or he would face a dangerous music.

The novelist professes that military regime and era in politics was a total failure, a situation that only worsens the problem of the nation, which it claimed to solve. It was an era not worth experiencing all over again. Corruption, foreign manipulation, strike actions, demonstrations, embezzlement, looting and intimidation which it claimed to eradicate only flourished the more and poverty was ushered in the more into the lives of many citizens. His Excellency gets whatever he wants and suppresses the people under his tyrannical leadership. Chris the commissioner of information and Ikem Osodi were victims of these sheer cruelty and hostility in leadership, which they paid dearly with their lives.

The military to Achebe are beasts and in human set of individuals. Their leadership style is that of intimidation, suppression and victimization it was a situation that really shook the foundation of the nation. His Excellency, the military leader wanted to be a life president who will continue to brutalize and silence the people. His government is like a den, no one leaves his den unhurt. Even when Chris wants to resign as the commissioner for information, he wouldn't be allowed to do so; he will be jailed for refusing to carry out his evil instructions. Chris laments thus:

So I will stay put and do you know something else; it may not be easy to leave even if I wanted, do you remember what he said, during that terrifying debate over his life presidency? I told you, didn't I? For one brief moment he shed his pretended calmness and threatened me; if anyone thinks he can leave the cabinet on this issue he will be making a sad mistake. Anyone walking out of that door will not go home but head straight into detention. Yes I remember that ... (119).

The military era was one of tyranny; denigration, molestation and complication were the citizens are but only slaves and mere worshippers of him, their great god. His Excellency like the manner of all military leaders hates anything that portrays the truth. This was what made Ikem Osodi a

victim of his injustice. Ikem Osodi, the Editor of the “National Gazette” took it upon himself to write about nothing but the truth; to expose and satirize the corruption and dictatorial nature of the military rulers. This was a great threat to the government of His Excellency and Ikem must be stopped by all means. Thus, Ikem became a victim of the truth he writes about.

Achebe exposed many actions and activities of the military rulers, actions that could not be sustained in a democratically elected government. His Excellency is hell bent on silencing anyone who says the truth about his government. Ikem paid heavily for saying the truth, he was arrested and murdered! Even when Chris refused to carry out the orders given to him, His Excellency could not be made to change his mind. He refused his resignation letter reminding him that he was not in Westminster or Washington but in a remote country Kangan. This ugly situation could only happen in military dictatorship. The novelist described the military dictators as set of individuals that are very insensitive to the yearnings of their people. These dictators rather chose to use their money as set of individuals that are very insensitive to the yearnings of their money, money from their sweats and toils to enrich themselves. They enjoy luxurious and ostentatious life. These rulers instead of providing food, water and shelter for their people only erect monuments, presidential retreat for their comfort and admiration. In the present military regime which the novel deals with, the military rulers spent fortunes only to rebuild the presidential retreat for their comfort.

Achebe also highlights on the plight of the people, who are against the dictatorial government. They are neglected and abandoned. The dictators believe that to frustrate them in the only means to make the policies of the military government against their wish. They were maltreated and marginalized. Those that stood in defense of the truth are denied basic social amenities and economic dividends. The people of Abazon were abandoned to poverty and hardship under the wreckage of erosion. They have no boreholes and other amenities because they refused to support the military ruler in power. As a result of marginalization and neglect, the people of Abazon have no option than to bow under the powers of oppression and dictatorship thus:

“Because you said no to the big chief he is very angry and has ordered all the water boreholes they are digging in your area closed so that you will know what it means to offend the sun you will suffer so much that in your next re-incarnation, you will need no one to tell you to say yes whether the matter is

clear to you or not ... so we came to Bassa to say. Our own eyes and perhaps the work on our boreholes will start again and we will not all perish from the anger of the sun, we did not know before but we know now that yes does not cause trouble. We do not fully understand the ways of today yet but we are learning ... so we are ready to learn new things and mend our old useless ways ... (127).

The military leaders cared nothing about the people but see them as sets of gullible and simple-minded followers. Even when the people of Abazon came to visit him to complain their problems, he simply sent Professor Okong to attend to them with lies:

“Find some nice words to say to them tell them we are tied up at this moment with important matters of state. You know that kind of stuff ...” “... Tell them, if you like, that I am on the telephone with the President of United States of America or the Queen of England peasants are impressed by that kind of thing. You know ... if they have bought a petition, accept it on my behalf and tell them to be rest assured ... that their problems not complaints will receive His Excellency’s president attention” (17).

Achebe through the characters of the taxi driver shows the people under the molestation of dictatorship. They have no hope of revival, had it not been for Ikem, who takes the pain to write about their situation; a deal he paid with his life. With the characters of Elewa, Bertrice, Adamma, Emmanuel and Abdul, Achebe brings to light, the victims and survivors of dictatorship. In them we see the despair, weariness and agony, but a sense of pride and cheerfulness for having survived the military era to witness a new nation – a dictator free nation. They understood the message Chris was passing across as Beatrice told Elewa and others:

You know why I cried? Chris was only just beginning to understand the lesson of that bitter joke ... Chris was sending us a message to beware. This world belongs to the people of the world not to any little caucus, no matter how

talented ... and particularly absurd when it is not even talented (Said Abdul 232).

This is a lesson they learnt, and it is a message to entire humanity. The society is for the people and not for a group of military leaders. The era of military dictatorship claimed the lives of Ikem Osodi and Chris, but the kidnapping of His Excellency is a medium through which Achebe demands a total eradication of military incursion in Kangan, an imaginary country that can be likened to any African state.

Exposing Military Dictatorship in Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*

In the novel, *Waiting for an Angel*, Habila exposes the situation of terror, anguish, victimization, molestation and slavery meted on the citizens of Nigeria during the military era in politics. He concerns himself with General Abacha's years of untold hardship, killing, violence, brutality and imprisonment that led the country many years back in development and Infrastructure. He captures the era and period as filled with atmosphere of blood, fear, terror, hunger, diseases, starvation, denial of self rights and denigration. He pictures a time in the history of the country when people were willingly waiting for death - An angel of death to take them away from the shocking realities of their lives. Thus, the title-*Waiting for an Angel* -an angel of death, for everyday in the poor people's lives seem their last day. The title in another sense portrays the hope that kept the people alive and made many survive - The hope that an angel will come one day and redeem them from the claws of military dictatorship. Together, everyone, young and old waited for an Angel, who later came with the death of General Abacha at the peak of his career; a time he was planning to become a life president.

Lomba, the main character in the novel was detained in the prison simply because he is a journalist who writes about the truth. The government erected more prisons and all around the country; innocent citizens were littered as political detainees without trial, a technique to put them away from challenging the government forever. Thus the prison superintendent told Lomba in his archaic English:

I read. All. I read your file again. Also. You are a journalist. This is your second year. Here, Awaiting trial. For organizing violence. Demonstration against. Anti-government demonstration against the military legal government: he did not thunder as usual (14).

Lomba tried to deny this though it was useless. He replied:

"I did not organize a demonstration. I went there as a reporter'. He shrugged 'That is not my business. The truth will come out at your Trial'. 'But when will that be? I have been forgotten. I am not allowed a lawyer, or visitors. I have been awaiting trial for two years now ...'

'Do you complain? Look twenty years I have worked in prisons all over this country. Nigeria ... sometimes it is better this way. How can you win a case against government? Wait, Hope' ... Now he lowered his voice, like a conspirator. 'maybe there, there'll be another coup, eh? Maybe the leader will collapse and die. He is mortal, after all. Maybe a civilian government will come. Then, there will be amnesty for all political prisoners. Amnesty ... (15).

This is the only hope for Lomba and thousands of political detainees littered all over the country, those who are not in favour with the callous military. The only hope is a civilian government. Through Janice, the girl friend of the Prison superintendent, Lomba's fate and helplessness was described thus:

'And you know that he is never going to be tried. He would be kept here forever, forgotten'. Her voice became sharp and indignant. 'How can you be so unfeeling? Put yourself in his shoes. Two years away from friends, from family, without the power to ... There was very little to be done for a political detainee – especially since about a week after that meeting, a coup was attempted against the military leader, General Sani Abacha, by some officers close to him. There was an immediate crackdown on all pre-democracy activists and the prisons all over the country swelled with political detainees ... (32).

do anything you wish to do. Two years in Chains! ... (30)

Habila reinforced the horrible and dehumanizing situation under General Abacha thus:

Habila delved into the psychological disposition of many individuals to expose the traumatic effects of military government on them. Bola expresses

helplessly the students' union resolution. The students were tired of the unending brutality and deceit, as well as the vain promises of a transition government and final handover of power to the civilians. It was obvious that the military rulers never had democracy at heart and so they kept postponing the date and toying with the emotions of the people. The students to show their resentments organized a peaceful demonstration. The students thought they were dealing with people with conscience. When they protested, a fire to fire attack was launched on them. Few were killed, many wounded. The military men invaded their hostels, to loot and rape the girls. Fundamental human right was blown into the wind. People and things feel apart. Like walking corpses, they lived their lives without meaning, order or form. The school was closed down till further notice. That experience made Lomba to quit school. Bola got home to learn of the accident involving his mother, father and two sisters. All died instantly except Lola, the younger sister who sustained minor injuries. They collided with a military truck lying on the side in the middle of the road. The joy of the family was destroyed, the hopes and aspirations of the characters shattered due to the unending tension mounted by the army boys.

Bola, a friend of Lomba was greatly affected by the death of his family members and the tension all over the land. In a psychological topsy-turvy, he went to the street shouting at the top of his voice:

The military has failed us. I say down with Khakistocracy!
Down with Militocracy! Down with Kleptocracy! ...
According to Wole Soyinka, "The man dies in him who
stands silent in the face of tyranny. (68).

As expected, he was arrested by the agents of the Khaki boys littered all over. He was beaten to coma and later dumped in a psychiatrist hospital. That was the end of Bola.

James drew the attention of Lomba to the realities around him when interviewing him for the post of a journalist. He told him:

"Look out there, see the long queue of cars waiting for fuel. Some of them have been there for days ..." And we are major producers of oil'. We returned to our seats. 'This is just one instance. If you care to look, you will find more: Ethnicity, religion, poverty. One General goes another one comes, but the people remain stuck in the same vicious

groove. Nothing ever changes for them except the particular details of their wretchedness ... (108).

Helon Habila traversed the country and told the story from the point of view of different characters, in different locations and in different situations but all expressing one thing in common: the general feeling of injustice, hunger, brutality and terror all around them. The whole citizens shivered and moaned during the era of blood; the military era that took the country many years back; the era that sowed the real seeds of corruption and stayed long enough to fertilize them to growth. Joshua and other forsaken characters lectured Kela in these words:

‘Look, we are living under siege. Their very presence on our streets and in government houses instead of the barracks where they belong is an act of aggression. They hold us cowed with guns so that they will steal our money. This is capitalism at its most militant and aggressive. They don’t have to produce any superior goods to establish monopoly. They do it by holding guns to our heads. Let me tell you why they hanged Saro Wiwa ... where is Abiola? In prison! They will continue subjugating us, killing all dissenters, one by one, sending them into exile, till there is no competition left to oppose them (158).

When the people of Morgan Street complained on a peaceful demonstration, because they wanted to change the name of their street, Morgan Street to Poverty Street, they were given war and violence. Many lost their lives. It was an ugly scene of violence, death and trauma worth telling than experiencing. Joshua had to choose exile. James towards the end summoned the whole situation of the country to Lomba in these words:

“... you won’t find a publisher in this country because it’d be economically unwise for any publisher to waste his scarce paper to publish a novel nobody would buy ... The people are too poor ... too busy trying to stay out of the way of the police and the army to read. And of course you know why paper is scarce and expensive – because of the economic sanctions placed on our country. But forget all that. Say you found an indulgent publisher to publish your book ... you’d want to enter it for a competition. And what is the most obvious competition for someone from a

Commonwealth country? Of course, the Commonwealth Literary Prize. But you can't do it. Because Nigeria was thrown out of the Commonwealth of Nations early this morning, it was on the BBC" ... (192).

It was the climax of it all, the very peak that troubled Helon Habila. In the end, all the writers and journalists were hunted like rats. James only option was exile. Lomba was later apprehended and thrown into the prison. It was in that prison that we met him when the novel opened. At last, General Abacha died and that was how the Angel of Liberty came to the rescue of many citizens under the bondage of military dictatorship.

Obikeze, Obiahulu and Obi, Emeka captured the scene in a purely non-fictional manner:

However, Abacha ... suddenly died on the 8th of June 1998. his death which Nigerians refer to as the 'coup from heaven' brought so much joy to most people as his iron grip on the nation was loosened forever by the cold hands of death. This brought to an end a regime that is reputed to be the most tyrannical, brutal, vindictive, overtly sectional, blood-thirsty, deceitful, corrupt and intellectually hollow in the nation's history (218).

In the 'Afterward' Helon made his personal statement that:

It was a terrible time to be alive, especially if you were young, talented and ambitious and patriotic ... you cannot listen to the radio without hearing your country vilified, 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).

He concludes thus:

'What this story tries to do is to capture the mood of those years, especially the Abacha years: the frenzy, the stubborn hope, but above all the airless prison like atmosphere that characterized them (225).

In politics of Nigeria, nothing that would be said of Abacha's and other military regime in the politics of Nigeria will be an overstatement. It is a nightmare we pray never to experience again.

Conclusion

In the form of conclusion, one could rightly claim that this paper has done enough labour to project the views of these writers on military dictatorship in the country Nigeria. Writers are the moral consciousness of the society. Helon Habila and Chinua Achebe have proved that beyond every reasonable doubt. From their point of view, this paper ends with a bitter statement, a crucial indictment on military leadership. Military men should on no account be allowed to occupy the leadership positions of the country. Writers should rise up to the challenges of helping the society regain all they lost. It is the duty of the writers of the present day to guide the country to attain an environment free of corruption, intimidation, exploitation, manipulation, subjugation and denigration, among all the seeds that fertilized during the military era in politics. No writer should be left out of this task. Also the duty of writers ought not to terminate with writing, watching, waiting and doing nothing. They ought to march writing with action. Writers ought to be activists whose gallantry and radical efforts will see to the end of several vices that bedevil us. Writers should step into the shoes of Ken Saro Wiwa, Wole Soyinka, these are writers cum activists. This duty must be done even in the face of our present democracy. Writers should be aware that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, therefore, they should guard themselves against the excesses of our leaders even in the present dispensation as some military men turn to civilians in the guise to lead and prosper the country. Much is expected of writers of this nation, Nigeria, especially now the country veers towards the side of democratic collapse as a result of several areas of injustice and gross failure still glaring in the leadership of the country. This is a call to save the soul of a dear nation. This is a duty to life, art and humanity. It is a duty that must be done for us to behold in our time, that country of our dream, something the generations yet unborn will look at and be proud of us. Politics ought to and should remain a game of justice, equity and fairness. In all ramifications, its ideal must be for the people, from the people, by the people. Leadership should be a source of hope and survival not for the rich who could play the game but for the beggars sprawling all over the gutters, slums, ghettos and streets. It should be for the peasants, the poor masses whose hands produced and harness and unimaginary wealth for the country and it behooves our writers to labour to its

realization.

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