

Review

“Words Made Flesh” A Formalist Reading of Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel*

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Formalism is one of the literary approaches of the twentieth century. It is a critical approach that emphasizes on a close reading of a text, the literariness of a text and not on something external. The approach demands for a close reading of a text and it is interested and appeals to the highest points and factors that make a work of art 'literary' in all ramification. Formalism provides for a reader, a way to understand and enjoy a work for its own inherent value as a piece of literary art. This approach emphasizes on close reading of a text in order to decipher the literariness of the work and nothing more. By emphasizing on close reading of a text itself, formalist critics place all attention and focus on the text as literature. A literary work from the view point of formalist critics is a piece on its own which is capable of its own meaning and significance in isolation of the society and several social issues that may have given birth to the work of art. This paper attempts a formalist reading of Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*. The idea is to enquire on the literariness of the work and to highlight on the peculiar parts ranging from the narrative techniques, diction, point of view and other intricate elements that make the novel an interesting literary piece. The paper concludes on how these techniques were richly harnessed and explored by the writer and how they combined effectively to contribute to the success of the literary piece and how these elements serve as keys to unlocking hidden textual meanings in the novel.

Keywords: Formalism, Literariness, Techniques, Diction, Style, Characterization, Criticism, Literary Appreciation

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INTRODUCTION

Formalism is one of the literary approaches of the twentieth century. Formalism as a literary theory is believed to have the distinction of having more names than any other recently school of criticism. There exist

several versions and names for formalism as a critical approach. The model of this approach as designed and defined by the America and English critics has been called the New Criticism. Then we have the Russian

formalism. The designation of the term "Formalism" was at its inception derogatory because of its focus on the patterns and technical devices of literature to the exclusion of its subject matter and social values. But this was later to become a neutral designation. It was a widely applied approach to interpretation and analysis of literature works by the early 1930s and it has continued to influence critics and teachers in the United States in the analysis and appreciation of literary works in the twentieth century. This made formalism as a literary approach one of the most influential and widely applied methods of literary analysis and criticism in the twentieth century. Formalism as an approach to literary criticism has its own chequered history but it stands tall in the judgment and evaluation of literary works in a way that it makes literary works interesting as it removes several external and socio-political constraints that may have come in the way of meaning of a text. It reduces the burden on a critic and the critic as a reader is armed with only a literary text and he is dependent on nothing external to the text to arrive at worthwhile meaning and evaluation of any given work of art (Abrams, 1987).

The formalist critic views literature primarily as a specialized use of language, and proposes a fundamental opposition between the likely use of language and the ordinary, "practical" use of language. Formalism as a critical approach conceives of literary language to be self-focused, and does not extend to external factors in conveying information. The function of literary language is not to convey information by making extrinsic reference, but to offer the reader a special mode of experience by drawing attention to its own 'formal' feature, that is, to the qualities and internal relations of the linguistic signs themselves. The object of study in literary science in the point of view of formalist critics suggested by Roman Jakobson 'is not literature but 'literariness' that is what makes a given work a literary work.'

Formalism as a critical approach emphasizes on a close reading of a text, the literariness of a text and not on something external. The interest of a formalist critic is on what makes a text literary. This is what makes the approach popular and interesting in the sense that it demands a close reading of a text and appeals to the highest points and factors that make a work of 'literary' in all ramifications. Formalism provides for a reader, a way to understand and enjoy a work for its own inherent value as a piece of literary art. By emphasizing on close reading of a text itself, formalist critics place all attention and focus on the text as literature. It removes social-political and economic issues in a text even when it is obvious that they are there. Formalist critics are not interested in the personality of the writer and what influenced him to write. These critics are not concerned about the social issues that gave rise to a given work of art. Again, they do not associate with literary works any

relationship whatsoever with society. A literary work from the view point of formalist critics is a piece on its own which is capable of its own meaning and significance in isolation of the society and several social issues that may have given birth to the work of art. The idea that literature does not grow or exist in a vacuum as Ngugi Wa Thiong'o posited but rather is given shape, impetus even area of concern by the socio-political and economic issues in a society does not go well with the formalist critical theory. Works exist on their own status and have no bearing whatsoever with society from a formalist point of view. They do not treat a text as an expression of socio-religious, or political ideas, neither does it reduce the text to bring a promotional effort for some cause or belief. They insist on a close reading of a text and the result of this is that formalist readers are discerning readers who follow closely all the issues in a text to arrive at desired meaning. A critic using a sociological approach can read a novel about the Biafran war and would be more interested in the stories about the war than in the novel to make his judgment. He continues to search for real life reports from various occurrences that with aid his interpretation of the message of a text. In such a case, the text may not be thoroughly read as the concern of the critic is more on the socio-political issues than the content on the novel itself. But a formalist critic aware of the task before him reads a work of art word to word, aware that his critical judgment is dependent on his findings and not in anything external to the text. This makes him a discernible reader.

In tandem with this, Kofi Agyekum posits that the formalists emphasize the form of a literary work as the core pillar for determining its meaning. In doing so, these critics pay attention to the literary elements such as plot, character, setting, diction, imagery, structure and point of view. The formalist believes that a literary work is analyzed internally with the work itself rather than resorting to literary history or extraneous things like the life of the author, or the socio-cultural, psychological, ideological and historical context of the work's formal elements. (124). Also as Di Yanni opines "what matters most to the formalist critic is how the work comes to mean what it does-how its resources of language are deployed by the writer to convey meaning. (20). Thus, for the formalist, literary work is language centered and oriented.

Anne Dobie avers that the critic who wants to write about literature from a formalist perspective must first be a close and careful reader who examines all the elements of a text individually and questions how they come together to create a work of art. Such a reader, who respects the autonomy of a work, achieves an understanding of it by looking inside it not outside it or beyond it. Instead of examining historical periods, author biographic or literary styles for example, he or she will approach the text with the assumption that it is a self-

contained entity and that he or she is looking for the governing principles that allow the text to reveal itself (40).

The formalist critics are not interested in anything external or the realities of the experiences of the author. Even the socio-political and cultural background of the novel is not needed. Also is the point of view from which the story is told is a significant shaping force. This is important with this approach because the reader is given only the information that the narrator knows, or how he or she understands it. The story of *Purple Hibiscus* may have been different if told by the author, in the omniscient point of view as her use of the naive narrator brought the story from the eyes of a child which could trigger lots of arguments and issues. This is the case with a story in the omniscient view or the multiple method point of view as all help to aid meaning from the point of view of formalist critics. Attention is also paid to diction, as language is very important to a formalist critic. Denotative and connotative meaning of words as well as symbols and allusions could aid meaning in a literary work. This is unity which is created for example when a single image of figure of speech is extended all through a work or when several images or figures form a pattern. This could be in the form of colour, sounds, symbol, object, words etc. all these are the task before a formalist critic which makes the approach interesting and appealing to a critic and reader.

Formalist Reading of Helon Habila's *Waiting For An Angel*

To read this novel, *Waiting for an Angel* from a formalistic point of view is engage in a close reading of the text and to highlight on the components of the novels that exude its literariness and makes it an interesting piece of art. The idea is to arrive at several hidden meaning from issues internal rather than external to the text.

Narrative Techniques in Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*

The novel, *Waiting for an Angel* (Asika, 2011) though written in the first person point of view began in the form of a prison's diary. The novel was told from the experience of many characters in their different locations. It is like a chronicle of the life and times of a group of people whose lives are symbolic and left much to be learnt, discovered and appreciated in their life time. The beauty of the opening chapter of the novel titled "Lomba" lies in the power of the diary format employed by the writer. The writer reported the chapter as if it was a true life account of the diary of a person discovered perhaps after his dead. Lomba, the protagonist in the novel was in the prison as a result of the role he played as a journalist

during the hostile military regime. He had gone to cover a demonstration by the people of Morgan Street who would wish their street to be changed to Poverty Street. Lomba had gone to cover the demonstration as a journalist and the scuffle and violence that followed suit landed him in prison. It was in that prison that we met him in the beginning of the novel and the frustration, trauma and madness of the prison wall forced him to start keeping a diary of his day to day encounter and experiences in the prison. The earliest date he started his prison diary as the novel unveiled was on Friday, July, 1997. The first diary he kept read thus:

Today I begin a diary, to say all the things I want to say, to myself, because here in prison there is no one to listen. I express myself, it stops me from standing in the centre of this narrow cell and screaming at the top of my voice. It stops me from jumping up suddenly and bashing my head repeatedly against the wall. Prison chains not so much your hands and feet as it does your voice. I express myself. I let my mind soar above the walls to bring back distant, exotic bricks with which I seek to build a more endurable cell with this cell. prison, misprison, dis. Un. Prisoner. See? I write of my state in words of decision, aiming thereby to reduce the weight of these walls on my shoulders, to rediscover my nullified individuality. Here in prison loss of self is often expressed as anger. Anger is to baffled prisoner's attempt to re-crystallize his slowly dissolving self. The anger creeps up on you, like twilight edging out the day. It builds in you silently until one day it explodes in violence surprising you... sometimes the anger leaves you as suddenly as it appeared; then you enter a state of tranquil acceptance. You realize the absolute puerility of your anger: it was nothing but acid, cancer, eating away you bowels in the dark. You accept the inescapability of your fate, and with that, you learn the craft of cunning, you learn ways of surviving – surviving the mindless banality of the walls around you, the incessant harassment from the warders: you learn to hide money in your anus, to hold a cigarette inside your mouth without welling it. And each day survived is a victory against the Jailer, a blow struck for freedom (3)

In terms of language, the language of the above excerpt can be described as nothing but poetic. It could simply make a good poem when arranged in verse and stanza with exclusion of some few minor words like below:

Today I begin a diary

to say all the things I want to say, to myself
 here in prison there is no to listen.
 I express myself
 it stops me from standing in the centre of this
 narrow cell
 and screaming at the top of my voice.
 It stops me from jumping up suddenly
 and bashing my head repeatedly against the
 wall.
 Prison chains not so much your hands and feet
 as it does your voice.
 I express myself.
 I let my mind soar above the walls
 to bring back distant, exotic bricks
 with which I seek to build a more endurable cell
 with this cell.
 prison, misprison, dis. Un. Prisoner.
 I write of my state in words of decision,
 aiming thereby to reduce the weight of these
 walls on my shoulders,
 to rediscover my nullified individuality.
 Here in prison loss of self is often expressed as
 anger.
 Anger is to baffled prisoner's attempt
 to re-crystallize his slowly dissolving self.
 The anger creeps up on you
 like twilight edging out the day.
 It builds in you silently until one day it explodes
 in violence surprising you...

The language is tacit and poetic and carries in it a whole lot of weighty thoughts, ideas and arguments which a prisoner would wish to pose on the realities of his life. The high level use of personification echoes in the whole paragraph. Anger is personified and built with human form. With the power of words, embellished with personification and often time hyperbolic statements, anger is seen as a destructive agent that engages the prisoners in a daily struggle. He invites them for a wrestling contest and in many situation defeat the prisoners. The effect of the defeat is expressed in so many uncontrolled ways and behaviours by the defeated prisoner. A good example of action capable of being produced by a defeated prison conquered by anger is the one described by Lomba in his diary about his fellow inmate thus:

I saw it happen in my first month in prison. A prisoner, without provocation, had attacked an unwary warder at the toilets. The prisoner had come out of a bath-stall and there was the warder before him, monitoring the morning ablutions. Suddenly the prisoner leaped upon him, pulling him by the neck to the ground, grinding him into the black, slimy water that ran in the gutter from the toilets. He pummeled the

surprised face repeatedly until other warders came and dragged him away. They beat him to a pulp before throwing him into solitary ... (4)

This is the exact effect of anger on the prisoners expressed in several other forms of violence and destruction that bring in more harm and oppression than the remedy and elixir they sought for. In some situations, when they defeat the anger, the effect on them produces a different sort of effect their bothers on the sanity of the prisoner. The effect of the defeated anger produces certain degrees of actions symbolic of the prisoner's world of doom and inescapable fate. These are actions inconceivable in our minds but very possible when you find yourself behind the bars, a prisoner without any hope of trial and redemptions. Such abnormal and inconceivable actions include: hiding money in your anus; holding a cigarette inside your mouth without wetting it (4)

One is only capable of thinking and imagining how one can tuck in perhaps a one thousand naira note into one's anus in such a way that a warder even if he opens your anus a thousand times will not see it as it has been inserted inside your body through your anus. Again one will be forced to imaging how the prisoner is capable of shitting out the same one thousand naira note from his anus when he wants to make use of the money. Again, one imagines how a prisoner will hide a cigarette in his mouth without getting it wet even when he shouts and sings as may be demanded by the warder as a prove that he had nothing inside his mouth. Yet, when it is time to smoke, the prisoner carefully tucks out the cigarette from a portion of the mouth where he hid it to smoke. Such actions look more like magic. There are quite inconceivable but are real in the world of a prisoner far removed from our daily world. This is the symbolic of all the writer hopes to describe embedded in the beauty of language and choice of words employed to do so. The lines in the novel are arranged in layers of poetic prose, or prosaic poetry as the case may be and laced with allusions, symbolisms and imaginative language that bring the story close to the heart of a reader. The powers of descriptiveness of the author is one style that makes the novel not just memorable but allows the reader to feel, touch, see, smell and sense the actions in the story. The descriptive powers of the writer transposes the reader from his world of reality into the imaginative world of the writer and in many occasions the reader begins to feel like a prisoner too, next in line with Lomba, or the Angel, an undisclosed character awaiting for his death or the inmates of Morgan street whose name beautify their streets – thus, their collective demand that the name of their street be changed from Morgan Street to Poverty Street in commemoration of the poverty they knew too well. This is the situation that brought destruction rather than the alleviation the inmates of the street sought for, a

situation that landed Lomba in prison while he was executing his duty as a Journalist in a hostile military atmosphere. It is in the powers inherent in the descriptive quality of the writer that we feel the actions and understand the situation of the characters even when the writer does not have that in mind. Let's consider this example from a prisoner who just came out of solitary and the writer's description of the heart-touching engagement between him and Lomba:

... When he left, an inmate, just back from a week in solitary, broke down and began to weep. His hands shook as if with a life of their own. What's going to happen next? He wailed, going from person to person, looking into each face, not waiting for an answer. We'll be punished. If I go back there I'll die. I can't. I can't. Now he was standing before me, a skinny mass of eczema inflammations, and ring worm, and snot. He couldn't be more than twenty, I thought, what did he do to end up in this dungeon? Then, without thinking, I reached out and patted his shoulder. I even smiled. With a confidence I did not feel I said kindly, "No one will take you back". He collapsed into my arms, soaking my shirt with snot and tears and saliva(5)

The writer was able to touch our different sense organs, the auditory, and olfactory among other sense organs with the imageries created. The prisoner is dying away with eczema, ringworm and snot and the fact that he was about twenty years of age made his condition more pitiable. The writer almost assumed the pose of a scatologist writer in his bid to describe and express the uncanny situation of prisoners evident in the diseases they suffer and the snot, tears and saliva always at their disposal.

Another style and area of language worthy of note is the combination of poetry in prose. The writer was writing poetry as he was writing prose. This is in the form of the prayers of Lomba as a prisoner. These poems were in the form of poetry and prayer for the prisoner, Lomba. Lomba as he intimated us in the earliest time he started a diary wanted to say the things he could not say in his diary:

Today I begin a diary, to say all the things I want to say to myself, because here in prison there is no one to listen. I express myself. It stops me from standing in the centre of this narrow cell and screaming at the top of my voice. It stops me from jumping up suddenly and pushing my head repeatedly against the wall. Prison chains not so much your hands and feet as it does your voice. (3)

This is another effect of anger and frustration on the prisoners. It makes them to stand and scream at the top of their voices, at no one in particular. It makes them to bash their heads repeatedly on the wall in search of answers and elixir that never come. Lomba started writing as a form of escape and as a form of communication since he has no one to talk to in prison. That was when he started writing poetry and how the writer began to weave poetry and prose in a chapter of his novel. These poems were sort of prayers thus:

Lord, I've had days black as pitch
and nights crimson as blood,
but they have passed over me, like water.
Let this one also pass over me,
Lightly, like a smooth rock rolling down the hill,
Down my back, my skin, like soothing water. (6)

This is one of the poems of Lomba that was also his prayer as a prisoner. As the narrator in the novel reported, it was this prayer that was on Lomba's lips the day the two warders came for him though it brought pain and torture to him as his poems and writing materials were confiscated and he was thrown into solitary; nevertheless, the poems and prayer opened avenues of better life and survival for Lomba as the discovery of his poems led to his discovery by the prison superintendent. The prison search for Lomba's property exposed the entirety of the worth of a prisoner:

They ripped off the tattered cloth on its back. There were no papers there. They took the pillow-cum-rucksack (a jeans trouser – leg cut off at mid-thigh and knotted at the ankle) and poured out the contents on to the floor. Two threadbare shirts, one pair of trousers, one plastic comb, one toothbrush, one half-used bar of soap, and a pencil. This is the sum of my life, I thought. This is what I've finally shrunk to; the detritus after the explosion: a comb, a toothbrush, soap, two shirts, one pair of trousers and a pencil (8)

This is the worth of a prisoner, the sum of what Lomba owns and possesses. The superintendent in his quark English was out to deal with Lomba to extract every truth from him. His language wrongly punctuated and misplaced tones and pitch that is a violation of the normal code of the English language become a symbolic of the personality of the soldiers. Many of them are poorly-trained in the English language and yet command many strategic and important positions in society. Hear the superintendent in his archaic and ill-construct grammar to Lomba:

'So, you won't. Talk. You think you are. Tough;

he shouted. You are. Wrong. Twenty years! That is how long I have been dealing with miserable bastards like you. Let this be an example to all of you. Don't. Think you can deceive me. We have our sources of information. You can't. This insect will be taken to solitary and he will be properly dealt with. Until. He is will to. Talk. (page)

The wrong punctuations in the statement and use of full stop in the wrong places is not a typographic error but how the writer presented and punctuated the grammar of the superintendent to show his level of education and grammar. It was from the discovery of other poems of Lomba that the superintendent discovered how harmless the poems were and how Lomba's poetry could help him in his love affair. The superintendent was in with a girl, Janice. Lomba was later thrown into the solitary and it was through the use of personification that the writer brought out several hidden meanings in the life of a prisoner in the novel. Lomba recounts his experiences in the solitary thus:

... As it realizing how close I was to tears, the smell, got up from their corners, shook the dust off their buttocks and lined up to make me acquaintance – to distract me from my sad thoughts. I shook their hands one by one; loneliness smell, anger smell, waiting smell, masturbation smell, fear smell. The most noticeable was fear smell; it filled the tiny room from floor to ceiling edging out the others. (12)

It was only his poems that brought remedy to his condition as the superintendent came to see him and handed him back his papers:

Your papers, he said, thrusting them at me once more. I was not sure if he was offering them to me. 'I read them. All poems. Letters. Poems, no problem. The letters, illegal. I burned them. Prisoners sometimes smuggle out letters to the press to make us look foolish. Embarrass the government. But the poems for your girl isn't it? ... Perhaps because I work in prison, I wear uniform. You think I don't know poetry, eh? Soyinka, Okigbo, Shakespeare ... (16).

The superintendent had offered Lomba a poem he wrote for her Christian girl friend, Janice, a teacher he was so much in love with. The poem was simply an imitation of Lomba's poem. After much ado, the superintendent offered Lomba an arm of friendship. He alleviated his problem as a prisoner. He brought him out of the solitary confinement, gave him pencil and paper, even, book too to read. He gave him comfort but on one condition that Lomba will continue to write poems for him which he

gives to his girlfriend as if he wrote them. Lomba in his diary captured one of the poems he wrote for her titled three words:

When I hear the water fall charity of your laughter,
When I see the twilight softness of your eyes,
I feel like draping you all over myself, like a cloak,
To be warmed by your warmth.
Your flower-petal innocence, your perennial
Sapling resilience – your endless charms.
All these set my mind on wild flights of fancy:
I add word unto word,
I compare adjectives and coin exotic phrases
But they all seem jaded, corny, unworthy
Of saying all I want to say to you.
So I take refuge in these simple words,
Trusting my tone, my hand in yours, when I
Whisper them, to add depth and new
Twists of meaning to them. Three words:
I love you (20).

Lomba wrote many poems. Consciously the writer was weaving poetry and prose, a style of writing that leave much to be admired and treasured in the novel. A combination of the two genres of literature in an inter-connecting manner, both of them expressing a giving thought of life of loneliness, quest for freedom and the power of love and at the same time can stand differently and make their own individual meaning is a style of writing not popular in many works of African writers. Lomba continued to write poems for Janice and the writer continue to intertwine poetry in prose to the delight of the readers. The poems help to calm the reader, sustain the tempo and enhance the plot and structure of the story. But in all the poems Lomba wrote, it was Lomba's bowdlerization of Sappho's "Ode" that brought the superintendent to the cell door. The poem read thus:

A peer of goddess she seems to me
The lady who sits over against me
Face to face
Listening to the sweet tones of my voice
And the loveliness of my laughing
It is this that sets my heart fluttering
In my chest,
For if I gaze on you but for a little while
I am no longer master of my voice,
And my tongue lies useless
And a delicate flame runs over my skin
No more do I see with my eyes.
The sweat pours down me
I am all seized with trembling
And I grow paler than the grass
My strength fails me

And I seem little short of dying (21).

It was this poem that brought the superintendent to Lomba's cell's door. With that poem, superintendent decided to ask Janice to marry him that same night. He has offered Lomba two packets of cigarettes. With much symbolic and embellished expression the writer explained how the superintendent only saw the sadness on the same face. The expression shows the contrast in life as the superintendent was happy with Lomba's imprisonment. He writes poems for him and was saving his relationship that might culminate to marriage while Lomba was languishing in prison dependent on the little succour and remedy the superintendent offers. That is a clear picture of the irony of life and the condition of men in their alien world. Some people profit from other people's misfortune. It is the way of the world. The poem was magical that it brought Janice to the prison. She came to see who has been writing the poems for her lover. That was state of despair; even the new level of comfort the superintendent was granting him and his poetic expression could not cure this trauma in him. The writer in his highly descriptive powers explains this thus as found in Lomba's diary in September:

I was in that lethargic, somnambulistic state can demand people surely fall into when in total inanition and despair, they await their fate – without fear or hope, because nothing can be changed ... I do not want to write any more poems for the superintendent's lover. I did not want more of his cigarettes. I was tired of being pointed at behind my back, of being whispered about by the other inmates as the superintendent's informer. Now I realized that I really had no 'self' to express, that self had flown away from me the day the chains touched my hands. What is left here is nothing but a mess of protruding bones, unkempt hair and tearful eyes, an asshole for shitting and farting, and a penis that in the morning grows turgid in vain (23)

That was the day he met Janice and the day his journey to freedom begin to gather. Through Janice, he realized the true person of the superintendent. His real name was Mustafa. He was human after all, with a name, a history, even a soul unlike the soulless soldiers they have always perceived of him. Janice loved his poems and wished he could help him win his freedom. Janice persuaded her lover to help Lomba win his freedom. Lomba's diary was silent on whether the superintendent did much to help him but the years in prison taught him not to hope too much, not to depend too much as the writer recognized that nothing kills prisoner faster as too much hope and too much despair (32).

Abacha later died in 1998, General Abdusalam

Abubakar dared to open the gates to democracy and liberty for the political detainees. Lomba was in the rank of those real and the writer vividly described it in his usual highly personified sentences thus:

This might have been how it happened: Lomba was seated in a dingy cell in Gashuwa, his eyes closed, his mind soaring above the glass. Studded prison walls, mingling with the stars and the rain in elemental union of freedom; then the door clanked open, and when he opened his eyes, liberty was standing over him, smiling kindly, extending an arm. And Liberty said softly, 'come, it is time to go'. And they left, arm in arm. (32)

That was how Lomba's release was captured by the writer in highly personified statement. The door cranking open and liberty in human form standing before Lomba and offering an arm is one part of the use of language in the novel that will not fade easily in the minds of many readers. Liberty offered an arm and hand in hand both of them left the prison, away into the world of freedom. Also worthy of note is the role nature played in preparation of this monumental day. Nature is and will always act as a source of comfort to man. Irrespective of the idea of the adverse effect of nature, nature is a friend to mankind, a sort of refuge and succour for Lomba while in prison was soaring above the glass studded prison walls mingling with the stars and the rain in elemental union of freedom. Nature already had granted Lomba freedom in his mind before liberty in personification came for him and led him to freedom again. These are parts of the language, style, description, symbols and imageries that brought several hidden aspects of the novel to the forecourt of the reader. Through the description and free flowing but highly symbolic and descriptive words used by the writer in his flawless English, we see the life and travails of a prisoner and have a taste of what life fills like when we are not free. We too could learn to treasure our freedom and give our best to life with the belief that nature will always be there to guide our steps. All these are lessons gleaned from the opening chapters of Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*.

Diction

This is the choice of words in a work of art. A writer might choose to be simple, complex, obscure all dependent on the type of literary work and what the writer hopes to achieve. A critic using formalist approach must be interested in the language of a literary work. As Dobie posits 'words hold the key to meaning. A formalist will look at words closely, questioning all of their denotations and connotations (43). In the novel, *Waiting for an Angel*, the

language use played an important role in the interpretation of the message of the novel. first is the title, waiting for an Angel". The "Angel" connotes more than the heavenly Angels we know. It means so many things. The waiting for an Angel is symbol of a time when people waited for death because they could not longer cope with the brutality, oppression, killings, tension and oppression of the military regime. Evident of this in the novel is the section titled 'the Angel'. In that chapter it was not the heavenly Angel that the character waited for, but the Angel of death that came in the guise of the soldiers. The soldiers are the Angel of death all over the country parading themselves and the character tired of the mounting tensions waited for them to ease his pains. That was why the moment he was dying, he had explained "But when I turn it is not a soldier standing there it is an angel. It opens its enormous wing and closes them again in a clapping motion... I am bleeding from the chest (43). The Angel whisked him away. On another level, the Angel connotes the waiting for an Angel that with redeem the people who came with the death of Abacha and the birth of democracy. This is the enormity of what Abdusalam Abubakar did the moment he dared to open the gates to democracy and to liberty for the political determines (32). The name 'poverty street' is symbolic of the sufferings of the masses languishing in the slums and ghettos when the government and our resources have the capacity to better the lots of all of them. The use of the words 'down with khakistocracy' down with militocracy! Down with kleptocracy! All connote the evils and looting propensity of the military men. These words are not in the dictionary but exist in the novel to give insight into the brutal and devilish nature of the military leaders. So many ideas were expressed by the writer with symbolism, allusions and words which the knowledge of what they connote and represent is a deep knowledge of several levels of meaning inherent in the literary text.

Point of view/ the Plot of the Novel *Waiting for an Angel*

Another issue worthy of note in the novel is the view of formalistic approaches the point of view and the plot of the story. Plot is the arrangement of actions, the sequence of events from one action to another until a story comes to the desired end as purported by the writer. The plot is the backbone of any work of art and a very important element of study for a critic using formalist approach. The plot of the story in the novel was not arranged in a sequential or chronological order and to understand it very well we shall do that alongside the point of view of the novel, *Waiting for an Angel* (Asika, 2011).

The story of the novel was told from a multiple method point of view. Unlike many novels written in the

omniscient and first person point of view, *Waiting for An Angel* added a new vigour from the multiple method point of view which allowed the writer to cover a wide range of issues in the manner he so did. Instead of chapter by chapter presentation the novel was unfolded with the names of characters in different locations reporting the different experiences. The book is compressed of 7 chapters in this order:

- Lomba
- Angel
- Bola
- Alice
- Lomba
- Kela
- James

The names of these characters made the title of each of the chapters and were narrated from different versions of one story which the writers set out to tell in the novel. This adopted points of view made the story more plausible and believable to some extent as we regard works of fiction. By allowing different characters to report their deferent experience, in their different locations, we see how the issues and ideas as expressed by the novelist is something of a communal experience. The issues addressed are issues not felt by one character alone but all these characters which they reported from their different locations and various dimensions from which we can make judgment. It also portrays the seriousness of the message and information the writer hopes to convey. The author's ploy to tell the story form different views of different characters, in difference locations and in somewhat different situation is unique and apt as these characters collectively expressed on thing in common, the ills and vices in their society thereby portraying the level of social decay, degeneration and disorder that were becoming the accepted norms and practices in society.

The first chapter 'Lomba', told about Lomaba's experiences in the prison a result of his patriotism to the country. In the prison he began to keep a diary and to unburden his thoughts. He writes to survive and to wait for whatever fate had in stock for him. He voices thus:

Today I began a diary, to say all the things I want to say, to myself, because here in prison there is no one to listen. I express myself it stops me form standing in the centre of this narrow cell and screaming, at the top of my voice. It stops me form jumping up suddenly and bashing my head repeatedly against the wall. Prison chains not so much your hands and feet as it does your voice... I write of my state of words of derision, aiming thereby to reduce the weight to these

walls on my shoulders, to rediscover my nullified individuality... (3).

This is why he writes and he went on to record all his tragic and most pathetic moments in the prison, the much he could remember. 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.

The next chapter titled 'Angel' tells about a character Lomba's friend who has always wanted to die. He had asked the diviner when they visited him with Bola and Lomba to tell them when he would die. The diviner told him that he will die when he sees Israfeal, the Angel of Death that will come for him. The soldiers were molesting people and making the environment hostile and vicious. They shoot and kill people at will. This is what obviously inspired the character to wait for his death and leave the brutal world. On the appointed day, the soldiers came with their usual molestation and brutality. There was curfew everywhere. The soldier began to intimidate him and in the encounter that followed, one of the soldiers shot him dead. The character explains while he was dying thus:

But when I turn it is not 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 out through the door... I am bleeding from the chest. I feel life draining out of me ... then it is gone (43).

The character thereby recreated his version of the brutal story and events of the time during the military regime of leadership which cost him his life.

The next title 'Bola' tells the story of Bola, Lomba's friend. He was a student and a young activist who believe in the rights of the students. He believes so much in Soyinka's maxim that 'the man dies in him who stands silent in the face of tyranny.' Bola aware of all the military have done in the country cried out bitterly thus:

Can't you see what is happening? The military have turned the country into one huge barracks, into prison. Every street out there is crawling with them. The people lock their doors, scared to come out. They play with us, as if we are puppets. Yesterday they changed the transition date again. IBB is deceiving us; he has no intention of leaving. It is our duty to push him out. We have decided to boycott lectures from tomorrow, all federal universities... (50).

Bola had led the activism and one could imagine the outcome of it. The soldiers came and opened fire on the students and killed some of them. Those who survived fled for their lives. The school was closed down till further notice. Bola came back home and learnt how his parents and his elder sister, Peju died in a car accident. Their car collided with a military truck lying on the side in the middle of the road. The joy of the family was destroyed, their hopes and aspirations shattered. Bola went to the street to register his anger as he shouted sorrowfully:

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).

He was a beaten to coma and arrested and that was the end of Bola another high score for military siege and brutality all over the nation.

The next section 'Alice' tells about Alice, a girl Lomba loved so much and wanted to marry but the moment the school was closed down; they were forced to go their separate ways. Lomba only met her again in a hospital where she was taking care of her sick dying mother. She was suffering from breast cancer and for her to cope with the bills and carter for her mother; she has to marry Ngar, a military man many years older than her. She never loved him but loves Lomba, yet she has to marry him because she needed the money. All Lomba's effort to save the situation was in vain and with tears filled eyes, he received the news of their wedding from a magazine he saw their pictures on while in prison. This is another tragic experience form Alice as a result of military siege.

The next section 'Lomba' narrates the continual tension in the country and how Lomba managed to survive after he dropped out from school. He had gone for an interview with "The Dial" and Dr Kareem took time to tell him about the situation of the country which he should write on as part of his interview. He told him thus:

Look out there, see the long queue of cars waiting of fuel. Some of them have been there for days! He turned to me, the amused look now pronounced in his handsome face 'and we are a major producer 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 comes, but the people remain stocked in the same vicious groove. Nothing changes for them except the particular details of their wretchedness. They've lost all faith in the government's unending transition programmes write on that' he finished abruptly (108).

Lomba indeed wrote more than as he was expected and that was how he got the job with *the Dial* as a journalist, a job that was to land him prison thereafter.

In the next title 'Kela' the story incorporated many characters living in a dungeon and hell of a street known as the poverty street. The street was described thus:

There were no trees on Poverty Street. The heat would comb the defenseless street unchecked... tearing into doors and windows, advancing from room to room, systematically seeking out and strangling to death the last trees of cool air hiding beneath chairs and behind cabinets... dogs would bolt out of the door ways, their brains cooked senseless, their tongues lolling out their mouths like pin sausages to be run over by cars. The chickens simply folded their heads beneath their wings and died ... (191).

This is where Kela and so many characters live. The place's real name was Morgan Street, but the inhabitants of the street changed it to Poverty Street. There we meet Joshua, who taught English and literature in a secondary school a block away from his house. Kela was sent to him so that he will prepare him for the exams in literature and Joshua indeed prepared him and taught him, not just for the exams but for the future and the realities of life around him under military regime in politics. From Joshua Kela learnt a lot about the realities of his environment. Joshua had a girl friend, Hagar who turned into a prostitute when she could no longer survive the hardship and poverty in the environment. She was his student way back in school when he was a youth corper, but turned out a prostitute whom Joshua was ashamed to patronize. There was the character of Nancy, Kela's sister that has a restaurant and the character of Brother. The woman's shop was called 'poor man's paradise! Once brother lamented thus:

... You de laugh at me because I bravely sacrifice my leg for this country, and now I am poor because I no fit work with one leg. You laugh at my friends here because dem de live for old and broken houses, because dem no get brothers in the army to thief and send dem money... 'He was shouting now, lifting the table with his fist as he spoke. But make I tell you something- you de laugh at the wrong people, make you go laugh at all the big big Generals who de steal our country money every day de send am to foreign bank while their country de die of poverty and disease...(133).

The chapter exposed the agonies and situations of many characters in different parts of the country under the chains and shackles of military dictatorship. The

characters were so frustrated and weary of life. Joshua once lamented to Kela in these words:

"Look we are living under siege. Their very presence on our streets and in the government houses instead of the barrack where they belong is an act of aggression. They hold us cowed with guns so that they'll steal our money. They don't have to produce any superior good to establish monopoly. They do it by holding guns to our heads. Let me tell you why they hanged Saro Wiwa. He was the only one who understood the economic aspect of the struggle. It is the money. He told Abacha, I know how much you and the foreigners are making gave us some of it. They killed him because he threatened these monopoly, got it? Monopoly. That's what this is all about. Where is Abiola? In prison! They'll continue subjugating us, killing all dissenters one by one, sending them into exile, till there is no competitor left to oppose them (158).

That was the plight of many in the novel. Joshua later organized a demonstration and it was in the process that many of them were shot. They had only gone to demonstrate that margin street should be changed to Poverty Street and that the Sole Administrator should come to their aid. That was their greatest crime. The soldiers opened fire on them. Hagar died in the process among many others. Joshua was wounded and was left in the hospital. Lomba escaped but was later arrested. Everything was destroyed for the characters. Kela later passed his exams in flying colour, he had literature A¹ having been taught by Joshua but he was never happy as he may never see Joshua again.

The last chapter 'James' narrated the tension felt by many writers in the novel. This chapter also exposed the state of affairs of the nation under the claws of the military dictators. Writers were suffering. Nigeria was removed from common wealth. Dele Giwa was killed by a letter bomb. James, the editor of *the Dial* was one of the most wanted with Lomba too. In that chapter, other writers gathered and expressed their sadness. Among them were Toni Kan, Chinedu, Otiono, Mark, Mike, Jimoh, Emeka Davies, Odia Ofeimum among others mentioned in the novel.

CONCLUSION

This paper sets out to attempt a formalist reading of Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*. The idea was to enquire on the literariness of the work and to highlight on the peculiar parts ranging from the style, diction, point of view and other intricate elements that make the novel an interesting literary piece. The plot and narrative

techniques were well handled to give a sense of unity, suspense and stylistic effect in the work. The use of multiple method point of view is very vital as it helped the writer to narrate the story based on the experiences of the characters from different parts of the country in order to make the story believable and convincing. The use of diction was also another interesting part of the novel. The story was told in free flowing and flawless English. The writer also coined some words like 'khakistocracy' 'militocracy' 'kleptocracy' With which he tries to explain the evils and looting propensity of the military men. These words are not in the dictionary but exist in the novel to give insight into the brutal and devilish nature of the military leaders. So many ideas were expressed by the writer with symbolism, allusions and words which the knowledge of what they connote and represent is a deep knowledge of several levels of meaning inherent in the literary text. The paper concludes that these techniques were richly harnessed and explored by the writer and that

they combined effectively to contribute to the success of the literary piece and how these elements serve as keys to unlocking hidden textual meanings in the novel from a formalist point of view.

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