Helon Habila – Lifting the Depression[1]

Violence crackles through *Waiting for an Angel*, Helon Habila's[2] debut novel, set in Lagos in the years of Nigeria's brutal military repression.

Within the first few pages, anger creeps up on a nameless prisoner who pounds the face of a warder into effluent flowing from the prison's toilet block. A sentence later, he, too, is beaten to a pulp. A chapter on, a man sits in a bar, sipping Coke, and waiting to die. Through the window, he sees a mob catch a thief, cudgel him, and then set him alight. "I watch the fiery figure dancing and falling," he says, "until it finally subsides onto the pavement as a black, faintly glowing, twitching mass."

And so it goes. A car crashes. A crowd is fired on. A friend is tortured through the night. We are led steadily to Ken Saro Wiva's judicial murder, the emotional heart of the book. As revolution is whispered on the street, Habila takes us to a peaceful demonstration, destined to meet a violent end. We watch the affray through the eyes of a fifteen year old, who shins up a mango tree as the riot police charge. "I closed my eyes," the boy narrates. "I discovered that I was whimpering like a lost child. I couldn't help it. Even now, many years later, the distinct sounds of the violence echo in my mind whenever I think about it. I can still hear the thud of blows, the oomph! of air escaping mouths and the shrill, terrified screams of the women."

Habila was born in Gombe in Nigeria's oil rich North – but Lagos has fascinated[3] him since he first arrived there as an

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[1] Suggested links are included as footnotes.

[2] http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=authC2D9C28A1123b25C83hHu1A5B640

[3] http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,5162-537595,00.html

impressionable teenager who had never seen the ocean. “I made the trip by bus, at night. On the way we passed wrecks of cars on turnings, and often the driver had to switch off his lights to deceive highway robbers lurking in the forest. All night the bus was filled with sounds of desperate prayers. Then we reached Lagos and the night gave way to dawn. I saw the Atlantic with the sun seeming to emerge out of it. It was glorious, ineffable.”

West Africa’s wild cosmopolitan heart, Lagos is suffering an extreme adolescence. In just thirty years, its population has grown twenty-fold and half of Lagosians are under 16. The city’s creative and entrepreneurial energies hold the key to the region’s future, but darker forces also grip it. Residents live with astonishing levels of everyday criminality, while riots regularly engulf the city. For an earlier generation of writers, Habila explains, Lagos symbolised an alien, Western corruption of the “true Africa”. They sent their characters there to lose their innocence. “It’s not surprising to see authors talking about Lagos as the ‘Devil’s City’,” he says[4]. “People see Lagos as a certain violent place. It’s almost like a living thing – like some animal that’s going to devour you.”

Younger writers, however, are ready for a more direct creative engagement with the city. “Lagos may be a very difficult place to live in: the slums, the agitation, the poverty and the violence. But as a background for a novel it’s brilliant. Half the things you don’t have to invent, they happen straight in front of your eyes. Stories just jump at you. As I writer, I just had to meet writers. In the North, there were no writers. No one understood what I was doing when I told them I was going to be a writer. They had never seen a writer before. In Lagos, these people became my friends. We had the same desire, the same passion.” But there is something desperate about this passion. Habila appears as a character, in his own novel, vomiting drunkenly over a balcony at a writer’s party. Amidst, the repression, the party is a “crazy, reversed wake where no one is able to cry.”

“Imagine yourself,” Habila urges us in the novel’s afterword, “young, talented and ambitious, living in such a dystopia: half the world has slammed all sorts of sanctions on your country; 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 sunk on the list of nations with poor human rights records. The weight on the psyche

[4] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/3110929.stm

could be enormous; all Nigerians became stigmatized by their rulers' misdeeds…It was a terrible time to be alive. Most intellectuals had only three options: exile, complicity, or dissent. Needless to say, there was more of the first two than the last."

Habila's escape came not through arrest ("you'll have no problem with visas after that, you might even get an international award"), but self-publishing. Nigeria may be at the heart of an exploding film industry (dubbed Nollywood[5]), but the audience for literature is small. So he scraped savings together to publish 1000 copies of the short stories on which *Waiting for an Angel* is based. Habila-the-publisher entered Habila-the-author for the Caine Prize for African Writing[6]. "Thanks for your mail," he wrote to the Caine Committee, when it announced its shortlist. "We'll let the author know of the good news immediately. We hope that God will guide the judges in their choice." When the prize was given, he had won.

Waiting for an Angel is a writer's journey, but it starts at the journey's end. In prison, Lomba, a novelist and journalist, arrested on a demonstration, keeps a secret diary. Inevitably, he is betrayed, his roll of papers and stub of pencil seized. From the darkness of solitary confinement, he is rescued only by the vanity of a warder, who needs poems to impress his educated girlfriend. But Lomba's diary peters out without conclusion and, transferred from prison to prison, any trace of his existence is eventually lost. Was he executed like so many others? Or did his tenacity allow him to survive? Habila leaves us only with possibilities. When General Sani Abacha's death ended his terrible reign, perhaps Lomba was one of those released. "This might have been how it happened," he writes. "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 the 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."

But even as Lomba's story is ending, so the book is starting. *Waiting for an Angel* has a sinuous and subtle structure. As readers, we confront with Lomba the arrests and the poverty,

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5 http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F50B11F63D540C758DDDA00894DA404482

6 http://www.literature-awards.com/caine_prize_for_african_writing.htm

the heat and the repression, the fractured loves and the overbearing vigilance of paranoid men. All the time, we are circling in on the demonstration where, we already know, Lomba must lose his freedom. Lomba's instinct is to struggle against his fate. At first, he is tentative, an onlooker. At a rally, he feels like an impostor, unable to join the chants of the crowd. But the political calls to him, softy, insistently. Nigerians have been silenced. He must try to be their voice – even if the effort is futile and Nigeria's rulers never allow him to speak.

Lomba has his chances of escape. A bored and cynical painter invites him to bed. He turns her down, having promised to report from the protest. When the violence starts, he escapes with the wounded in a taxi, only to slip back into the action after a few blocks. His progress towards an arrest we never see is inexorable. His disappearance from the book takes us full circle and gives *Waiting for an Angel* its timeless quality. Lomba is frozen, always struggling with his destiny, always on the point of capture, always maybe executed, always perhaps let free. This, then, is Habila's final message. Hope is not the certainty of a happy ending, but the chance of one. The writer's duty is to define for us what is possible. "In a place like Nigeria, the people are already depressed," he explains. "What use is it just giving them back their depression?"

Now a Fellow at the University of East Anglia, Habila faces the familiar quandary of the exile. How to render the world he writes of, from the world he lives in? One thinks of Joyce, sending emissaries to measure up Dublin as he painted its definitive portrait from his continental home. From Chinua Achebe, we have had the seminal portrait of the disintegration of rural Africa. Today, it is the cities that bear the continent's hopes. Habila thinks Lagos now awaits its great novel. "I now have a huge platform and so much to say. African literature needs to do something dramatic, something great – to force itself onto the world stage."

David Steven
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David Steven was talking to Helon Habila at the British Council's Cambridge Seminar

[1500 words]