

**The Visionary Relevance of Kaine Agary's
Yellow-Yellow and Helon Habila's *Waiting For An Angel***

by

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Abstract

Writers in Africa use literature to see into the future of their societies. This paper focuses on Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and Helon Habila's *Waiting For An Angel*. A close reading of these novels reveals that one of their major preoccupations is to explicate hegemonic tendencies that disintegrate society. Through a critical analysis of the texts under study, this paper exposes the conditions that defame and hold the society down. The Marxist -sociological approach serves as the theoretical framework to interrogate the issues in these texts. The paper aims to show how the authors move the society towards the truth by surmounting inherent hegemonic evils. This, as the authors aptly demonstrate, could be achieved through exposure and resistance.

Vision is a practical phenomenon which finds expression in virtually all aspects of human life. It is a comprehensive sense of where you are, where you are going, how you are going to get there and what you will do when you get there. Vision resides in the subconscious mind and not the eyes. It is a creation of visualized idea or ideas that one considers when engaged in any undertaking. These ideas, which are later crafted into the direction the society will be taking, form a kind of picture in the mind of the person or the society waiting to be nurtured into reality. It is thus the key to understanding leadership. Men and women with vision see more and further than others. Vision can be relevant and irrelevant. A vision is irrelevant if it is not suitable in a particular course of action. On the other hand, a vision is relevant if it is focused, specific, clear and suitable to its course or perspective. This type of vision is pivotal to the harmonious survival of any society.

It is therefore considered suitable for the purpose of this paper. In Africa, societies provide a rich context for shaping the imagination of her writers. If the continent is engulfed in visionless leadership, there is no observable dearth of writers and visionaries to drive home its course. In this view, Achebe contends that literature *offers kinetic energy necessary for social transformation and change* (167). Each phase of the continent's socio-historical evolution spawns its own corpus of writers who exploit the timeless relationship between literature and society and make bold and visionary statements concerning the state of the continent. Through literary texts, writers build formidable intellectual and optimistic resistance at what they see and reflect as an intolerable society. This point to the visionary relevance of writers to achieve certain needs and ends. Joe De Graft explains that:

On the surface, these ends are many and varied; but at the deepest psychological level, they are closely related to man's compulsive need and therefore search for sanity and security in a world that theatres annihilation from all directions (3).

The high tempered zeal of Kaine Agary and Helon Habila in the texts under study is best vindicated by the above statement. Emenyonu equally opines that "writers must be relevant to the needs and aspirations of their societies..." (v-vi). In being relevant, Ojinnah adds that Agary and Habila *have taken up arms on behalf of the people* (7) in the societies presented in these texts. Agary and Habila portray societies characterized by frenzy and stubborn hope. The novels fueled by outrage are trenchantly biting interrogation of a cocktail of adversities including the free fall to anarchy. The authors, like in most works of historical fiction, have made use of and synthesized recognizable historical facts and incidents into the fictional fabric.

In the beginning of these novels, the authors present air-tight prison-like societies. Lomba, in Habila's *Waiting For An Angel* is a political detainee moved from one prison apartment to a more obnoxious prison apartment. In *Yellow-Yellow*, the protagonist, Zilayefa, finds the air in her Ijaw village suffocating. Thus, she wishes for freedom at all costs:

I was open to all sorts of things. The only option I was unwilling to consider, that tormented my quiet moments the most, was to remain in my village (39).

Ironically, getting away and becoming free from village entrapment for the bigger world becomes a story of adventure that ends in a misadventure. This could be because Laye was not aware that the entire society has been plunged into a huge barrack. Habila describes the situation like this:

Everyday came with new limitations, new prisons (224).

A critical reading of these novels would invariably reveal a period, as Habila explains, terrible to be alive especially if you were young, talented, ambitious and patriotic (223). In addition, James, a character in *Waiting For An Angel* tells Lomba that during this period, *people became too busy trying to stay out of the police and army* (192). The society becomes where dreams are never realized because *something always contrives to turn them into a nightmare* (164). The indirect comparison of the characters in the novels with the crab paints a picture of holistic societal retardation: people became like crabs in a basket pulling anyone who tries to stand up (Waiting... 183). Invariably, the land became a land of pygmies and visionless people.

There is equally a vehement comment on the mismanagement of resources. For instance, the absence of working refineries which led to incessant fuel scarcity in a society from whose soil crude oil is being lifted. In *Yellow-Yellow*, Agary describes that:

Long queues at petrol stations were a common sight... As petrol prices went-up, bus fares went-up, the price of bread went-up, and school fees went-up, but salaries remained the same (110).

This reality is equally exposed by Habila in *Waiting For An Angel*:

Ahead of them is a Texaco filling station, but like all the other filling stations it has no fuel (207).

The authors also expose the diverse protracted ethnic and interpersonal clashes inherent in the societies. In *Yellow - Yellow*, Agary opines that:

There was fighting between neighbours, between friends and between communities. Things were such that, with frustration weighing heavily on everyone, even those who prided themselves on being easygoing and having no enemies were dragged into miniwars... which were over property, contracts and even girlfriends (106).

The authors seem to be saying that one of the most pernicious consequences of societal evils is the culture of violence that it creates among the people. In *Waiting For An Angel*, Habila labels the North-South ethnic polarization which reached unprecedented heights (226) as the cause of the clashes. Agary states that:

People were convinced that the land's unpredictable leader was deliberately fanning the embers of ethnic conflict to shift focus from himself and his bid to succeed himself in the promised upcoming elections (109).

Consequently, dialogue, bargaining, compromise, all essential elements of effective governing style were de-emphasized in these texts. The characters are compelled to submit to senseless commands. In *Waiting For An Angel*, Habila explains: We lived with guns to our heads (226). He equally captures the monstrous effect of the evil scenario in the image of the recurring dark sun as Brother explains to Lomba: here na so heat full everywhere. Heat and Soja. If the heat no kill you, Soja go harass you (131). In addition, the authors reveal that the visionless leadership in the texts created criminalized economy. Virtually, all segments of the economy are rendered comatose by corruption, shady deals and fraudulent practices. In *Yellow-Yellow*, **Agary notes that:**

There was so little confidence in the fairness of justice that very few waited for the court's decision. The judges were so corrupt that a simple case would be adjourned over and over again until the litigants and their lawyers got the message and paid some bribe to the judge. Whoever acted quicker received a judgment in their favour (106).

Both authors show that selfish and visionless leadership as seen in these texts could legitimize the notion that the essence of political power lies in its use as an instrument for the private plunder of public resources. This is revealed by Agary in *Yellow-Yellow*:

The picture of Admiral's party that came out in the papers and soft-sell magazines showed beautiful, happy faces of people enjoying incredible opulence against the hardship suffered by the majority of the country (122).

In this view, Akpuda, in *Celebrating God's Own Robot* opines that these kinds of leaders are visionless and selfish, and he thus describes them as:

Patriarchs of crumbling quarters. Presidents for life. Founding fathers who founded only their own estates (43-44).

Agary and Habila also expose the unforgettable trampling upon of freedom of expression and freedom of the press. The visionless leadership in the texts silences all forms of opposition. In *Yellow-Yellow*, Agary explains that:

All those who dared complain about the land's leader mysteriously disappeared... one after the other, people who spoke out against the government were jailed, attacked and killed by 'armed robbers' or invited to meetings where they were served poisoned tea (99).

In *Waiting For An Angel*, Habila highlights that:

Abacha used plain, old-fashioned terror. There were more official killings, arrests and kidnappings... traditional rulers were deposed, newspapers were shut down and their publishers and editors arrested... the looting of the treasury went on as briskly as ever before (227).

The exposure of these forms of evil attests to an honest and vivid representation of a rigid and despotic leadership, which is an indelible index in the society.

Meanwhile, through the exposure of these societal ills, the authors call on the people to resist them. In *Waiting For An Angel*, Joshua sees the society plunged in the midst of these ills as not normal and therefore needs to be salvaged. He comments that: "in a normal country there wouldn't be a need for revolutions; there wouldn't be a Poverty Street" (159). Thus, the societies portrayed in the texts are engulfed in class divisions and confrontations between the ruling class and the common masses. On this, Amuta explains clearly that:

This intra-class schism between the cultural and the intelligentsia and the political/business arms of the elite has driven most African novelists into open partisanship with the broad masses and direct opposition even confrontation with the political business class. (77).

Consequently, using the rejection of Morgan Street for Poverty Street in *Waiting For An Angel*, Habila is able to envisage a holistic resistance and overhaul of the entire society. The people opt for Poverty Street because according to them:

We don't know who Morgan is or was some colonial administrator, perhaps, a reminder of our hopeless, subjected state. No, that name is too grand for us. We are poor, neglected people. If we were to choose a name for ourselves, we'd choose a plain and simple one, something that reflects our reality (171).

The people opted for Poverty Street because they do know what poverty is (171). It is a realistic reflection of their existence. While Habila records a collective resistance, Agary on the other hand records a personal rebirth of the protagonist, Laye, which is synonymous to the collective resistance and rebirth of the society. Laye thus comments:

However, if I lived, it was an opportunity for a personal rebirth along with Nigeria
... I would focus only on completing my education and making my mother, Sisi
and Lolo proud of me (177).

Prior to this rebirth, Laye is portrayed as an existentialist outcast and a personification of the plight of the individual immoralist in an atmosphere of moral and spiritual decadence. The death of the Head of State in these novels parallels the breakdown of a monstrous empire. It also brings with it new hopes and surmounting of the hitherto lawless and visionless society. According to Agary:

What was indisputable was the excitement in the air. People breathed as they had
not breathed in a long time. They talked about tomorrow as if they really believed
in it, as though magically all the problems in their lives would be fixed tomorrow
(176).

The implication of this is that the authors' vision for their societies is relevant because through the meticulous manipulation of words, the broken soul of the society is healed. Hope Eghaga observes that: Some words heal the broken soul, mend the potholes which their policies have inflicted on the land. Some words testify against them, the apes in power (7). In conclusion, Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and Helon Habila's *Waiting For An Angel* highlights socio-political issues, make sympathetic and humanitarian statements on the plight of the traumatized, alienated and broken. This situation is brought about by either violence or the parasitic relationship that exists in a strict social stratification. Through visions of exposure and resistance, the authors see that wars would definitely end if people share and love. This is why the authors advocate revolution to end an unfair social and economic order. In a language that is simple, though spiced with imagery, Kaine Agary and Helon Habila bring out their unique visions of life in a new and egalitarian world order where peace and love prevail.

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