

ISSN: 0976-8165

IMPACT FACTOR 7.86

# THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN  
ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

VOL.14 ISSUE 5 OCTOBER 2023

14 Years of Open Access

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal  
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## **The Quest for Political Freedom in Prison Narratives: A Critical Reading of Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel***

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**Article History:** Submitted-08/09/2023, Revised-13/10/2023, Accepted-18/10/2023, Published-31/10/2023.

### **Abstract:**

Using as a stepping-stone Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*, this investigation project analyses the quest for redemptive freedom in prison literature. This research paper argues that the hallmark of prison narratives lies in the fact that they foreground an act of resistance geared towards effecting freedom. Authors of prison literature, so the paper highlights, were either erstwhile jailers or actual ones who see fit to share their harrowing experience behind bars with the outside world. On top of being a scathing indictment of political leaders whose unconscionable fear of the pen or dissenting voices translates into paranoiac tendencies, prison narratives ooze with an utter refusal to be cowed into intellectual paralysis. Physical imprisonment does not necessarily mediate imprisonment of the mind. So writing while in confinement is an enabler of moral strength that allows survival in the face of overwhelming odds. The trials and tribulations of Lomba (Habila's lead character) and those of like-minded people whose wholesome advocacy of free speech and democracy has put in the crosshairs of the military dictatorship serve as a gruesome reminder that the fight for justice and freedom has the potential for bringing out the worst in humanity. Speaking of methodological approach, this research paper uses close textual analysis of the novel at hand. It also taps into perspectives predicated upon the humanities and social sciences (history, sociology, philosophy, psychoanalysis, psychology, for instance) as well as postcolonial theory.

**Keywords:** Prison, freedom, justice, language, postcolonial, resistance, power.

## Introduction

The purpose of this research paper is to investigate prison narrative as a pathway to redemptive freedom. To that effect, I predicate the theoretical framework on the notion of prison literature, also known as prison diary or prison writing. It can be summarized as a person's textual account of their life in jail. Anouck de Wringer gives a definition that captures the two-pronged edge of prison writing:

*Prison literature is a genre in which authors usually express their individual or collective struggles against an oppressive regime. In this way, prison literature could be regarded as a literary testimony of oppression and resistance that can clarify the specifics of violence within a particular socio-political context. (1)*

Indeed, prison writing has the credentials of protest literature as it exposes the travails of a troubled soul induced by political persecution. What marks prison literature as a genre lies in the fact that its author is oftentimes a person who has served time for politically motivated reasons, called a political prisoner or prisoner of conscience. Eamonn Carrabine underscores the privileged status of prison writing authors:

*Any account of prison writing soon acknowledges that most of the literature is written by privileged prisoners. Not only are they literate but often they have been imprisoned for political, religious or ideological reasons which further distinguishes them from other inmates. (20-21)*

Owing to the multifaceted hassles associated with the writing, for an inmate to summon up the courage to put pen to paper, the game must be worth it. The institution of prison is, according to conventional wisdom, earmarked for deviants, criminals—that is, people who offend against the social body. So putting folks behind bars for their dissenting views is downright nefarious. Political prisoners seek to unburden themselves through the power of language. To put it differently, they push back on being doubly chained through deprivation of liberty and separation from family. All this goes to show that the notion of resistance is inscribed writ large in prison narratives. Resistance is not enacted in a vacuum as it is always tied to an injustice. Anatheia Portier-Young appositely writes in *Apocalypse against Empire*:

*Acts of resistance proceed from the intention to limit, oppose, reject, or transform hegemonic situations...as well as systems, strategies, acts of domination. Resistance is effective action. It limits power and influence*

*outcomes, where power is understood as an agent's ability to carry out his or her will. (11)*

Prison narratives foreground an utter refusal to be cowed in all-out submission. The ordeals attendant upon the experience of imprisonment are a stark reminder of the significance of freedom in the sense of unfettered exercise of movement. It's noteworthy that basically two strictures go with the territory of prison life: silence and freedom deprivation over and above loss of contact with the social world. Political prisoners are steeped in the consciousness of their social utility, and, accordingly, strive flat out to keep their moral compass intact. A stubborn refusal to relinquish their ideals, and an unwavering denunciation of injustice are inscribed in their writing. Little wonder that the content of prison narratives is not only highly political but also, more significantly, about a crying need to right the wrongs of power abuse and bad governance. It would be wishful thinking, indeed, to conceive of politics as divorced from freedom. As Hannah Arendt clearly points:

*Whether we know it or not, the question of politics is always present when we speak of the problem of freedom; and we can hardly touch a single political issue without, implicitly or explicitly, touching upon an issue of man's liberty. For freedom – which is only freedom in times of crisis or revolution – the direct aim of political action, is actually the reason why men live together in political organization at all; without it, political life as such would be meaningless. The raison d'être of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action. (28)*

Prison life writing authors attempt, in a defiantly shrewd way, to strike a blow for freedom in the face of overwhelming odds. They may be fully alive to the dangers that they are courting but they do not recoil from throwing caution to the wind due to the loftiness of their goal. Prison writers' preparedness to pay the ultimate price for an ideal that may go beyond their destiny is anchored on a deep-dyed belief in agency as a means of effecting transformational change for the good of the greatest number. The Enlightenment-age German thinker George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel cautions against de-linking the quest for freedom and willingness to sacrifice one's life to it:

*It is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained; ... the individual who has not staked his or her life may, no doubt, be recognized as a Person; but she*

*or he has not attained the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness.* (Qtd. In Freire 36)

Prison can expose the frailty of self, in which case the prisoner is so consumed by the experience of prison life that he can do nothing but sink into resignation and despair. Conversely, imprisonment can be an enabler of agency; it can also reveal a prisoner's strength of character. In that event, the prisoner finds in resistance, not least through the pen, solace and succour. Despite the physical cum mental constraints that come with the territory of imprisonment, prison text writers bend their minds to weave their experience into the collective as their unwarranted woes reflect those of society at large. Frantz Fanon sums up clearly the correlation of prison life writing and the realities of social life outside the prison:

*Great men and women who up till then would never have thought of producing literary work, now that they find themselves [in prison], or on the eve of their execution – feel the need to speak to their nation, to compose the sentence which expresses the heart of the people, and to become the mouthpiece of a new reality in action.* (179)

When you think about it, the fictionalization of prison life is an indictment of postcolonial African leadership in addition to being a throwback to the past. A gross inability to put up with dissenting voices and a crass proclivity for tampering with the constitution with an eye to staying in power is doubtless a blatant hallmark of post-independence African political leadership. Animus against criticism and any form of challenge to their power drives African ruling political elites to resort to imprisonment of dissidents and opposing forces as a kind of deterrence. As the Kenyan celebrated thinker Ngũgĩ explains in his prison diaries, the prison system, not least in post-colonial Africa, is “*a repressive weapon in the hands of a ruling minority determined to ensure maximum security for its class dictatorship over the rest of the population, and it is not a monopoly exclusive to South Africa and England*” (4). Post-independence African leadership have taken a leaf out the book of the colonial empire. The colonial undercurrents of the glaring tendency amongst African ruling elites to put in jail those of their compatriots who stick their neck out by decrying the ills of their leadership feature decidedly show in the exchange between the detained Ngũgĩ and his cell warder. The former makes an analogy between his imprisonment in post-colonial Kenya and that of his jailer in colonial Kenya, namely Jomo Kenyatta. When the warder asks the prisoner why he still is not in the sack, the latter replies in a rather ironic way that he is “*writing to Jomo Kenyatta in his*

*capacity as an ex-detainee*” (4). The warder’s comeback that the two cases are different, Jomo’s being a colonial one, is made a mockery of by Thiong’o wa who emphasizes that his case reeks of neo-colonialism: “*A colonial affair in an independent country, eh? The British jailed an innocent Kenyatta. Thus Kenyatta leant to jail innocent Kenyans. Is that the difference?*” (4). The end-game of the nefarious propensity of tyrants for sending dissenting voices into gaol is intended to cow them into silence, thereby breaking their will to resist. Notwithstanding, prison literature has shown that physical imprisonment does not automatically translates into imprisonment of the mind. The political prisoner’s irresistible urge to write, to paraphrase Ngũgĩ wa thiong’o amounts to an enactment of stiff pushback.

### ***Waiting for an Angel: A synopsis***

A blockbuster novel in its own right, *Waiting for an Angel* came out in 2003 to critical acclaim. It is set in Nigeria against the background of military dictatorship that has taken a heavy toll on the people. The narrative basically revolves around a young journalist gone by the name of Lomba. In the aftermath of covering what was intended as a peaceful demonstration by students and pro-democracy activists, Lomba got arrested and subsequently sent into jail. Rather than wallow into self-pity or despair behind bars, he boldly takes to chronicling the manifold ordeals attendant upon prisoner life. Lomba’s raw deal at the hands of the prison superintendent serves as a testament to the unspeakable brutality of the military regime under General Sani Abacha conspicuous by its ferocious crackdown on Nigerian men and women of letters as well as pro-democracy activists. Lomba knowingly flouts prison rules and regulations to engage in writing activity to make a point about his own self cum the desperation of his society

### **I. (Political) imprisonment and its discontents**

Arguably, the quest for political freedom is enacted in prison life writing. The call to chronicle one’s prison experience encapsulates an attempt at pushback against tyranny. In prison literature, the miseries of life behind bars play second fiddle to the fears of putting pen to paper in a gutsy attempt to describe and castigate the horrors of dictatorship. Political prisoners draw the line at having their minds chained. If anything, there is more to prison life writing than a melting criticism of the hardships of solitary confinement. Rather, it is the nefarious use of imprisonment as a weapon of tyranny and power grab that is witheringly indicted in prison writing. As the French twentieth-century top-flight thinker Michel Foucault writes:

*Prison is the only place where power is manifested in its naked, in its most excessive form, and where it is justified as a moral force. "I am within my rights to punish you because you know that it is criminal to rob and kill . . . What is fascinating about prisons is that, for once, power does not hide or mask itself; it reveals itself as tyranny pursued into the tiniest details; it is cynical and at the same time pure and entirely 'justified,' because its practice can be formulated within the framework of morality. Its brutal tyranny consequently appears as the serene domination of Good or Evil, of order over disorder. (3)*

To be sure, the inhumanity of prison life is inscribed, first and foremost, in the prisoner's loss of identity upon entering prison. That loss of identity is compounded by outright dehumanization. The full might of power is meted out on the prisoner without him being capable of putting up physical pushback. Political detainees bear the brunt of the state apparatus's unconscionable goal of quashing dissent. Lomba glaringly exemplifies what it feels like living behind bars for trumped-up charges of disturbing the peace and plotting against the state. Jailed for covering an unsanctioned political demonstration for *The Dial* newspaper, an accusation which he adamantly denies, he is made to run the gamut of dehumanizing treatment at the hands of, lo and behold, Muftau, to wit, the prison superintendent. Lomba's despondent submission that "*Prison chains not so much your hands and feet as it does your voice*" (14) says a mouthful. Actually, Lomba knows only too well that prison packs a punch in physical and psychological terms. Witness how he describes his living conditions behind bars:

*When I lay to sleep rats keep me awake, and mosquitoes and lice, and hunger and loneliness. The rats bit me at my toes and scuttled around in the low ceiling, sometimes falling on to my face from the holes in the ceiling. (26)*

Here, Lomba concretely describes the hellhole-like situation that he lives in. The infliction of so much wanton suffering is meant to negate the humanity in him, and, as consequently, quell any will to push back. There is more to imprisonment than bodily suffering. According to Gresham M. Sykes, the physical maltreatment in prison, e.g., '*sadistic beating, a pair of shackles in the floor, or a caged man on a treadmill,*' take a backseat to the destruction of the psyche in the backwash of "*the loss of liberty, the deprivation of goods and services, the frustration of sexual desire, and so on*" (64). Upon being a prisoner, you no longer belong to yourself. Instead, you become a mere cipher in the hands of agents of power. You're identified

with a number, hence the ‘*dissolving individuality*’ that exercises Lomba big time. That is, the number of your cell somewhat supersedes your real name. A name being part of a person’s essence, the prisoner is thus reified. Identity-wise, stripping a person of their name is tantamount to making them into a nonentity, nay to removing a huge chunk of their selfhood. As the American historian and sociologist of Jamaican descent Orlando Patterson puts it, “A man’s name is, of course, more than simply a way of calling him. It is the verbal signal of his whole identity, his being- in- the-world as a distinct person” (54). A proper name is part and parcel of the person’s *ipse*, to borrow a term from the late French historian and philosopher Paul Ricoeur, meaning selfhood. He writes: “*The privilege accorded the proper names assigned to humans has to do with their subsequent role in confirming their identity and their selfhood*” (125). There is no more effective way of negating someone’s identity than by rendering them nameless. A person without a name would be akin to a ferry without a helm.

Life in incarceration is a fate worse than death through the sheer fact of being cut off from the outside world without which social life is next to impossible. In a seminal book entitled *A Society of Captives*, Gresham Sykes points to the lack of interaction with the outside world as being a painful hallmark of prisoner experience:

*In a very fundamental sense, a man perpetually locked by himself in a cage is no longer a man at all; rather, he is a semi-human object, an organism with a number. The identity of the individual, both to himself and to others, is largely compounded of the web of symbolic communications by which he is linked to the external world. (6)*

The manifold miseries associated with imprisonment are beyond pale; so, it goes against the grain of ethics and morality to use prison not so much as a means to punish crime but as a recipe for self-serving political ends. Prison can help turn a monster into a good man. By the same token, it can make a bad man even worse. Prison acts as a deterrence if its use dovetails with the ideals of its birth, namely correcting deviancy. Much as I see eye to eye with Gresham Sykes that “*the prison is an instrument of the State, an organization designed to accomplish the desires of society with respect to the convicted criminal,*” (13) the fact remains that its weaponization (by regimes that ride roughshod over human rights) makes a mockery of the lofty rationale behind its invention. In the world of *Waiting for an Angel*, Lomba exemplifies the human face of the nefarious use to which the prison is put in the context of oppression:

*His only contact with the outside world was when his mess of beans, once daily at six p.m., was pushed into the cell through a tiny flap at the bottom of*

*the wrought-iron door, and at precisely eight p.m. when the cell door was opened for him to take out the sippy bucket and replace it with a fresh one. He wrote that the only way to distinguish night from day was by the movement of his bowels – in hunger or in purgation. (24)*

Prison life writing belies the idea that silence dissolves the will to push back. According to Elaine Scarry, the need for information drives the torturer's unconscionable resort to torment. In the eyes of the torturer, what the prisoner says under duress is the name of the game, viz. confession. It is no skin off his nose whether it be fake or genuine. More to the point, substantiation of the motives of arrest goes with the territory of torture. They may be phoney, yet they can allow the torturer to claim the moral high ground. Scarry writes:

*This display of the fiction of power, the final product and outcome of torture, should in the end be seen in isolation to its origin, the motive that is claimed to be its starting point, , the need for information. Torture is not unusual in giving so prominent a place to so false a motive, for, as noted earlier, other acts of political violence within these same governments such as arrest and gratuitous punishment are frequently accompanied by explanations of motive so arbitrary that they see, intended as demonstrations of contempt. (58)*

Arguably, prisons are something of a social backwater compounded by a rock-solid regimentation of life that rests on rules and regulations the breach of which invites a stern retribution; they are, from Monicka Fludernik's vantage point, "very specific, marginal places in society" (179). In the case of the political prisoner, the retribution is even harsher as prison authorities, acting upon orders from people high up in government, out-Herod Herod in their evil intent to break the inmate's will to speak out against injustice in any shape or form. Michel Foucault argues for the interconnectedness between prison and power (3). Against a background of political dictatorship, the prison can serve as a displayer of power and might as well as an effective weapon of deterrence. South African prominent writer, John Maxwell Coetzee, regards torture as having a two-pronged symbolism with a clear-cut end game. He posits that,

*relations in the torture room provide a metaphor, bare and extreme, between authoritarianism and its victims. In the torture room unlimited force is exerted upon the physical being of an individual in a twilight of*

*legal illegality, with the purpose of, if not destroying him, then at least of destroying the kernel of resistance within him. (363)*

In a jaw-dropping analysis of the workings of the exercise of power, Michel Foucault is at pains to aver that power is performative, and that the object of its force is directed against the action of others (789). To put it differently, when it intervenes it is in the spirit of punishing forcefully the action of a person. More importantly, Foucault foregrounds violence as a key hallmark of power. He writes: “A *relationship of violence acts upon a body or upon things; it forces, it bends, it breaks on the wheel, it destroys, or it closes the door on all possibilities*” (789). The exercise of power relies on violence to pack a punch. Power is a destroyer of freedom since “*freedom disappears everywhere power is exercised*” (790). Lomba epitomizes big time the obnoxious end game of the exercise of power, namely deprive the subject of their free-wheeling capability. As a state agent, Muftau exerts violence in the form of torture upon Lomba to make him rue for his alleged glaring breach of prison rules. However, the regime’s fear of the potential potency of artistic expression lies beneath the surface of its dehumanization of Lomba. Lomba’s adamant refusal to come clean about the identity of he who has given him the papers puts him in the crosshairs of Muftau. At bottom, in his eagerness to wrest confessions from Lomba to buttress the state apparatus’s narrative against him, Muftau, a sanctimonious lapdog of the blackest dye, strives flat out in order not to fall short of his superiors’ expectations. His language vis-à-vis Lomba is tinged with disdain and haughtiness as it feeds on hate, whereas that of Lomba betokens powerlessness.

The rapport between the torturer and his victim is asymmetrical - that is, heavily weighted against the latter. As it happens, the body of Lomba becomes a symbol of the State’s power epitomized in the prison by Muftau. Little wonder that he uses his clout over the prisoner to make him write love poems that he sends to his girlfriend: “*I can make life easy for you here. I am the prison superintendent. There is nothing I cannot do, if I want. So write. The poem. For me*” (28). It is not lost upon Lomba that failure to toe the superintendent’s line is sure to land him in hot water. The loss of liberty which features prominently in the pains of political imprisonment is not only uncalled-for payback for the prisoner’s rejection of injustice, but also a nefarious face of the daily trials of ‘un-freedom’ as result of authoritarian rule. In Michel Foucault’s view, the body of the prisoner is a trifle that is acted upon to display the full might of power. He points out that,

*The body now serves as an instrument or intermediary: if one intervenes upon it to imprison it, or to make it work, it is to deprive the individual of a liberty*

*that is both regarded as a right and as a property. The body...is caught up in a system of constraints and privations, obligations and prohibitions. (11)*

To be put in goal on fake charges is downright torturous from a mental and physical perspective owing to the marginality cum drabness that hallmark the prison. The travails and tribulations of Lomba at the hands of the prison superintendent and his minions go to show the unspeakably crass inhumanity of those who use prison not so much as a vehicle of correcting deviancy but as a weapon to assert and bolster up their grip on power. Despicable acts of torture are exacted upon voices of dissent like Lomba to cow them into submission. It is noteworthy, nonetheless, that there is more to torture than sheer infliction of pain. According to Elaine Scarry, torture encapsulates a particular language that seeks to produce pain with an end game:

*While torture contains language, specific human words and sounds, it is a language, an objectification, an acting out. Real pain, agonizing pain, is inflicted on a person; but torture, which contains specific acts of inflicting pain, is also itself a demonstration and magnification of the felt experience of pain. In the very processes it uses to produce pain within the body of the prisoner, it bestows visibility on the structure and enormity of what is usually private and incommunicable, contained within the boundaries of the sufferer's body. (27)*

Lomba, knows only too well what it feels like going through the gauntlet of torture experience. He recounts with grim details his gruesome torture exposure after rolls of paper have been found in his cell (18-19). The superintendent whom he says “*was too well versed in the ways of torture*” makes no bones about calling the likes of Lomba ‘rats’, ‘saboteurs’, ‘anti-government rats’ with an eye towards shamelessly bearing out their arrest. ‘*False motive syndrome*’ (58) is Elaine Scarry’s term to describe the tendency of authoritarian regimes to jail dissenting voices on bogus charges. Elaine Scarry contends that the use of torture may confer an aura of strength on the regime that practises it, yet it also paradoxically underscores its instability (27). This point is borne out by the terrors that political detainees hold for oppressive regimes. Witness how the prison superintendent Muftau jumps down Lomba’s throat upon discovering the latter’s writing activity in prison:

*‘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. 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. (26)*

A one-time political detainee, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o underscores the redemptive meaning of pieces of paper for prisoners of conscience. He submits that, “*paper, any paper, is about the most precious article for a political prisoner, more so for one like me, who was in political detention because of his writing. For the urge to write... is almost irresistible to a political prisoner*” (7). It comes then as no surprise that Muftau loses it when he finds out that Lomba dabbles in writing while in confinement. As he tries to overcome his imprisonment-related woes, Lomba waxes philosophical by looking on the bright side of things, claiming that “*each day survived [in prison] is a victory against the jailer and a blow struck for freedom*” (15). Lomba has shown that the propensity of oppressive regimes for using the prison as a way of deterring critics does not always pay off.

## II. Prison writing as a weapon to effect political freedom

Interestingly, *Waiting for Angel* serves as a metaphor for the Nigeria of the 1990s, when the people were living under the yoke of a cut-throat military dictatorship that had gone to unconscionable lengths to do away with dissenting voices, and, accordingly, crack down on freedom of expression. Pro-democracy and human rights activists who were dead set against Sani Abacha’s regime were severely dealt with. Despite a pervasive climate of fear induced by a relentless crackdown on opposing voices, the people refused to take things on the chin and staked, with jaw-dropping courage, their determination to pay the ultimate price for the sake of uplifting change. Kela’s astounding submission that, “*To become a martyr, one has to get killed. Killed for a cause,*” (164) is a measure of the youth’s mind-set.

Prison narratives are nothing but a bully pulpit to strike a blow for political freedom. The staple diet of prison writing feeds on the backwash effects of political tyranny, and the spirited pushback of detainees; it feeds on what the late Palestinian-born American cultural critic, Edward Said, terms ‘worldliness’<sup>1</sup>. There is no denying that the political prisoner’s

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of ‘worldliness’ is Edward Said’s brainchild. This sophisticated cultural critic holds that you cannot seriously divorce a text from the historical, social and political circumstances against the background of which it is produced and located. To put it differently, no theoretical and literary analysis of texts can genuinely give the short shrift to their material contexts. The gravitas of literary texts lies in their relevance to the concerns of the society in which they are located. Edward said propounds his theory on ‘worldliness’ in a signal book entitled *The Text, the World and the Critic*. Therein he criticizes in no uncertain terms the uninformed tendency of literary theory within American academy – shades of the 1980s – to isolate “*textuality from the circumstances, the events, the physical senses that make it possible and render it intelligible as the result of human work*” (4). He doubles down on his point later on: “*My position is that texts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even they*

approach to combatting oppression is anchored on a matrix of resistance with an eye towards freedom. As a journalist worth his salt, Lomba makes it a point to turn the spotlight on the day to day struggles of the populace to get by. In a one on one with James, the editor of *The Dial*, he explains that he sees to it that his articles reflect what the late Nigerian thinker Chinua Achebe calls "*the burning issues of the day*":

*I had spent the whole night writing and rewriting. I use my street, Morgan Street, as a paradigmatic locale, the fuel scarcity as the main theme. The long lines of cars waiting for fuel at petrol stations and obstructing traffic I use as a thread to weave together the various aspects of the article; in front of the petrol pumps I place the ubiquitous gun-and whip-toting soldiers, collecting money from drivers to expedite their progress towards the pumps... (117)*

Against a backdrop of military rule-induced oppression, human rights and pro-democracy activists are thwarted at every turn in their all-out drive to bring about positive. Anti-authoritarianism narrative helps keep the human toll of oppression front and centre, and, more significantly, underscores the compelling necessity for resistance as a way to break the shackles of injustice. Key to the people being jostled into consciousness is the press which has paid a heavy price to the military's gross reluctance to brook dissenting voices. James Fikki and Dele Giwa are testament to the military's heavy-handed tactics against the press. As "*the founding editor of Newswatch Magazine, and the loudest voice against continued military rule in the country,*" (199) Dele Giwa has been killed to the great dismay of James Fikki as he reckons amongst his few close friends. Speaking of James, he has the office of his newspaper razed to the ground. When Lomba suggests calling the Fire Brigade as "*something could be salvaged,*" James replies assuredly with a tinge of despondency: "*Lomba, this isn't an accident. This is arson. Deliberate, official arson. The fire Brigade must have been informed by a neighbour by now. But try again if you want*" (202). It's a statement of the obvious that artistic expression is a bugbear of authoritarianism as it seeks to decry the structures of power that

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*appear to deny it, they are nevertheless part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted*" (4). Said's stance is, arguably, a counterpoint to structuralism's emphasis on the literariness as the only aspect worthy of study in a text. For art to pack a punch, it should be seen to highlight and contribute to remedy the ills facing society. The Palestinian-born American thinker frames his indictment of proponents of pure textuality as follows: "*In having given up the world entirely for the aporias and unthinkable paradoxes of a text, contemporary criticism has retreated from its constituency, the citizens of modern society*". The study of textuality has its own merits. Granted. But, texts, argues Edward Said, are intrinsically connected to "*the existential actualities of human life, politics, societies and events*" (5). Texts are apt to have a positive bearing upon the lives of people when they are anchored on the plight on the downtrodden. Ngũgĩ's submission "*I need life to write about life*" (9) sounds like a vindication of Said's theory.

grind down the faces of the poor. Also, it fosters civic consciousness. When art challenges the abuses of power, it goes political. And political art, by its very nature, has the potential for creating an agency for the seeds of resistance to blossom into prickly flowers that could topple authoritarian regimes. In the context of political tyranny, the move to single out the press for criticism and silencing is not perfunctory by any means. French nineteenth-century prominent political philosopher, Alexis de Tocqueville, believes freedom of the press to be “*the capital...and constituent element of liberty.*” He foregrounds liberty of the press as a bulwark against impunity. He writes:

*In certain nations claiming to be free, each of the agents of power can violate the law with impunity, and the constitution of the country does not give the oppressed the right to complain to the judicial system. Amongst these peoples, the independence of the press must no longer be considered as one of the guarantees, but the sole remaining guarantee for liberty and for the security of the citizens. (291)*

Arguably, genuine journalism and political art go hand in hand. They have a commonality, indeed, namely that they echo the social and political concerns of society to make a difference. So James and Lomba are, understandably, knocked for six over the arson attack that engulfed *The Dial* in flames. As the two journalists collect their thoughts, and try to take in the full-scale destruction that they have just witnessed, Lomba “*holds the ash before his face*” and says despondently, “*these very ashes could be from my pages*” (203). With the torching of the *Dial*’s office, they are deprived of an earnest way of proving their worth to the society. Meanwhile, James’ s adamant, if courteous, refusal to take Emeka Davies and Lomba’s advice to go down the road of exile can, in many regards, be looked on as a measure of hope. He elects instead to go underground in Davies’s house. The rationale behind his daring call reads as follows: “*What dignity would I have, over fifty in some cold, unfriendly capital in Europe, or America, washing dishes in a restaurant to make ends meet?*” (218). Come to think of it, James’ move hides a nobler, more profound reason: physical and psychological readiness to die for the ideals he steadfastly believes in. To shut down a newspaper on disingenuous political grounds is commensurate with pulling the plug on a mouthpiece of a people.

Lomba’s life writing welds the personal into the collective. That is, his personal woes are intertwined with those of his society. Not only does his writing chronicle his life behind bars but it also stands as a stunning tribute to freedom fighters whose praxis is geared towards calling time on oppression. A stubborn refusal to be cowed into silence in the face of political

oppression stands out in clear relief in prison writing. All this goes to show the impossibility of divorcing prison writing from politics. When James invites Lomba to write on politics, he is not gung-ho, saying, "*I am not very political.*" However, he has to eat humble pie when James comes back, with a touch of irony: "*You can't escape it. In this country the very air we breathe is politics*" (112). In the same breath, he embarks upon a scathing tirade against the military:

*If you care to look, you'll 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. They've lost all faith in the government's unending transition programmes.* (113)

The subject matter of prison writing, it bears stressing, conflates the personal with the collective to make a point about the obnoxious character of political authoritarianism. Political prisoners write about their own travails, namely their subjectivities subsumed in a maelstrom of glaringly unwarranted state violence and disregard for human rights. Their writing also holds a mirror to the multifaceted concerns that make it wildly difficult for the populace to put food on the table. In this sense, Monika Fludernik's argument in favour of "*the prison as world / world as prison topos*"<sup>2</sup> (178) is spot-on. Emphatically, political prisoners are a bunch who mark themselves off from ordinary prisoners through their recourse to the written word to not

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<sup>2</sup> In a powerful article entitled "The Prison as Colonial Space," Austrian professor of English literature and culture, Monika Fludernik, analyses how society is analogous with prison, using as a stepping-stone prison memoirs and prison novels authored by South African writers during apartheid. Key to her point is how institutionalized racism was a throwback to the colonial era, and how prison back then was morphed into a colonial space, somewhat boasting the same power structures as those that were up and running outside (177). She emphasizes that, in South African prison literature, the topos that regards prison as an epitome of apartheid, is front and centre. Hence her no-nonsense move to contrast the world as prison and the prison as world. In the context of apartheid, the world as prison implied that the dead hand of oppression mediated by the apartheid war machine, and the vortex of fear that people lived in, felt like prison. Conversely, against a background of oppression, the prison as world analogy refers, as it were, to the continuity of the world in prison? The prison, she argues, shares with the world some features, i.e., curtailment of freedom of speech and movement, constraints, fear, or what not (179). The reading of prison as a world can be applied to *Waiting for an Angel*. Indeed, the all-out crackdown on dissenters and the social malaise as well the fear it has generated, turn the society into something of a prison, for the people are not allowed to move freely or enact agency geared towards change. In the 1990s when Nigeria was under the yoke of military rule, life for Nigerians felt like a hellhole since they were subjected to strictures of any ilk. By Habila's own admission, the 1990s in Nigeria were "a difficult time to be alive, especially if you were young, talented and ambitious – and patriotic" (Afterword in *Waiting for an Angel*: 223). In the world of the novel, it is Morgan Street renamed Poverty Street that encapsulates the prison-like situation that Nigerians live in (122-123). More to the point, Mao's withering indictment of the military captures the deep-seated level of social and political suck plaguing the country: "*They killed him [Ken Saro Wiwa] because he threatened their monopoly, got it! 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*" (161). Mao's real name is Ojikutu. But his one-year spell in the Delta Niger for youth service was a kind of eye-opener, causing him to go radical in both outlook and way out of the predicament of his fellow countrymen.

only to push back against the multifaceted discontents spawned by imprisonment but also to remain relevant to their society. In spite of physical and mental odds being stacked against them, political detainees stick their neck out trying to stay connected with the outside world. Inmates who feel hard done by because of their unflagging commitment to the ideals human liberation attempt to move beyond the silence that is imposed on them to keep being a thorn in their oppressors' side, thereby enacting the continuity of their social utility. In Rivkah Zim's books, writing is, in the eyes of the prisoner, an invaluable means to defend himself against what Sykes calls '*the pains of (wrongful) imprisonment.*' Zim is at pains to underscore the time-honoured character of prison writing as a trope of resistance:

*Prisoners of state or political dissidents, prisoners of conscience, and confined victims of intolerance and hatred often feel a special need to maintain and defend their integrity and that core of convictions for which they have been imprisoned. ...prisoners have always used various means to preserve and defend themselves against the corrosion of fear, uncertainty, and disinformation. Writing in captivity is often one of the most important and durable of these methods. (2)*

The political detainee draws on the power of literature to achieve a two-pronged goal. Firstly, he seeks to remain true to the ideals of humanity while at the same time struggling to keep at bay discouragement from the disgusting drudgery and regimentation of prison life. Despite the harshness of life behind bars, Lomba manages to soldier on, mindful that caving in to pressure by state leadership through their psychological and physical terror will expose him as a craven, and, consequently, rib off on the future of the cause for which he has already gone through so much. Thus, his strength of character cum rock-solid belief in Soyinka's wisdom that "*The man died in him stands silent in the face of tyranny*" enables Lomba to highlight in his prison diary, with consummate skill and indomitable courage, the woes of his fellow countrymen as a result of gross bad governance and political instability. According to the celebrated journalist, and editor of the newspaper *The Dial*, Nigeria looks as if she were stuck in time-warp:

*...If you care to look, you'll find more: ethnicity, religion, poverty. One general goes, another comes, but the people remain stuck in the same vicious groove. Nothing ever changes for them except the particular details of their wretchedness. They've lost all faith in the government's unending transition programmes. (113)*

The aforementioned ills make up what Ngũgĩ calls “*life struggles of active people*” (8) which undeniably deserve laying bare, and trashing with an eye towards uplifting change. Political detainees seek to free themselves from wallowing into low self-regard, and despair. In a potent research article, the late top-notch American scholar Barbara Harlow is at pains to underscore the cathartic purport of prison writing:

*The prison writings of political detainees, of men and women, in Israel as elsewhere throughout the world, offer a critique not only of the ruling systems that have incarcerated dissidents, but of the very institution of literature as an autonomous arena of activity. ... Literature, when abstracted from the historical and institutional conditions that inform its production – and distribution – serves in the end to underwrite the repressive bureaucratic structures designed to maintain national borders and to police dissent within those borders. (42)*

Doubtless, writing is part of the mental wherewithal that makes the political prisoner tick. He owes it to his society to risk paying the ultimate price for the sake of rolling back oppression. Resisting the overriding urge to put pen to paper is anathema to the political inmate as it spells out renunciation. Rather, writing behind bars keeps the political inmate going in the face of overwhelming odds. As Ngũgĩ posits:

*For a detained patriot, breaking through double-walls of grey silence, attempting, if you like, a symbolic link with the outside world, is an act of resistance. And resistance- at the level of merely asserting one's, rights, of maintaining one's ideological beliefs in the face of any programmed onslaught is in fact the only way a political detainee can maintain his sanity and humanity. (27)*

Literature draws its potency from its potential for change. The reach of language in terms of consciousness raising, and the possibility of meaningful change that it affords is raving momentous. Over and above its function as a powerful human means of communication, language can also serve a redemptive purpose, that of contributing to soothing the sting of the sharp claws of oppression.

From an African vantage point, prison life writing can, in many regards, be looked on as a postcolonial agency. It foregrounds, if anything, the prison as a lightning rod for criticism of post-independence African political leadership and its attendant human cost. African prison

literature turns the clock back to the colonial era with its emphasis on a cross-section of African leaders' proclivity to fall back on imprisonment as a way of putting the kibosh on dissent. In a colonial setting, any attempt by the colonized to free himself from the yoke of oppression is severely death with either through jail time or death. Substantiating away the colonial mind-set that has continued into independent Kenya, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o goes to great lengths to point out the coloniality of political imprisonment, call out the comprador bourgeoisie for taking a nasty leaf out of their white opposite numbers' book. He makes the contention that, "*like their colonial counterparts, they had become mortally afraid of the slightest manifestation of a people's culture of patriotic heroism and outspoken indomitable courage*" (72). As if wanting to highlight the perpetuation of colonial practices in post-independence Africa in general, the high-profile Kenyan thinker, in reply to his warder who was asking him why he was up so late in his cell, said drily, "*I am writing to Jomo Kenyatta in his capacity as an ex-detainee*" (4). The guard draws Ngũgĩ's attention to the fact that Kenyatta's detention was a colonial one. Nothing daunted, he holds his own and, in an endeavour to score points off the warder, points out persuasively: "*A colonial affair in an independent country, eh? The British jailed an innocent Kenyatta. Thus Kenyatta learnt to jail innocent Kenyans. Is that the difference?*" (4). Oliver Lovesey is in lockstep with Ngũgĩ respecting the coloniality of political imprisonment:

*The imprisonment of African writers, often almost by definition politically engaged, is the incarceration of the creative national spirit seeking to define and celebrate national freedom. Silencing the national voice dehumanizes and re-colonizes nation. (32)*

The colonial undercurrents of political imprisonment speak to the topicality of Frantz Fanon's teaching that "*Not with impunity does one...undergo domination*" (41). Six decades after the demise of colonization which paved the way a bulk of African countries achieving nationhood, the dead hand of the colonial and (neo)-colonial matrixes continue unabated.

In the final analysis, suffice to say that *Waiting for an Angel* puts a human face on the manifold ravages of political imprisonment at the same time that it highlights the stubborn quest for political freedom underlying it. Prison life writing weaves the personal into the collective to make a point about the inhumanity of authoritarianism. Habila's lead character Lomba shows that the enactment of resistance through writing enables the political prisoner to survive. The novel reveals prison writers to be a rare breed of unimpeachable men who think nothing of defying the odds in order to remain true to the cardinal virtues of justice and liberty.

They register with unfailing courage their dogged determination not to allow themselves to be cowed into silence. They espouse a weltanschauung commensurate with their moral compass, which speaks volumes about their strength of character.

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