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**Inheritance of loss:
Narrative and history in Helon Habila's *Measuring Time***

History has always lived a charmed life, whether in recording the living drama, the highs and lows of human social activities and ordering the chaotic conglomeration of contemporaneous events, on the one hand, or in re/telling, in whatever mode of representation, oral or scribal, events of the past. Akin Akinola, in his paper, 'Who Needs the Past? An Inquiry into the meaning and relevance of History', outlines some popular, contentious positions on the subject. In his view, one such standpoint questions the veracity of historical information and regards history as 'only a pack of tricks we play on the dead' (1), while another dismisses history as a discipline without any utility whatsoever, as it is argued that men do not learn from the past. Akinola, however, holds a contrary opinion, as he convincingly argues for the usefulness and significance of the discipline. To begin with, he defines history as 'a sort of memorial to the achievements and endeavours of a people or community, either as a collectivity or as individuals' (1). He elaborates:

In keeping with the nature of man and his society, the scope of history is as wide as it is complex. Human activities, human institutions, human relationships and the like are important elements in the subject matter of history. Indeed it is through a recourse to history that communities, groups and peoples often define their identities and ruling groups establish their legitimacy. This is why the story of origins looms very large in folk histories, and dynasties as well as other distinguished groups compile elaborate genealogies of their pedigrees. Man everywhere displays an avid interest in his antecedents and history panders to this sentiment considerably (1).

Akin Akinola also goes on to opine that, due to the changing fortunes of life, a people's priorities and preferences change, thus influencing the patterns or trends in the occurrence of events. Accordingly, while the Greeks saw history as essentially cyclical, 'the Hebrews, under the influence of their religion, viewed events as moving along a straight line towards a dramatic climax' (7). Men like Hegel, Karl Marx and Arnold Toynbee, we are told, have undertaken to survey human history in order to discover the rhythms, trends or laws by which it is governed (7). Quoting Elton, Akinola tends to suggest that 'recorded history is too short to furnish us with sufficient samples from which we can hypothetically establish the trends and pattern of events in history. If patterns there are in history, then, these can only be known to the Almighty or men of infinite faith' (8).

In spite of this assumed limitation of historiography, the so-called lessons of history have continually made scholars avid students of history. This historical imagination or sense of history permeates all scholarship in the sense that it has become standard practice for researchers and intellectuals to willy-nilly undertake what is called 'Literature Review' in their research endeavours as a cardinal roadmap to their discursive schemata. The historic imperative informs this chronology or structure of ideas traced among text, context, inter-text, among other things. This overarching accent on the grand narrative of the immanent interconnectedness of all knowledges and consciousnesses is the very hallmark of scholarship. Today, we often trace the disciplinary peculiarities and differences between History and Literature to Plato's postulations. Plato argues that the discipline of history is distinguished by its fidelity to fact, its record of actual human actions and activities. On the other hand, literature is the imaginative recreation and refraction of these actual human actions and activities. Such is the autonomy of art that unlike history, it creates its own universe of meaning, liable to its own internal terms of

reference. The historian selectively mirrors privileged aspects of society, while the creative writer captures *all* experience.

According to Abiola Irele ‘all history, as narrative, inhabits the space between apprehension and comprehension’ (101). The imagination plays a crucial part in any ‘narrative recollection of the past, if only because that past is no longer part of the immediate experience of the traditional story teller or the modern historian’ (101). Following Hayden White, Irele avers that the process of reconstitution of the completed past, not only obeys ‘a principle of selection and rearrangement of the material to be presented in narrative form, it also involves the calling into play of distinct rhetorical strategies’ (101). The protocols of narrative art or the “rhetorical strategies” of historical narration such as irony, metonymy, personification, conceits, and other tropes of artistic representation tend to juggle or scramble the ‘neat’ order of lived/felt actualities in order to achieve a higher order of (textual) experience. It is this principle of ‘defamiliarisation’ which gives art its independence from the quotidian humdrumness of everyday phenomena and the ephemerality of the present. In all of this – we must reiterate - the role of the imagination is pivotal.

In underscoring the relationship between history and fiction, Abiola Irele again proves helpful: It is this formal equivalence between history and fiction, determined by the intrinsic properties of the narrative genre, which accounts for the incessant traffic that takes place between them, highlighted in the particular case of the historical novel, of which Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* provides the supreme instance. This factor, which conditions the possible assimilation of history and fiction to a single mode of discourse, also points to a certain principle of reciprocity between them, a kind of reversibility in their nature and status (102).

This historicist cast of mind seems to be discernible in Helon Habila's fiction. Truth be told, it is not as if Habila happens upon us like a happy accident, furnishing a bracingly novel perspective on the riddling miasma known as the Nigerian National Question, on the one hand or/and the Afro-pessimism on the other. History as subject matter has always been the fleshpot of sorts for African writers.¹ Such is its burgeoning influence in the creative imagination of African writers that Lewis Nkosi has a whole chapter in his study *Tasks and Masks* (1981) on History as 'hero' in modern African literary discourse. By the same token, writers like Chinua Achebe (*Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*), Yambo Ouologuem (*Bound To Violence*) Sembene Ousmane (*God's Bits of Wood*) Peter Abrahams (*Tell Freedom*) *inter alia* have been unjustifiably criticised for writing documentary or anthropological 'novels' due to what the critics consider a preponderance of sociological minutiae.

In the western world especially North America and Western Europe, the subgenre of the historical novel is also popular. John Steinbeck in his novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, for instance, captures for all time the crisis of the Depression Era; Faulkner is the bardic voice of the American South and Hemingway vivifies in his work the horrors of the World Wars. The Hungarian Marxist theoretician, George Lukacs in *The Historical Novel*² also examines some of the methodological and theoretical issues in the field. However, what seems to be at issue between history and fiction is the question of referentiality, that is, the relationship between textuality and context, or, put differently, literature and the object world. How much liberty should the creative artist take with social reality? An attempt to answer this question will throw up a barrage of theoretical and critical issues extraneous to our primary purpose here.

Thus, as earlier hinted, in Helon Habila's fiction, we encounter a strong sense of history. For example, in his first novel entitled *Waiting For An Angel* (2003), Habila, like some of his

compatriot contemporary writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (*Half of A Yellow Sun*) Sefi Atta (*Everything Good Will Come*), Chris Abani (*Graceland*), creates what we may term ‘faction’. This is an artistic practice involving the melding or interweaving of both the product of the imagination and real-life events and situations. Besides, real-life personages also animate the fictive world of the novel in question. Therefore, for Helon Habila and his ilk, the conventional tactics of impersonality, indirection and suggestiveness which are the props of the fabulist or/and parabolic modes will not suffice. Matters are not helped by the postmodernist celebration of the principles of transgressivity, flux, fluidity, indeterminacy, instability, play, fantasy and decentred consciousness. This inter-and-overlap as well as the breach of disciplinary boundaries seems to be at work in Helon Habila’s art. If we encounter people and places we know in real life in *Waiting For An Angel*, in his second novel, *Measuring Time* the author manages to thinly disguise real-life persons and places, while at the same time stating real-life places and historical events such as wars, dislocation, migration, contemporary politics in Nigeria and elsewhere.

Measuring Time tells the story of Mamo and LaMamo, a set of twin brothers whose mother dies after giving birth to them. They grow up in a small village in Northern Nigeria with a philandering and domineering father, Lamang. Dreaming of escape, Mamo and LaMamo decide to run away to become soldiers. Mamo, however, takes ill with an attack of sickle-cell anaemia and is forced to stay behind. He hears from his brother via sketchy letters, as LaMamo joins a rebel group near the Chad border, trains in Libya, then fights alongside Charles Taylor’s rebels in war-torn Liberia. Still in the village of Ketu, Mamo explores local history. He is recruited by the traditional ruler, the Mai, to write a ‘true’ history of his people. As Lamang fights for political office and Mamo falls in love with Zara, LaMamo endangers his life as a mercenary fighting for a cause he no longer believes in. Over time, Lamang, their father comes

to a sad and tragic end in his frenzied bid to achieve political relevance in his community.

LaMamo returns to his native land a one-eyed detritus and promptly loses his life in a mindless orgy of violence which he champions. Although Mamo survives the ravages of his terminal ailment to become a local celebrity, being the secretary to the Mai and his would-be biographer, he also suffers untold loss embodied in his loss of Zara who herself suffers depression, rendering her finally incommunicado.

A thematic exploration of *Measuring Time* will afford us a deeper insight into the semantic universe of the novel. To be sure, the novel among other things examines the age-old theme of generational conflict, in this instance, between parents and their children. For instance, there is no love lost between Asabar and uncle Iliya, his father. Asabar, who briefly departs the village to seek fame and fortune, returns disillusioned, becoming a miscreant, a plaything in the hand of politicians, especially his uncle Lamang. Asabar indulges in smoking weed, and we are told that he finds very early in life “the pleasures of alcohol”. And, because of this, he cannot get along with his Spartan-like father, an ex-soldier and proprietor of a school. For her part, Zara seems to have come to grief in the novel on account of the frosty relationship between her and her mother. She gets into a loveless, rancorous marriage in order to please her mother who seems to blindly support custom and tradition even in the face of injustice and abuse meted out to her daughter by her irresponsible husband. What is worse, as Zara battles the ensuing emotional and legal crises caused by her failed marriage, her mother does not appear to be terribly bothered, so long as her other daughter, Rhoda, is doing well in her own marriage. It is this absence of maternal support and understanding which plays a major role in the onset of Zara’s mental breakdown. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Zara will not talk to her mother when her crisis comes to a

head, preferring instead to commit her thoughts to writing and eventually send her diary to Mamo.

The breakdown of the family or the disappearance of family values of parental love, support, care and warmth seems to be at the root of the myriad of social pathologies afflicting contemporary society. It is interesting to note that Helon Habila uses the Lamang family as paradigm or template to mirror the unsavoury state of affairs of the family as a social unit in the contemporary world. *Ab initio*, the very groundbase of the Lamang family, is fundamentally compromised by the absence of love between the couple-Lamang and his wife Tabita. Apart from wasting away from her congenital illness (sickle-cell anaemia) Tabita is never loved by Lamang, who would rather have married Saraya, who is given away to another man, a truck driver, who dies in a road accident one year after the wedding. Thus, Lamang and Tabita are forced into marrying each other by Tabita's father, a man rich in cattle and cash. However, Tabita dies in childbirth, thereby denying her newborn children the all-important mother love and bonding. Mamo and LaMamo are thrust upon an inhospitable and hostile world, like stranded castaways at the mercy of surrogate parents. The severance of the ties between mother and children (and, by extension, between father and sons) symbolises a form of alienation from nature as maternal essence, nurturing, protective, therapeutic and remedial. The impression of the world gained by the twin brothers is that of existential xenophobia, cosmic ennui, despair, and meaningless misery. Theirs is a life apart, as sentient driftwood afloat on the turbulent sea of life. As a consequence, an adversarial oppositionality builds up between the boys and society, embodied as it were by an authority figure, their father. Small wonder, then, that Mamo and LaMamo, young teenagers, are taken up with the idea of harming their father. Their career in

kill-the-father neurosis spawns all that follows: an unresolved Oedipal complex, resulting in mercenary soldiery for LaMamo, on the one hand, and scholarship for Mamo, on the other.

The twin brothers, Mamo and LaMamo, are created by Habila to have divergent characteristics and hence pursuing widely divergent fates; one a man of war and the other a man of ideas, an intellectual. The characterisation of these boys brings to mind the two sets of twins in William Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* (Antipholus of Ephesus and Antipholus of Syracuse and Dromio of Ephesus and Dromio of Syracuse); Taiwo and Kehinde in Femi Osofisan's *Twingle-Twangle*, Nagoa and Noaga in Camara Laye's *The Radiance Of The King*, and more recently, Olanna and Kainene in Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of A Yellow Sun*. An intertextual reading of Helon Habila's *Measuring Time* will seem to leave us with the sneaky feeling that the author in the Bloomian or/and Eliotesque tradition must have been influenced consciously or otherwise by the familiar idea of sibling rivalry experienced by most sets of twins. Real-life situations and textual examples furnish a cornucopia of instances: the Esau and Jacob case is a timeless case in point. And like Laye's Noaga and Nagoa, Mamo and LaMamo are full of mischief; they embody the youthful spirit of rebellion, restlessness, revenge and rage, driven as they are by some vague notion of knight-errantry and chivalry (47). Admirably, though, the twins tend to complement each other: LaMamo is strong, bold, courageous and extraverted while Mamo is effete, anaemic, shy, intelligent and introverted. They can also read each other's mind. And as they both follow the paths nature has marked out for them, they confront petty rivalries and jealousies:

“I guess I was. I was so jealous I never talked to him about you again. I felt so betrayed that day ... But I guess I've always been jealous of him he has everything I don't have. He is always the strong and healthy one, and when we were kids, adults would always pat him on the head and say, 'What a healthy strong boy; and when they turned to me the look on their faces would change.

My fantasy is to have his body, with my mind, and then I'll be the perfect person" (102).

This statement is made by Mamo to Zara, as her coming into their lives almost ruins the delicate relationship between the twins. Mamo's subsequent attempt to acquire university education, which eventually fails, and his scholarly endeavours are all geared towards fulfilling his dream of *measuring up* to his more physically equipped twin-brother. Even his conquest of Zara can in this light be interpreted as a form of victory over his brother. Thus, Zara becomes a war trophy signifying Mamo's capabilities. However, LaMamo, who does not suffer from inferiority complex, only fights wars from place to place in order to fill the void within with meaning, and, looks up to his weak brother for intellectual leadership.

Love is a major theme in the novel. Right from the first page of *Measuring Time*, Habila in bold strokes establishes this important ingredient in interpersonal relationships. He introduces Lamang as "the king of women", who has a song composed in his honour: "king of women / owner of ten women. In every village from / Ketu to the state capital" (13). And, in spite of his penniless charms, Lamang loves Saraya, the "black beauty", his first love. Their affair is jinxed for economic reasons. Lamang consequently gets entangled in a loveless sour marriage to the sickly Tabita whose premature death ends the charade. For her own part, Auntie Marina marries an abusive husband who infects her with gonorrhoea, and who, when she fails to give birth, marries a younger woman. Apart from other accounts of marital woe recounted in the novel, Zara's case seems paradigmatic. Married to a dashing enterprising young military officer, Zara has a boy for her husband, who in turn batters her and cheats on her. And due to irreconcilable differences, Zara divorces him and falls in love with Mamo. Later Zara abandons Mamo and reunites with her former University heartthrob, Themba, a South African, involved in charity work. Themba and Zara leave for South Africa where they enter into a contractual marriage of

convenience, a rather curious affair without conjugal responsibilities. Zara deserts Themba who desires real commitment from her and promptly returns to Nigeria where she starts work in a clinic in Ketu as an auxiliary nurse. Zara represents in *Measuring Time* unrealised and botched potential: a gifted and intelligent beautiful woman, starry-eyed and ambitious, and potentially revolutionary, she is separated from her only son, and cannot settle down with a man of her dreams, and, shorn of family support, Zara ends up an embodiment of loss.

Measuring Time also thematises partisan politics as played in Nigeria. Lamang exemplifies this in the novel: in order to capture the popular imagination, he deploys his enormous wealth to provide food and entertainment for the needy in the Ketu community. Asabar helps him mobilize the village youth to support his candidacy as chairman of the Victory Party at the state level. However, his rival, Alhaji Isa Danladi “steals” his idea of “Reverse Osmosis”, a scientific method of irrigation, and uses it to campaign for the contested hot-seat. Lamang loses to his rival and cross-carpet to the opposition party, the New Victory Party (NVP) on whose platform he contests the election and loses. As usual, the election is marred by violence and grave irregularities resulting in wanton loss of life and property, acts of police brutality and arrests, among others. Lamang eventually suffers a stroke and later dies miserably. On this score, Habila proves himself admirably as a keen watcher and perceptive analyst of the sundry shenanigans that pass for political hustings in Nigeria.

War has been a favourite theme among writers from the earliest times: Homer’s *Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, Virgil’s *The Aeneid*, Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon*, Shakespeare’s War Tragedies (*Macheth*, *Julius Caesar*, *Othello*, *King Lear* etcetera), Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, Pat Barker’s *The Ghost Road*, Mazisi Kanene’s *The Epic of Emperor Shaka The Great* and, more recently, Adichie’s *Half of A Yellow Sun*, (itself influenced significantly by a plethora of war

novels based on the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War of 1967-70)³, and Uzodinma Iweala's *Beast of No Nation*. As a matter of fact, both Adichie and Iweala⁴ write about the growing incidence of child soldiers in Africa. By the same token, Helon Habila shows a great sense of historical awareness and social responsiveness by lending his own voice to a denunciatory call for the eradication of the rising menace. In doing this, he exposes the false and misleading allure of the life of danger:

“We could be famous as soldiers”, they told each other. And in their eager, fifteen year-old minds they saw themselves on some distant battlefield, surrounded by dead bodies, some of which they had killed, and only themselves standing, masters of all they surveyed; and far away in the villages, which they had liberated from some evil tyrant, hidden by dusk and the smoke of battle-the village all resembled Ket-i-the women waited to welcome them with garlands. Then, after achieving fame and wealth, they'd return to Ket-i as living legends (47).

Habila adroitly blends the heroic elements of Western medieval romance and the Biblical account of the king Saul and David saga to construct this delusion of grandeur suffered by the foot loose and fancy-free duo. Baulked by ill-health, Mamo stays behind to mind the homestead while LaMamo sets sail, going to forge in the smithy of his soul the uncreated conscience of his troubled epoch. We follow him from Northern Nigeria through Chad, the Sahara Desert to Liberia, engaging in armed conflict, killing and managing to stay alive himself. He also sacrifices one of his eyes in his mercenary campaigns.

Having seen so much human suffering and the debasement of human life through mindless blood lust and mass killings, La Mamo loses his innocence and zest for life. Although he finds love in Bintou, the foreigner who he eventually marries, LaMamo returns home and dies from bullet wounds unleashed by policemen during the civil disturbance he leads, when the youths of Ket-i storm the Mai's palace, leaving sorrow, tears and blood in their wake. In more

respects than one, LaMamo typifies the tragic abortion of hope and possibility which the youth in every society represent.

There is a sense in which the foregoing thematic analysis of the novel *Measuring Time* can be justifiably considered disparate, if inter-connected perspectives on the overarching subject of history — in both senses, the narrative of past human events and actions, and the living high drama of quotidian contemporary occurrences. The only qualification required on this score is to highlight the imperative of fictionalisation employed in the narration. However, the desire to imaginatively reconstruct the familiar historical trajectory of the African peoples seems to fascinate the writer a good deal, such that what we actually find in the narrative is a meticulous reconstruction in a largely fictive sense of history, especially of the African world seen through the minuscule prism of a microcosmic world — the fictional Keti community. For good measure, and predictably, too, Helon Habila takes us to the very misty beginning of prehistory in his effort to recount the origins of his fictional world. Myths of origin familiar to students of Anthropology and Sociology and folklore serve Habila well in this regard. This mythic substratum of his history of the origins of Keti encourages a willing suspension of disbelief in readers more oriented as they are, to a technologized, sceptical scientism.

According to Habila, Keti owes its origin to a certain old man, a leader called Kunglung who “long ago upon a certain day” rallies a band of men to an adventure of migration, war and conquest (144-146). Through the use of magic and charms and the crude weapons of war known to men at the time, the ancestors of Keti people were able to rout the aborigines and forcibly occupy their land which the present-day Keti community now claim for their own.

That brings us to the history of the Mais (kings) of Keti. Under the section of the novel captioned “Mamo’s notes toward a biography of the Mai”, the author with the meticulous

fastidiousness of a historian and the imaginative *élan* of a *griot* narrates the genealogies of the present Mai “whose name is Alhassan, ... the fourth in the line started by his granduncle, Bol Dok. Bol Dok was the first Mai to be officially recognised by the colonial district officer, Mr. John B. Graves, in 1918. This was also the year the missionary Reverend Nathan Drinkwater first arrived in Ketí. Drinkwater was actually brought to Ketí by Bol Dok. The two had met in Jos where Bol Dok was living as an exile” (200).

Having provided an intersection between the traditional authorities and the colonialists, the novel seems to break into the living daylight of verifiable historical time. What is more, the writer gives his tale greater historical authenticity through the use of dates, places and personages that we can relate to within the larger collective historical destiny of Nigeria. The cloak-and-dagger business known as Indirect Rule (in which the white colonists ruled the natives through the people’s *emirs*, *obas*, *obis*, and so forth) finds ample expression in *Measuring Time*. Mr. John B. Graves, for instance, practically designs Ketí to reflect his British homeland scenery. Apart from that, he also installs a Mai who he expects to work in league with him in governing the locals. While Mr. Graves sees to the political administration of Ketí, Reverend Nathan Drinkwater, who claims to have been appointed and chosen by God to bring the Gospel to the Ketí people, all the way from the United States of America, works assiduously to convert the natives to Christianity. The colonial presence in the novel, as in Nigeria’s history, later gives way to an all-black indigenous hegemony, thanks to the gaining of independence. And the political conflicts leading up to the outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafra Civil war are all captured in *Measuring Time*.

Habila cleverly hides behind one of his characters, Toma, A.K.A. “One Leg,” to recount the tragic story of the war: “It began with rumours of killings. The year was 1966 we heard from

travellers and on the radio that the Igbo leader, Ojukwu, was planning to divide the country in two ...” (42). Tama then goes on to rehash the familiar troughs of Nigeria’s darkest historical moments yet — the Igbo versus Northerners conflicts culminating in unprecedented loss of life and property, and, of course, the full-scale fratricidal war of secession on the part of the Igbo. Toma and uncle Haruna enlist in the Nigerian army and go to war against the Biafran secessionists. Toma loses a leg in action and returns home, a human wreck while uncle Haruna is utterly dehumanised by the depredations and devastation of battles witnessed, and later commits suicide.

Measuring Time equally reflects Nigeria’s chequered history of military dictatorships which spans the period between 1984-1999. Accordingly, the novel creatively examines and highlights these years of the locusts, detailing the economic stagnation, social misery and political misrule inflicted on the populace by the men of “action”. The return of the country to the civilised norms of democratic political culture exemplified by the so-called sanctity of the Ballot is realistically represented by the political aspirations of Lamang and his coterie of local politicians. As earlier highlighted, the political skulduggery dramatised by the ruling Victory Party (VP) and the opposition party, the New Victory Party (NVP) exemplifies the high-wire sweep-stake that is Nigerian politics (the Obasanjo years). Interestingly, on the continental level, the narrative captures the contemporary scene scarred as it is by war, famine, disease on the one hand and the socio-economic ramifications of globalisation, driven by multinational conglomerates, *Pax Americana*, and neo-colonialism, on the other.

The novelist as historian carefully traces the historical tramlines of the fictional Keti Community (and, to some degree, Nigeria’s history) from the mists of antiquity through pre-colonial and colonial times to the post colonial era. Impliedly, Helon Habila constructs a linear

progression of historical time. And quite significantly, it is the ontology and the phenomenology of Time that the prose stylist actually sets out to interrogate: *Measuring Time*. Time, like proverbial masquerade dancing, has always provided contrasting perspectives to different scholars, philosophers, theologians and even scientists of different ideological stripes. And this differing cognition and contrasting attitudes to the nature of Time are temporally, culturally and historically relative. However, the universality of the concept of Time as Janus-faced, giver / taker, health/ill-health, plenty/dearth, benevolent/malevolent, life/death, is *writ large* in *Measuring Time* as in various other works, literary and non-literary.⁵ The Renaissance theme of *Carpe Diem* ‘Seize the Day’ seems to find great scope in Habila’s novel. Armed with the sobering knowledge of the evanescence and the finitude of the human estate, the renaissance writers sought to cheat death *a la* Habila by canonising themselves and their feats in poetry. The immortality of art is recognised in various parts of the world.⁶ This universal embrace of the monumentalising function of art (both in the oral and written modes, but more in the written) is a counterfactual strategy deployed to mitigate the angst of finitude: it affords man the anodyne illusion of self perpetuation in the face of the disquieting and grim finality of death. Time assumes a doubly spectral quality apprehended within the modernist or existentialist paradigm. Without going into the finer details of existentialism, it is enough to call our attention to its notion of “a sense of meaninglessness in the outer world; this meaninglessness produces discomfort, anxiety, loneliness in the face of limitations, and desire to invest experience with meaning by acting upon the world, although efforts to act in a meaningless, “absurd” world lead to anguish, greater loneliness, and despair”. (C. High Holman and William Harmon, 1992, 186). Seen against this backcloth, therefore, we can reasonably argue that virtually all the characters in the novel are engaged in sundry acts of “measuring time”: Lamang in his political activities,

LaMamo in mercenary soldiery; Iliya in his unstinting push for a better future; Auntie Marina, arguably the most admirably realised character: a pillar of strength and stability in the family, a true matriarch; Zara, the beautiful and generous woman who tries to give love and help to others; Drinkwater in his missionary work among a benighted people; the Mai who represents the limitations and the possibilities of tradition, the Waziri (the vizier) in his personification of the Evil principle; Mr. Graves in his onerous task of the “pacification” of a subject race; Haruna, the shell-shocked non-entity from a civil war; and Mamo himself, whose efforts to write ten to fifteen volumes of biographical history help him to “invest experience with meaning”.

Yet, it is the ennui, the emotional atrophy, the sense of fragmentation and the sense of alienation, loss and exile which undergird the modernist consciousness that come through in *Measuring Time*. On occasion, Mamo, like other characters, is overwhelmed by a feeling of loneliness (66, 184, 118, 199, 300):

He waited for something, anything, to happen, and as he waited he measured time in the shadows cast by trees and walls, in the silence between one footfall and the next, between one breath and the next, in the seconds, and minutes and hours and days and weeks and months add up to form the seasons (118).

Habila further elaborates on the climate of despair and loss enveloping the world:

The radio and books sustained him at night. He’d lie in the dark and listen to the voices from faraway Lagos or London or America or Germany ... There were also the late request programmes when insomniacs like him would phone in with their marital woes, their sexual angst, their clinical depressions, and their congenital diseases. As he listened to the voices... the loneliness didn’t bite that sharply; he’d feel as if the people on the radio were seated beside him, together forming a community of misfits, freaks, and solitaires, desperately reaching out to touch flesh, to form a cycle of empathy (119).

Time’s cruel action continues to dog Mamo’s heels as he frantically seeks ways and means of easing his loneliness: “he felt powerless, and trapped and almost desperate” (150). He

is held hostage by Time as he takes to desultory walks, a driftwood killing time. And, sometimes, all he does is wait: “I am just waiting” (119). The question is, what is he waiting for? The answer comes in the next page: “Nothing” (120). This Beckettian dystopia which Mamo inhabits along with other “inmates” is made doubly tragic by the possibility of imminent death from sickle-cell anaemia. Although Mamo survives the ravages and the vicissitudes of time, his father, Lamang, is not so fortunate: he too suffers restlessness, aloneness and misery which he seeks to counter with political engagement. Sadly, he is left high and dry, and, as a result, suffers opprobrium which in turn causes him to suffer a stroke, and, later, death. Needless to add, other characters like Asabar, Zara, Auntie Marina, LaMamo, the Waziri, and Haruna come to grief in varying degrees of tragic intensity. Thus, Time in the novel is represented by varied and disparate images of loss, misery, alienation, psychological disintegration, ageing, and passage. It is invariably yoked to the remorseless ineluctability of change.

This existential paradox of change is imagistically poetized within the living compass of the phenomenal universe. Nature is in a metaphysical sense anthropomorphised as a prima donna in the cosmic drama of survival. In this connection, the dialectics of rain and drought (and what they stand for in symbolic terms) is played out on the very turf which happens to be the main source of the people’s livelihood: their farmlands. Apart from the topographic details which *Measuring Time* furnishes, the general impression of Keti conveyed by the novelist is that of a place characterised by aridity, emptiness, and devastation. The farming community is largely hungry, disinherited, wresting a meagre harvest of crops from a drought-harassed soil. Images of hardship and loss pre-dominate the novel: objective correlatives such as “dark patches” and “jigsaw pieces” (302), “the roofless classrooms” (308) the abandoned abbatoir, “the long, narrow white strip” (the Keti River 309) point up the prevailing state of anomie in the novel. Even

Auntie Manria, who begins to see ghosts (312), and Zara, who suffers a mental breakdown towards the novel's end, further complicate this *dans macabre*.

Also, the Keti universe is singularly iconised by the hills and valleys which give it a sense of place and location. Indeed, the hills are a symbolisation of a fortress as well as a battlefield invested as they are with mythic tonalities. It is a fortress in the time of social stress; a getaway/tryst for lovers. They also play an ambiguous role as a summit of hope and possibility (the people go up there to pray and fast for rain) and, conversely, a place of slaughter (the sectarian violence and the resultant killings). Instructively, the Keti burial ground is strategically situated at the foot of the hills. In all of this, hardly do we get a benevolent glimpse of nature's possibilities. Instead, it is a purgatorial prelude to Apocalypse that *Measuring Time*⁷ furnishes the reader.

To be sure, what redeems the novel from the banal reportage of mere historical or/and anthropological documentation is the surefooted handling of the imaginative reconstruction of material. This vividly realised sense of artistic verisimilitude derives principally from the writer's *forte*, which is a mastery of language. Thus, in spite of the ethnographic element which the novel's emphasis on history unavoidably establishes, the novel's claim to the status of a work of imaginative art is hinged on its utilisation of the protocols of narratology. In this light, therefore, the writer intelligently harnesses the resources of both the oral and written modes of artistic representation. Habila, in narrating Mamo's research endeavours, for instance, remarks: "his knowledge came from popular tradition: gossip, legend, myth, and what little history there was in books" (188). It is generally said that the death of a *griot* is analogous to the burning down of a library. This is because the *griot* occupies a strategic and superior position in traditional society by virtue of his wealth of knowledge about the customs and traditions of the

tribe, the complexly intricate genealogies of kings, local history of wars, migrations, deaths, births, and so forth. He is the memory of the social collective as well as its conscience. The office of the *griot* is at different instances occupied by a number of characters in *Measuring Time*: we are told that there are various versions of the story of the love affair between Saraya and Lamang and the tragic marriage between Lamang and his wife, Tabita (14). This is in keeping with the oral nature of information dissemination in a largely pre-literate society or one in which there is a high degree of illiteracy like the Keti Community. Accordingly, the scrupulously “edited” stories (details of the story always change with each retelling) of the marriage between Lamang and Tabita are told by Auntie Marina to the twin brothers, Mamo and LaMamo. Even when Mamo experiences his sickle-cell anaemia crisis, Marina, who stands in *loco parentis* to him and his twin brother, regales him with stories:

She was a magician, a witch with words. She could conjure up mountains and undersea kingdoms with words. I stayed alive from day to day just to hear her next story. She was Schederazade, I was the king, but she told stories to save my life, not hers – at least that was how I saw it (18).

It is instructive that Helon Habila invokes the well-known myth of Scheherazade, a myth which memorably exemplifies the power and the sheer magic of *poiesis*; the novel’s narrative development turns upon this element of suspenseful narration which goes back and forth in time to imaginatively reconstruct a living drama of tradition and modernity. In the same vein, Mamo and Lamano first learn about their uncle Haruna’s war exploits from oral tales told about him until he materialises in the flesh, seemingly giving the lie to the former heroic portraiture of him (39). Besides, uncle Iliya also furnishes us the interesting story of their family history (40); Toma, AKA, “One leg” gives us an eyewitness account of the horrible details of the civil war

and tends to put the record straight concerning the fate of Haruna, who commits suicide upon his return from the war.

Even after Mamo has won fame in Keti for his review of Reverend Drinkwater's book, the older members of the community still take him to task over what they consider Mamo's poor treatment of oral history (159). Mamo, Habila's persona (or alter ego?), as the superintending narrative ego manages quite deftly to weave the disparate and sometimes fiercely conflictual tales of the *dramatis personae* in the novel into one seamless story of the human spirit of invincibility and self-affirmation in the face of time's vicissitudes. Beyond the deployment of oral resources such as myth, legend, drama presentations, verbal accounts of events and happenings, the writer falls back on the use of written documents, mostly non-literary. In the chapter entitled "the example of Plutarch", for example, Professor Batanda, in his letter to Mamo writes:

History is not only about paper qualifications; if it were so, then most of the old men we depend on for oral accounts of the past would be disqualified from calling themselves historians. Have you ever wondered how most historians got their material, especially those early experts on Africa? Most of their history accounts were based on papers left by colonial officers and their wives' diaries, and explorers' journals and missionaries' accounts, etc (156).

Habila, like his hero, Mamo, equally avails himself of the insights afforded by the intertextual expropriation of such research items as photo-albums, letters, memos, diaries, and books. In this regard, the Drinkwater family proves very useful to Mamo and by implication, Habila.

Most of the characters irrespective of their place on the social ladder appear to seek self-presence and self-validation through the individuating potential of storytelling: they try to "cheat death", so to speak, or "act upon the world" by historicising their passage through life by telling their stories in song and dance, drama, verbal repartee, casual banter, and even their daily

struggles for survival. This desire in man for existential security against Time, the ultimate naysayer, is tellingly dramatised by the Waziri's devious but compulsive efforts to have Mamo write a biographical history of the Mai in which he, the vizier, will be portrayed in good light. To that effect, he tells Mamo: "what is more important at the moment is the book" (282). The Waziri wants his and the Mai's memory preserved in a book, and he is even willing to offer money as a bribe to Mamo, the scribe, to do just that. The practical imperative of writing over the primacy of orality has been recognised and copiously commented upon by many scholars, such as Walter J. Ong (1982), Jack Goody (1987) and Irele (1982, 2001). In *Measuring Time*, for example, we see the church actors who initially re-enact by rote the drama involving the pioneering efforts of Rev. Drinkwater among his early native Christian converts later abandon the old style of improvisation for a scripted play authored by — who else? — Mamo. (33-35; 315-321). Yet the novel incorporates the story-telling tradition that records the narrative history of a community.

On a final note, *Measuring Time* is an artistic project of revisionism, a hermeneutic metacriticism of a monumental memoriabilia: the ten or fifteen volumes of biographical history ostensibly written before the novel by Mamo. Helon Habila thus plays the role of artist as reviewer, or auditor, evaluating, assessing, analysing, explicating and interpreting the tomes of historical material left behind by Mamo. On the one hand, Mamo relies on both oral and written sources for his own material while Habila as critic-novelist brings the disciplinary bias of the novelistic genre to bear on Mamo's work, on the other. This 'archaeological' *modus operandi* adopted by the writer stimulates much research interest among scholars working in the areas of reader-response theories, psychoanalysis, post/modernism, Marxist theoretical approaches, deconstruction, New Historicism, among others. It is tempting, for instance, to want to seriously investigate Habila's intelligent manipulation of point of view in this novel with his critical

commentary on Mamo's – and other characters' – words and deeds. This revisionist ethos is very much instantiated in the novel: the author writes:

In her retelling of the same events to the twins, Auntie Marina never dwelled too much on the unhappy aspects of the story; she had a light touch, skimming and flying over the surface, always aiming for the folktale's happy reversals of fortune and resolutions. (15).

We also find in evidence this interpretive stance later in the novel; in the dialogue between Mamo and Zara in her apartment:

She interrupted him, saying, “why don't you write about it?”
 “what?” he asked, raising his eyes from the page.
 “A review, about this book: All comments you are making write them down”.
 “I can't. You only review new books. This book was published in ... let me see ... 1970, by Drinkwater's son, from papers left by his father who died in 1952 ... No newspaper would publish that”.
 “But what of journals and specialised magazines? There are tons of them ... and you don't have to write a review as such, you could write about our history, about misrepresentations by foreign historians, using this book as your example” (146).

Mamo's review of Drinkwater's book is similar to Habila's novelistic effort; it emphasises in a sense Professor Batanda's argument to the effect that biography “deals with the human element; it gives us the freedom to ruminate, to be subjective, and so to philosophise, to examine character, and to condemn or to praise...” (156-157). There is therefore a panegyric hint to the novel as the author celebrates the adamant will of the peasantry to eke out a living in an inclement environment. We also discern a polyphonic or heteroglossic quality underneath the narrative voice as history comes through, finally, as the “hero” of *Measuring Time*. And who make history, but people: men, women and children? Clearly Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* provides a template of sorts for Helon Habila as he seeks to go “into their hearts, to write about their secret desires and aspirations” (300), knowing that “All aspire to be happy” (300).

Although *Measuring Time* tends to plot a linear chronology of narrative action, the writer's obvious revisionist agenda also tends to create discontinuities, thus creating a simultaneity of past and present happenings which nevertheless manages to avoid obfuscation. Flashbacks and anecdotes help bolster the narrative scheme of the novel, giving it variety and interest. It is quite interesting, though, to see the narrator switch from past tense to present tense in the last pages of the book. Mamo's onward journey towards Zara's place becomes intriguingly a return to the past — with all its munificence — thus giving the tale a fullness of effect, a certain full-orbed organicism. Yet, one tends to feel cheated, dissatisfied with the many loose ends left dangling: what becomes of Bintou's pregnancy? How does Zara finally end up? How does Mamo eventually put pen to paper to write the many volumes of Keti history? Even LaMamo's sudden reappearance in Keti and his sudden death strike one as *Deux Ex Machina* and somewhat melodramatic. Again, we are informed that Mamo is planning to write between ten and fifteen volumes of the biographical history of Keti. We are also told that his biography, entitled *Lives and Times* (14) and comprising fifteen to twenty chapters, focuses on major characters who have affected his own life one way or another. The question, then, is, does Mamo eventually write the proposed ten-or-fifteen-volume book? Or does he finally settle for a fifteen-to-twenty chapter book of biographies, captioned *Lives and Times*? (300).

Measuring Time is a *bildungsroman* novel which, on the one hand captures the historical evolution of a community (Keti), and on the other the physical and psychological development of Mamo and LaMamo with the attendant progression from innocence to experience. It is a historical as well as a psychological novel, powered by a certain democratisation of point of view which, in turn, lends the novel an element of irresolute scepticism, embodying, as it does, the increasing complexity of contemporary human experience. Through the incorporation of the

elements dream, fantasy, hallucination, hearsay, gossip, and the like, the novel appears suspended between the agonistic claims of orality and the chirographic immobilism of textual phenomenon. Like many modernist writers, Helon Habila seems to fix his gaze on the revolting underbelly of human nature and the inescapable horror of the human condition. And, like Thomas Hardy, Habila believes that “happiness (is) but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain” (260).

NOTES

1. Wole Soyinka in a famous essay entitled “The Writer in a Modern African State” (Soyinka, 1988, 15-20) lampoons his fellow African writers for being fixated on the past and challenge them to turn their attention to the present and the future. (Also see Achebe’s “The Novelist As Teacher”, in Achebe, 1975).
2. Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel* (London: Merlin Press Ltd; 1989); references in text refer to this edition.
3. T. Akachi Ezeigbo’s book, *Fact and Fiction in the Literature of the Nigerian Civil War* (1991) furnishes a wide range of texts, particularly novels, whose subject matter is the Nigeria-Biafra civil war of 1967-1970. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s war epic, *Half of A Yellow Sun* (2006) also provides a wide array of books based on the war.
4. The late Nigerian environmentalist-writer, Ken Saro-Wiwa wrote a novel entitled *Sozaboy* (1985) which he sub-titled “A Novel in rotten English”, Saro-wiwa’s concept of “rotten English” is a hybrid code which is closer to pidgin English than Standard English, but is not exactly pidgin English. Based on the disorientating effects of war, *Sozaboy* admirably reflects its thematic thrust through its formal methodologies, i.e. “mangled” language. Iweala may be said to have been influenced by Ken Saro-Wiwa and other experimentalist novelists.
5. Time’s Janus-facedness, its Ogunian dualism is universally acknowledged both in primitive, pre-literate cultures and in modern literate discourses. Osundare’s prologue-poem “Earth” in *The Eye of the Earth* (1986, 1) as well as many of his poems examines the subject of Time’s vagaries. English Renaissance poetry’s thematization of the *Carpe Diem* is well-known. And the varying attitudes of western writers to the subject of Time are reflected in the dominant foci of the different literary epochs and movements in western literary history.
6. See Achebe’s meditation on the imperishability and the immortality of art (or “narrative”) in his novel *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987, 113-114). Also, John Donne’s poem “The cononisation” and many renaissance poems, especially, Williams Shakespeare’s sonnets, emphasize this issue.
7. Helon Habila, *Measuring Time*, 2007. All quotations are from this edition.

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