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The Political Power of Women in Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*

In Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* (first published in 2002) many characters are mentally strong and highly educated. For characters like Joshua, James and Lomba these features enhance their political power when they decide to use them to criticize the regime. The women, on the other hand, have no use for these strengths in the political arena. The aim of this essay is to investigate the political power of Janice, Auntie Rachael and Hagar. These are selected as representatives of women from three different age groups. The essay argues that these women are restrained politically due to their gender but still have political power because of their influence on the men. Subjects such as education, family relations, social status and political power in relation to other characters will be discussed.

To analyze the political power of Janice, Auntie Rachael and Hagar it is necessary to define the expression "political power". In the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* "political" is defined as someone or something "connected with the state, government or public affairs" (Wehmeier et al. 1166). Power, however, is not as easy to define. Within the social sciences one needs to differentiate between "power to" and "power over". "Power to" is the ability to accomplish an action. More relevant to this study is "power over" that considers the relationship between people, in the sense that one person has control over someone else. This control may further be separated between making decisions that are binding to others and influence over others, i.e. to affect people through external pressure (for example persuasion or even intimidation). There is furthermore an ongoing discussion among researchers if this influence needs to be intentional or not (Heywood 122).

Due to the problems in defining power, Lukes has decided on a relatively broad definition. He argues that power is when a person gets someone to do something they would not have done otherwise (36). When combining these two words, *political power* would thereby mean to influence the behaviour of someone connected with the state, government or public affairs. Political power is therefore not only in the hands of those with a political title but belongs to anyone who is able to influence someone connected to these matters. This is the definition that will be used in this essay.

Previous analyses of *Waiting for an Angel* have also focused on the political themes in the novel. Erritouni (2010) discusses what the book implies about the author's thoughts on revolution and Marxism. Others like Akingbe (2010) and Akung (2011) concentrate on the relationship between ordinary citizens and the military. However, even though the power of the people has been discussed before, the female perspective seems forgotten. In a patriarchal society it would be a mistake to assume that women have the same opportunities as men. For that reason, this essay attempts to shed light on the situation of the female characters in

Habila's highly political story.

A written text can never truly give the truth of events or people; it can only represent them (Said 21). Nevertheless, as Habila refers to non-fictional people and even tells the political background of the story, it is clear that the novel is not completely without connection to the real world. To analyse *Waiting for an Angel* it is therefore relevant to present the history of Nigerian women.

Nigeria did not exist as a country until 1914, when the British colonisers created the country. At the time, more than three hundred different ethnic groups inhabited the area and these groups had little in common (Uchendu ix-x). They all had different views on women's political involvement, but none believed that the role of women was the same as in the western countries. The men in Britain did not let the women take part in politics, whilst the same was allowed and even encouraged among the Nigerians. Titles with high social status were given to both Nigerian men as well as women and everyone respected the female leaders (vii, x, 11). For that reason, it was not appreciated when the British colonisers tried to treat the Nigerian women as they did their own. Women's contributions to society were ignored and all political involvement stopped; this made a lot of women angry (36). The cultural differences between the British and the Igbo women led to the Aba Women's War, in 1929 (Falola, *Colonialism* 122). Even though riots had occurred earlier, this was the first time during the British rule that women were central in a major protest (108). The women had no single leader and included members from several tribes (115). Even though many women were killed or injured, the riot led to several significant changes such as women not being forced to pay tax and a reorganization of the native courts (122). The political power of women during this time period was thereby explicit and they did not need to influence the men close to them but were able to bring about change themselves without a middleman.

Most of the events described in *Waiting for an Angel* take place in the 1990's by which time women were enfranchised, they were present in the political arena all over the country and they even held some important political titles (Uchendu 63-68). Conversely, compared to the men, the political interest among women in Nigeria appeared to be low. According to Uchendu, it may have been that politics was considered a place for men, a lingering attitude derived from the colonisers (63-68). During the Abacha regime between 1993 and 1998, the people were repressed and critiquing the regime was often punished with prison or death (Falola, *History* 197). If women found it difficult to enter politics before, it was certainly not easier in a time when even men were struggling. None of the female characters analysed in Habila's novel seems to even consider a political career for themselves,

even though they are clearly concerned about the state of the country. Janice demonstrates her attitude towards the legal system when she criticizes the treatment of Lomba. Auntie Rachael does not like the military and Hagar longs for the day when democracy returns. It is therefore not lack of interest that prevents the female characters from officially joining the political arena. It seems more likely that they are affected by lingering attitudes or scared by the threat of punishment.

To acquire a political title one needs to be educated. When the British arrived and western education spread the effect was devastating for female education. All over Nigeria, except in the northern part, where most people were Muslims, the Christian missionaries set up the first schools; these were all boys' schools. It was believed that women should stay at home and did not need an education. Men, according to the colonisers, were the only ones who had an economic as well as political responsibility. The women who did receive a western education studied other subjects than the men (Uchendu 32-33).

After Nigeria gained its independence in 1960, more schools opened thanks to government funding (Uchendu 71). Primary education became free in 1976 (Nwagwu 170), but not all families found it necessary to educate their daughters. Many could not afford to support all of their children through secondary school and saw therefore no use for a basic education (Nwabara 8-9). The families also suffered a financial loss as the girls could work at home or elsewhere, instead of going to school (Onibokun et al. 38). The women who did attend were often persuaded to study subjects that would be useful when becoming a housewife. Areas such as mathematics and science were seen as more appropriate for the boys. Dividing the sexes in this manner made it even more difficult for the women who later in life wished to study medicine, engineering and similar areas as they lacked the basic knowledge needed (Nwabara 8-9). Janice is the only woman who has gained a higher education in *Waiting for an Angel*. The picture of her as a strong woman becomes even more apparent knowing that few women studied at university since the entire society reinforced the belief that they should stay at home. For these women, a higher education would be unnecessary once a suitable husband was chosen (Nwabara 8-9). Early pregnancies were also a common reason for young women to leave school (Onibokun et al. 2).

Contrary to Janice, Rachael and Hagar's marital status, marriage was an important subject to men as well as women in late 20th century Nigeria. Not only did it connect two people in love, but marriage also enabled them to reproduce (Falola, *Culture* 119) since premarital sex was (and still is) not looked upon kindly (Nigerian Society and Culture). Having a child was one of the most important reasons for getting married as children gave a

higher social status. Marriages were often arranged among young people, even though it was becoming less common (Nwabara 10 & Falola, *Culture* 119). The appropriate age for marriage differed between traditions. However, if a woman was more than 23 years old and still not married it was assumed that something was wrong with her (Nwabara 10-11).

In case the marriage did not work out a divorce would have been possible, but the social stigma connected to it was worse than staying in a bad relationship. A lot of the time the couple would just move apart instead. The negative attitudes towards divorce were, on the other hand, less severe in the urban areas. The most common reasons for a couple to split up were the inability to have children, especially a son, one partner committing criminal offences or other antisocial behaviour. The man took over all the property after a divorce, including the children. If the children were very young the woman could get custody of them until they were old enough to stay with the father. Even though polygamy was declining at the time, it was still seen as a solution to many marital problems, e.g. if one wife could not produce a male heir, the second one might (Falola, *Culture* 120-121).

In the Nigeria depicted in *Waiting for an Angel*, Janice's fiancé, the superintendent Muftau, is the first person connected with the state, government or public affair to be influenced by a woman. The superintendent is a man who has the power to change the situation of those who have been incarcerated without a trial, but does not due to fear. According to Akingbe, Muftau is "as much a prisoner of his hopes and fears as any of the captives he presides over" (29). People working in state facilities during the Abacha years, were probably thoroughly controlled and inspected in their workplace. As the superintendent has worked with prisoners for a long time, he knows what happen to those who dare challenge the regime. Clearly, no Nigerian citizen was truly free during this time. Habila says that the Abacha years were characterized by an "airless prison-like atmosphere" (229). Everyone had to go through their own prison, no matter whether it was located inside jail, at work or on the streets. The political detainees may be physically imprisoned, but Muftau's actions and thoughts are restrained due to fear of the government.

Muftau overcomes some of his fears when he finds out about Lomba's talent for writing poems and seizes the chance to impress on Janice. Without even knowing it, she has influenced the way that the superintendent treats one of the prisoners. When Janice and Lomba finally meet she clearly states her opinions of the treatment of the political detainees. She knows that they never get a hearing and are often left, forgotten, in prison. When her boyfriend refuses to do anything more to help Lomba she exclaims: "How can you be so unfeeling! Put yourself in his shoes – two years away from friends, from family, without the

power to do anything you wish to do” (Habla 40-41). Not only does this demonstrate Janice’s own opinions but also that she has faith in her ability to affect Muftau’s behaviour. If she did not believe that she could influence him in any way, she would not have blamed him for Lomba’s situation or tried to make him improve the prisoner’s life. Habla writes that she says this like a teacher to a student. Nevertheless, her reprimand is expressed in a way that not only tells the superintendent that he is wrong, but also that he does not live up to her standards. Janice makes Muftau feel ashamed as she points out his lack of empathy that is apparently something she values in a man.

Janice is aware of the power her boyfriend has over the prisoners and sees her chance to bring about change in at least one of them. Her influence is used on a personal level instead of taking an official stand against the regime’s treatment of their critics. In a society where she would have had more political freedom she might have been able to work for a permanent change. A prison reform, changing the lives of all political prisoners would be a major step towards a country that respects human rights. During the Abacha regime, the human rights were non-existent in Nigeria, including the freedom of speech. A man would have problems getting his voice heard by the government (Falola, *History* 197) and, as a patriarchal society, it would have been even harder for the women. Janice knows this and is therefore doing the best she can: influencing the one person that can make a small change in her place.

Her appeal to Muftau’s feelings and character makes the superintendent ashamed. Lomba states that:

He was just Man. Man in his basic, rudimentary state, easily moved by powerful emotions like love, lust, anger, greed and fear, but totally dumb to the finer, acquired emotions like pity, mercy, humour and justice. (Habla 41)

The above quotation demonstrates that Muftau is influenced due to his feelings for her, and not because he has internalized the sense of what would be the humane thing to do. Lomba is thereby diminishing the superintendent to a person who does not have the intelligence to fully understand “the finer” feelings that humans are not born with, but learns. Muftau is “just Man”, not as in the sex but as mankind in a fundamental state. This statement is far from a compliment to Muftau even though it shows that he is not completely evil. Neither is it praise for Janice’s attempt at persuasion; she could not accomplish a long lasting change in Muftau’s attitude by means of this technique. However, even if Muftau’s attitude does not alter, she does bring about a temporary change in his behaviour and does therefore have political

power.

In their relationship, it is clear that Janice is in control, as she is not afraid of threatening to leave Muftau. The superintendent, on the other hand, had to fight for a long time just to get her to go out with him. Janice is using her upper hand to influence the way the superintendent runs the prison. Even though Lomba's conditions are only slightly improved, it is evident that Muftau is influenced by her opinions. Had there not been a coup and the detainees not been moved, Janice's fiancé might have been able at least to contact Amnesty International and let them work for Lomba's release.

Neither Janice nor the superintendent appears to consider marriage to be of great importance due to social norms. As already established, children and especially a son gave high social status in Nigerian society in the late 20th century. Muftau already has a son. When it comes to Janice the reader is never told if she has or ever had a child or husband. When talking to Lomba about the superintendent she says that: "I know he has his awkward side, and that he was once married – but I don't care. After all, I have a little past too. Who doesn't?" (Habla 37). First of all, this demonstrates that she, as well as society, thinks that a man should only be married once. Regardless of the reason for being single again, it appears to carry a certain social stigma. It also shows that something has happened in her life that makes her less attractive as a spouse. Had she been married previously she would not have pointed that out as a flaw in Muftau without mentioning that it applied to her as well. Without a former husband or a child she would belong to the women past the age of 23 who were regarded as having some kind of problem.

At one point Lomba says that she is "a little past her prime, past her sell-by date" (38). In western society that would probably mean that she is too old to have children or that her age is starting to show. Considering that Nigerian women married when they were quite young, Janice might also be in her late twenties or early thirties. A possible explanation to her not being married may actually be her university education. An intelligent woman was not considered a suitable wife in late 20th century Nigeria (Nwabara 9).

Being a teacher in Nigeria during the time *Waiting for an Angel* is set, did not carry a high salary. It did therefore not come with a high social-status. Many female teacher students used their college degree in education to get into university and study other subjects instead of working in schools. Those who wished to become teachers had four main reasons. The first two had to do with the wish for a higher education and wanting to teach. The third and fourth, however, emphasized the importance of staying close to their husband or husband-to-be. As teachers, they would have had time for their families and no problem in finding a job in the

same city as their husbands. It was therefore common for the urban areas to have more female teachers than the rural ones (Nwagwu 176-78). Janice is for that reason probably one out of many female teachers in Lagos. She could furthermore be a representative for the 40% female primary school teachers that existed in the beginning of the 1990's Nigeria. Nevertheless, for secondary schools the number was only 32% (170-71). If Janice were working at the higher levels where a majority of the teachers were men, she would thereby challenge the traditional division of labor between the genders.

Janice might be seen to have a higher social status than her boyfriend. Muftau's speech indicates that he is not highly educated. Janice, on the other hand, has been to university. The superintendent values her schooling and states that this is the reason why she has class (Habla 27). As mentioned earlier, men were often intimidated by female intelligence. A woman with a high education in, for example, mathematics was considered less feminine than someone who had stayed at home or studied subjects such as art or home economics (Nwabara 8-9).

It is unclear in what subjects Janice is a teacher. If her educational degree had been mathematics or chemistry, she would have been considered an intelligent woman and therefore a threat to men. Muftau's appreciation of her education would then be unusual for men at that time. Courting a woman who is clever and more educated than him shows that the superintendent is quite a brave man. She may, nevertheless, be a teacher in the typically female subjects such as art or home economics and therefore not be seen as intimidating.

Her subjects set aside, Janice still has the opportunity to influence the next generation. The reader is never told what age group she is teaching, but regardless of the pupils' age she has the opportunity to select what they read, talk and listen to. Even though many of the children's attitudes are formed at home, already before they start going to school, they can always change and norms can be questioned. A teacher has the possibility to challenge these attitudes and beliefs and influence his/her pupils. According to Onibokun et al., it is in school that the socialization process takes place and thereby affects the future leaders (2). Janice may also bring about change simply by being a role model to the female students who wish to get a university degree or change the attitude towards women among her male pupils.

Another female character who has the chance to influence others is Auntie Rachael. As a well-known, successful businesswoman she appears to be respected by all citizens on Poverty Street. Rachael's restaurant is prosperous enough to make her relatively rich and the Nigerian society treasured the economical skills of a woman (Uchendu 19, 26). The story told by Kela takes place the same year that Saro Wiwa was killed. That makes it the year 1995

(Habila 228) and Auntie Rachael would then be 53 years old (as she ran away with her husband in 1960 at the age of eighteen). Considering that the life expectancy of Nigerian women in the 1990's was 46 years (United Nations), the aunt belongs to the older generation. Elders were always treated with respect in Nigeria, even by strangers (Falola, *Culture* 129).

Kela's mother thinks highly of Auntie Rachael and even considers her a heroine. She says that: "Rachael was the most strong-willed and independent person she had ever known – perhaps because Auntie Rachael refused to remarry, even though she had no child" (Habila 140). Considering the social pressure that was placed upon women who were not married or did not have children, Rachael must be regarded as a very strong woman.

As she comes from the northern part of the country where women were even more restricted than in the urban areas of the south (Uchendu 48), it would be easier for Rachael to keep her untraditional lifestyle in Lagos than up north. She appears to be on good terms with her brother and his entire family, so the reason for not wanting to travel north is not a family issue. Probably the problem is the prejudice against women without children among the rest of the society. Although she is a strong woman, that may be too much to handle, even for her.

When Kela finds out about his aunt's drinking problem he reacts with surprise and sadness. According to Ikuesan it was unthinkable for a woman to drink alcohol in traditional Nigeria. The only exceptions were social functions and celebrations where a small amount was acceptable. Intoxication was solely for men. In the mid 90's women should still keep their drinking to special occasions, otherwise it was best kept private. This applied particularly to women living in rural areas. If a woman suffered from emotional problems and needed to numb her feelings, it was more common for her to use sleeping pills than alcohol. A woman who abused alcohol not only had to struggle with the addiction itself, but also with a social stigma that would not apply to men. Alcoholism would also affect her relatives, as their reputation and honour would be destroyed (941-43).

A drinking problem would be devastating for a female business entrepreneur. Not only would it be difficult to keep the business running, but the customers would also go elsewhere if they found out (Ikuesan 943). Rachael's addiction may be another reason why she does not want to visit her relatives. As it would be impossible to keep her drinking habit secret while living with them, she is aware of the effect her alcoholism would have on the family's reputation. On the other hand, Nancy mentions that the aunt started drinking only two years ago, when her new fiancé was killed. This means that she would have had plenty of time to travel up north before becoming addicted, but refused.

Auntie Rachael's drinking shows that she is not satisfied. Joshua tells Kela that people

start dreaming when they are not happy with the real life, and Rachael dreams. She dreams of the past and not of the future. Considering her age and the losses she have had, it is not strange that she does not dream of her own future, but rather of the happy days she has already experienced. However, Kela states that she is not doing this in a healthy way as she is “groping back to a time dissolved” (Habila 138). Times are changing and as a woman who has dared to challenge the norms of society, she has now lost the strength she once felt. She is trying to find the support of her dead husband in her alcoholic dreams. As time passes and the alcohol dims her memories it becomes harder to find that support.

As seen above, it would have been nearly impossible for her to run her business and simultaneously continue her addiction once Nancy had left. Not only due to the physical and psychological effects of the alcohol, but also because of society’s attitude towards female alcoholics. Forced to run the business she is thereby also obliged to stop drinking. Once again, she demonstrates her strength, as she is able to stop using alcohol instead of failing her job.

When she finally becomes sober she shows her political views and wisdom. On one occasion, she slams the door shut on the policemen that come by looking for something to eat. There are no reprimands for her action. This one, single time when she stands up and protests against the regime nothing happens, as if they do not take her seriously. For the men who had signs labeled “Poverty Street” the punishments are more severe. One might think that refusing to serve the policemen would be more serious than writing a few words on a sign; however, because of her gender, that is not the case.

As the regime does not listen to a woman, she tries to influence the men around her. Considering her opinion of the government, she should want as many as possible to take an official stand against the regime. However, even though she hates the military (Habila 160)¹, her concern is keeping the people she cares about alive. As she has experienced how two of the men close to her died because of their political involvement, Rachael is afraid of losing even more loved ones. Even if Auntie Rachael treasures Joshua’s knowledge (124), she does not hesitate to tell him that he is wrong. Kela says that Rachael appears to be disappointed in Joshua; that he should know better than to be so naïve as to think that the demonstration will be peaceful. When the aunt exclaims that Joshua seems to be forced into becoming a martyr (164), she demonstrates that she knows that he does not want to take on the role that has been

¹ Readers interested in the military’s role in the novel are referred to Akung and Simon’s ‘The Military as a Motif in the Nigerian Novel: Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel*’ (2011).

given to him.

The pressure and expectations on Joshua have, nevertheless, grown to such a vast proportion that he no longer has a choice. During their conversation Joshua never disagrees with Rachael, but listens carefully and tries to calm her. His manner shows that he is aware that the demonstration will probably turn violent. His earlier statement about Mao's plans being foolish (Habla 162)², further demonstrates that he agrees with everything Auntie Rachael says. However, the pressure from society is even stronger than common sense. Even though Rachael has not been able to dissuade Joshua from participating in the demonstration, the fact that she even tries shows that she believes herself to have some influence over him.

According to Erritouni, Rachael does not want Joshua to lead the demonstration, as she believes that just staying alive is the ultimate act of resistance (154). However, she tells Kela that "Our land is a land of pygmies. We are like crabs in a basket; we pull down whoever dare to stand up for what is right" (Habla 186). This statement shows that people who dares to take a stand for "what is right" are doing a good thing. They are, however, risking their own lives as well as the lives of others. Therefore they may be "pulled down" so that those who are afraid of what the military will do, the "pygmies", will not get hurt and neither will the one who takes a stand. According to the aunt, it is the same as lighting that only strikes the tallest tree (Habla 186). As long as only one person takes a stand and not everyone together, the single person will be hurt. Rachael explains this in an attempt to stop Kela from fighting the military regime, but she also shows an admiration for those brave enough to take a stand. She is therefore not saying that it is wrong to object and that staying alive is defiance enough but that people need to stand united in their protest.

Furthermore, considering that she tries to convince Joshua not to lead the demonstration, she is also one of the "pygmies". On one hand she admires a person who takes a stand, but on the other hand she does not want Joshua to be that person. This indecisiveness is probably the reason she fails to convince Joshua. As long as she has dual preferences, she will never be able to persuade anyone. People listen to her and she is keen to give her opinions, expecting others to take them into consideration. Even though she does not influence a change in the behaviour of any person connected with the state, government or public affairs, her opinions are treasured and respected. Furthermore, she guides Kela in his political education and functions as a role model to Kela's mother. By challenging the

² For a discussion on Habla's possible attitude towards revolutions see Erritouni's 'Postcolonial despotism from a Postmodern Standpoint: Helon Habla's *Waiting for an Angel*' (2010).

traditional views of marriage as well as living an independent life, she has shown that anything is possible.

On Poverty Street there is another woman who also tries to convince Joshua not to attend the demonstration, namely Hagar. When she and Joshua met, she was the one in control of the relationship as she was sending him love letters. Although he was restrained due to his profession, it demonstrates that she is determined to get what she wants by her own means. Even when life took an unexpected turn and she was thrown out of her mother's home, she did not contact Joshua for help. This event forced her into prostitution, but she never fell into despair. Neither has it caused Joshua to think any less of her. As he explains as she urges Kela not to judge his love for Hagar, "Never condemn a man or give up on him because of the road he has chosen – because sometimes it is actually the road that chose him. People can change. People do change" (Habla 151). This quotation demonstrates the respect Joshua has for Hagar even though she works as a prostitute. He still admires the intelligence she showed as his student, and has not lost hope that he can provide a better life for her as soon as she changes her mind about marrying him.

As the attitude towards prostitutes was negative in Nigeria and they were often considered unsuitable wives (Bamgbose 578), Joshua challenges the traditional values of society. Hagar, on the other hand, is fully aware of the damage it would cause Joshua's political career. She no longer imagines a future together with Joshua, as she believes he will be important in politics one day. This insight is probably one of the reasons she claims to be mentally older than him. Even if Joshua is academically gifted he lacks experience of everyday life. He naively believes that people will accept them as a couple, without her past preventing him having a political career of any kind. As Hagar sacrifices a life together with the man she loves, she not only does what she believes is best for him; she endorses his participation in politics. When she shows Kela her collection of texts written by Joshua, she sounds "proud and sad all at once" (Habla 155). She is giving up her chance of love so that he can make the country a better place to live. Hagar is trying to persuade him to try a career that would not have been possible if he were the only one in control of their relationship.

Joshua's own feelings about politics are presented in his conversation with Kela on the beach. He explains that starting a revolution is not a choice people make but a necessity. In a "normal country" he would be able to teach, marry and have kids. This means that to participate in politics is, as he sees it, his only option. The people have also made it clear that he will be the leader of the entire protest, even though he is reluctant to take on the role. He considers Mao's eagerness to use violence foolish and believes it will end with people being

killed. Joshua therefore considers moving away to avoid the entire situation (Habla 162-63). According to Erritouni, most African writers claim that intellectuals have a responsibility to represent the masses, as they are unable to do it themselves. Habla, however, shows in Joshua an intellectual who doubts his given responsibility and questions the role that has been forced upon him (157).

When Kela asks Joshua if he would really leave Hagar behind, he appears to become angry. He is, however, not mad at Kela, but the situation (Habla 162-63). After this conversation, he decides to stay and even changes his argument for leading the demonstration. What used to be a role forced upon him is from that moment on a voluntary act to make sure that Mao does not succeed with his violent revolution (164). Since Hagar does not want to leave Lagos, Joshua's feels that his only choices are leaving her behind or joining the protest. As he does not want to leave her, he justifies his participation in the demonstration by appointing himself the sole peacekeeper. Without any intention of making Joshua lead the protest, Hagar has influenced his decision.

It is apparent that the couple has trouble communicating their feelings and opinions to each other. Joshua refuses to leave the city to avoid the fight he does not truly believe in, as he would then lose Hagar. She, on the other hand, tries to support his political career by not dating him. None of them are satisfied with the current situation. However, when Hagar and Joshua have a conversation about the matter on the day before the demonstration, it ends in a quarrel. It is as if she realizes that something bad will happen, changes her mind and does no longer want him to lead the protest. She now wants him to leave with her instead. By this time Joshua is nevertheless determined to go through with the protest and nothing she says can stop him. Hagar's attempt to influence Joshua into leaving his assigned role has failed. To ask this of him on the day prior to the demonstration, is asking too much since he feels that the people depend on him.

As Hagar attends the demonstration along with her co-workers, she shows her true strength. She knows the protest will end badly, but still supports Joshua and even convinces other women to do the same. In this way he has influenced her to act in a way she would not have done otherwise. She has then influenced other women. Just as the Aba Women's War showed that women have more power than the political leaders thought, Hagar and her co-workers' participation makes the demonstration even more powerful. Hagar is, however, also influencing Joshua. From the second he notices her, he becomes a strong, decisive leader, even though he is terrified.

When the protest turns into chaos, Hagar convinces Joshua to run away. He turns

around as if wanting to return but the accident makes him leave the scene. If he had stayed, he would surely have become a martyr. Hagar has first helped him achieve his political status among the people by refusing to become his wife. She has thereafter supported his action, even though she does not approve, and finally saves his life. The fight for democracy had already plenty of martyrs and another one would probably not make a difference. A man who is alive and breathing can, however, make a change. Dunton claims that *Waiting for an Angel* emphasizes “the value of the written – and published - word in achieving self-validation and in contributing to the contestation of an oppressive State apparatus” (74). Even though examples of this can easily be found in the novel, an even stronger emphasis is placed upon the value of the spoken word. The military’s strong reaction to the demonstration and Joshua’s speech show that the spoken word is as much a threat as the written. As Dunton indicates, the written word is only a threat once it is published. A speech, on the other hand, cannot be censored to the same extent and Joshua is therefore a serious threat as long as he is alive.

All of the women discussed in this essay are described through the eyes of men. Janice is pictured by Lomba, Rachael and Hagar by Kela. As stated in Spivak’s *Can the Subaltern Speak?* it is impossible for a subordinate person to be heard when they are not allowed to speak for themselves, but interpreted through the eyes of someone else (104). The women in Habila’s novel are never given the chance to tell things from their own point of view. The dialogue available to the reader is always described and remembered by a man. Not only does the novel’s society diminish the importance of these women, but also the narrative itself.

From a Eurocentric perspective it might not appear strange that the women in *Waiting for an Angel* are not given more power in society. Mohanty claims that women in the third world are often seen as just “being third world”. This means that they are considered “ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, victimized etc.” (199). Moreover, citizens of entire nations are underdeveloped (214). Comparing this description of third world women with those discussed in this essay, Habila’s characters have actually come far in the fight for equal rights. None of them are described as ignorant, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated or victimized. The fact that they do not have the same rights as many women in western society would just be prescribed to their underdevelopment. On the other hand, when deliberating the status and political importance Nigerian women had before colonial rule, the female characters in Habila’s novel are far from enjoying the rights they once had.

During the Abacha years, life was a struggle. Women’s fight for equal rights was

overshadowed by the effort of staying alive and regaining human rights. That does, however, not mean that the characters in Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* accept their fate or do not believe in a brighter future. The women discussed in this essay are all respected and cherished by the men closest to them. Even though they do not seem to consider a political career an option, they all have strong opinions and are not afraid to tell others about them. These women are not inferior to the men in any way. The social structure left by the colonisers may not show women as the powerful leaders they once were. Nevertheless, the female characters in Habila's novel use the patriarchal structure in the best way possible. By influencing the men they encounter, they have an implicit political power that causes an immediate or, perhaps, future change. They are also able to bring about change by being a role model to others or by changing the men's attitude towards women.

It would be interesting to study the political power of the other women described in *Waiting for an Angel*. It would also be intriguing to investigate the extent to which the male characters influence each other and if this is affected by factors such as age or education. However, the novel makes it clear that anyone can bring about change. The political power of the female characters and their relentless determination to create a brighter future for themselves as well as others give hope that women everywhere, no matter how oppressive the regime, will not be silent in the face of tyranny.

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