



Violence and Subordination: Reinforcing Voices of a Cohesive Vision in three Contemporary Nigerian Novels

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Abstract: Black writing has become something of a cohesive project: a response to the common experience of racial inequality, and a united concern to be free from White domination. The African literary forebears established an aesthetic which demands not only commitment to craft, but also to the “big social and political issues” of the society. From a postcolonial theoretical viewpoint, this paper argues that Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel* and Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come* engage the big, weighty, serious theme of abusive power relations between the ruling class and the citizens. Adichie, Habila, and Atta in these novels keep faith with the standard for the African writer’s commitment by intervening in the plight of their people. Thus, they reinforce the tradition of their literary forebears evident in their position against oppressive governance, characterized by violence and subordination, both in the colonial and the post-colonial periods of Nigerian history. This article is a textual commentary as well as critical notes on the novels.

Key words: African, commitment, domination, violence, reinforce, cohesive, postcolonial

Introduction

Since the emergence of the modern African novel in the middle of the twentieth century, notably with the publication of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* in 1958, the dynamics of domination have continued to receive the centre stage from the different generations of writers. To a very large

extent, writers in Africa have spurned the concept of art for art’s sake and have instead endorsed the functional utility of literary art as a socially relevant tool. The tool was wielded against the aggressive invasion of the African continent and her people; and from a theoretical standpoint, literature in the African context became legitimating for

an “anti-racist racism” project (Achebe, “The Novelist as Teacher”105). Ernest Emenyonu further commented that “the African novelist emerged as a true voice of Africans, and as the conscience and sensitivity of the society, boldly challenged untenable myths and stereotypes of Africa and Africans in the wider world” (x). Thus, the writer and his work sprang up as part of an African revolution. As Ngugi wa Thiong’o aptly observed: “the promptings of his imagination spring from the fountain of the African anti-imperialist, anti-colonial movement of the forties and fifties. From every tongue came the same tune: ‘Tell Freedom’” (158). These lent support to Ogude’s (1983) conclusion on the cohesive vision of Black writing:

The culmination of Black writing in the eighteenth century coincided with the anti-slavery movement and it is even more so to add that contemporary black writing received considerable impetus from the independence movement of the forties and fifties. In essence therefore, the development of African literature has followed the social and political fortunes of the black people and their continent. It is a conclusion which satisfactorily explains the themes and preoccupation of African writers and which also explains new trends in modern African literature (52).

Hence, the issue of power domination with its exploitative, subjugating tendencies has not only been at the very foundation of African literature but has also continued into the twenty-first century writing. New voices have emerged to reinforce the voices of the earlier generations on the theme of

power as moderated by violence and subordination.

The history of the struggle to be free from the yoke of colonialism and the subsequent replication of the oppressive condition of the imperialist power by local politicians, brought politics to the front burner, where it has unremittingly engaged successions of writers. Initially, both the poets and the politicians were on the same side of the struggle for independence, but the latter broke faith in the post-independence era, to look out for their own narrow, corrupt, selfish interests. This has further impelled writers and thinkers to vigorously pursue the political theme – given that politics is the power base of any society since it impacts other tissues such as culture, the economy and the general social conditions of being. African literature, in Eldred Jones’s view, “continues to be intensely political and seems destined to remain so for some time”. This is because “writers are in the thick of the fight for true liberation of their countries, a position which is still fraught with dangers” (3). Helon Habila, a voice of the younger generation, upholds the same view when he sees the political responsibility of the writer as that of allegiance to the aesthetics of politics begun by the early generation of writers:

They were writing against the whole colonial system, which was very repressive, very racist, very dictatorial. They actually used to have congresses where they would discuss the best way to write fiction in a way that would address the political issues of the day.... So, politics more or less becomes an aesthetic in African fiction.... (“The Heroism of Ordinary People: An Interview

with Carmen McCain.” Web source).

From a postcolonial theoretical viewpoint, then, this paper is an attempt to show that the selected novels of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta, and Helon Habila have continued to reinforce the concerns of their literary predecessors on the resilient subject of politics in African and more specifically Nigerian literature. Goring, Hawthorn and Mitchel (2001), explain that postcolonialism particularly reacts against the master-narratives of Western imperialism, focusing on newly emergent minority discourse, especially that of the Third World countries of Africa, Asia, the Caribbean Islands and South America, in recognition of the fact that ‘minority’ cultures are actually ‘majority’ cultures, and that hegemonized Western (Euro-American) studies have been unduly privileged for political reasons” (192). They go on to state that in line with this agenda, the postcolonial discourse has created a vast room for the study of a variety of “non-canonical” literatures and has equally given academics a focus for the development of new areas of study (192). This record of achievements vindicates such theses as those of Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin (1994) in their book *The Empire Writes Back* move that the colonized should create their own discourse, reject the claims of transcendence or universalism by the colonizers, and then embrace pluralism, given the fact that truth is multiple. They also underline the need for such “subversive manoeuvres” as in the “re-reading and the re-writing of the European historical and fictional record” (196). Post-colonial literature and its study are, indeed, laced with politics. Postcolonial theory therefore implies an

attitude towards the subject studied, a fact occasioned by the issue of ambiguity or loss of identity in literature written by culturally displaced people trying to make sense of their world in the light of their colonial experience. Such an approach results in “writing that is critical of the conqueror and promotional about its own ideologies” (Dobie 2008, p.208).

Cohesive Commitment to the African Cause

All of the three novels under study - Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come* (2005), and Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel* (2001), (henceforth, *Half*, *Everything*, and *Waiting*, respectively) dwell on politics in Nigeria. The three novels are committed to the task of remembering and preserving the memory of injustice. All of these novels are contemporary, having been published in the first decade of this century. Although they express a different temper in their style, they have not deserted the political crisis of Nigeria’s history.

Adichie’s *Half*, set within the time spanning the early to the late 1960’s, recreates the story of the nation’s independence, doomed by the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970). Adichie’s war narrative is told from a Biafran point of view, from the inside, so to speak; and from the perspective of a hurting, painful sufferer of the war’s tragedy. Her device of the book within the story provides a clear historical index that sheds light on the nature of the crisis afflicting Nigeria as a nation. The post-independence anomie is traced to the British imperialist’s manipulation of events for their own selfish interest. In this novel, Nwankwo’s (2008) view of the Nigerian war narratives as “racy

accounts which do not probe...” becomes clear, and his wish for a more exploratory work that fully plumbs “the depth of political dysfunctionality and national malaise” (7) is met and fulfilled. The novel’s engagement with the war succeeds, and, is therefore, the index which “could guide the insightful reader toward the foundation of Africa’s perennial or still unfolding tragedies” (13).

Sefi Atta’s *Everything*, on the other hand, is a broad sweep of the various post-colonial phases of Nigeria. The work marginally, and from a point of distance echoes the civil war crisis, and then more fully covers the period from the 1970’s to the 1990’s - the post-war era, particularly, as marked by military dictatorship. It is the story of a people’s struggle for good governance, as two of the characters point out. Sheri wants any government at all, be it military, civilian or even communist that can give her electricity, and water and to those in the villages dying of guinea worm (213). Grace Ameh (one of the characters) contends that what really matters is a good democratic government: “Let the process begin. Good will take care of itself” (300). This view echoes the title of the novel and sums up its commitment to the political cause. Beyond this, Atta draws a nexus between political dictatorship and patriarchal shortcomings, stressing that women are “still reeling under the yoke of dictatorial men, which parallel with state dictators that brutalize and impoverish the nation and its people” (Orabueze, 2010, p.86).

Habila’s *Waiting*, captures the years of military dictatorship, especially the Abacha era, which unleashed violence, death, and imprisonment on the citizens. Thus, both Habila and Atta explore the

history of post-civil war politics in Nigeria, as marked by brutal military dominance. In the words of Onukaogu and Onyerionwu, they particularly “recount the trauma of creative writers, social crusaders and journalists during the military regimes that were passionate about its non-tolerance of the human rights standpoint” (p.126). The “big” political issues of the writers’ imagination are characterized by pain and gloom. Nnolim (2010) makes this observation when he describes Adichie’s *Half* as a continuation of the lachrymal nature of the twentieth-century African literature. It is not only Adichie, but also Habila and Atta who look at the nation’s history from a tragic sensibility. The nation’s political history, whether in the pre-colonial, colonial, or post-colonial times, is redolent with subduing, repressive pain of violence, of the painful memory of many things that went wrong and ugly.

Sadly, Nigeria shares a common experience with other African countries in her pain and despair, going back in time to the era of slavery. African writers have followed the course of history beginning from the era of slavery, through colonialism, to neo-colonialism and now globalization. The racist mission and conquest of Africa sowed the seed of the tearful texture of African literature, even until the contemporary stage as the works here attest. Thus, Nwankwo (2008, p.2) rightly expresses this view: “Ostensibly, African history if one may borrow titles of works by two well-known writers, either trundles with *the rhythms of violence* (Lewis Nkosi) or appears perpetually *bound to violence* (Yambo Oulougum).” This reverberates Ayi Kwei Armah’s epithets for the Arab and European aggressors in *Two Thousand*

Seasons as “predators” and “destroyers.” respectively. The issue of racial inequality is most certainly a salient factor in the discourse of African problems; consequently, a postcolonial theoretical frame of reference is imperative for an understanding of the writers’ vision in the selected novels.

Adichie, Habila and Atta have recreated major events of unhappy experiences of Nigeria, of her sad and tragic struggles. Therefore, like their literary forebears, they have shown commitment to the country by taking their “position against the oppression of the people, all forms of brutalities and of unwarrantable violence against the masses” (Obiechina, 1988, p.4). Indeed, like their forebears, they have shown commitment to the “big issues” of Africa as enunciated by Achebe:

It is clear to me that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant – like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue the rat fleeing from the flames (The African Writer and the Biafran Cause, p.113).

Narrating Violence

The brutal circumstances of Africa’s encounter with Europe are a common historical knowledge. The concept of the nation-state, a feature of the modernizing impulses of Europe, spread to other parts of the world through colonialism. European colonial forces succeeded in persuading or, rather forcing groups of people to submerge their identities into nation states. As a result, “three entities, society- people - country, came to be regarded as

virtually coterminous with, even subordinated to the idea of the nation” (Cohen and Kennedy 2007, p.120). Invariably, the concept of a nation-state no longer depended on the unity of a single people with a common tongue. Social science research underpins the achievements of the modern nation-state on the ideological suppression of its “diverse, multi-stranded, richly layered and plural” nature to the point of reconciling different languages into a single lingua franca and applying other suppressive mechanisms. Like Cohen and Kennedy argued: “flags, anthems, sporting teams, capital cities, grand buildings, icons and symbols reinforced the nation-builders’ message. War, trade competition, and imperialist rivalries consolidated the processes of national unification” (515).

In line with this, Nigeria (meaning the diverse groups of societies around the River Niger area) became a product of the modernizing imperialist policy, manufactured in 1914 under the governorship of Lord Lugard. In effect, by its very nature, the ideology of the nation-state embodied subordination which was legitimized through the force of power. Nationhood, therefore became a political construct, as pointedly reflected in Adichie’s *Half*.

The dynamics of power struggle, of a “we” and the “other”, in a state of conflict, often results in violence. Oppression and injustice will always be confronted with rebellion or fight. Violence is played out first, in the relationship between the White racial powers and the colonized people of Africa; and then, in the relationship between the political ruling class and the masses in the post-colonial context, and between the Igbo and Nigeria as a

whole, and between the biological groups of the gender binary.

In Adichie's *Half*, the main characters are on the Biafran side of the conflict. The story is told through the perspectives of Ugwu - a teenage houseboy from a poor village background; Olanna, the daughter of a rich business tycoon; and Richard, an English man who has come to Nigeria to explore the Igbo Ukwu art, and, is in love with Kainene, Olanna's twin sister. The story, a combination of politics and personal relationships that get overwhelmed by the brutal conflicts around the characters' lives, begins in a peaceful university setting at Nsukka. Olanna falls in love with a Mathematics professor, Odenigbo, who not only rallies his friends and colleagues to discuss the nation's developments and the selfish legacies of colonialism, but also fully endorses the Biafran cause. But the realities of the war prove too much for the characters to bear. The Igbo, who have given their best shots to the war efforts, get disillusioned as it becomes obvious that the Biafran leadership is ill equipped. In the end, the people suffer colossal losses in both material and human terms. The story carries us through the struggles, suffering, family relationships, as well as love affairs, community involvements and political failures.

In Habila's *Waiting*, on the other hand, the Badagry slave museum evokes memories of the early seeds of oppression – the mouth-locks, leg-irons, and chains. The original root of the country's malaise thus borders on the economy – at first, the slave economy, with the accompanying violence and destruction that went with it. In Adichie's *Half*, the question of the economy is given a sharp edge within

the story – “The Book: The World Was Silent When We Died.” We read:

He discusses the British soldier-merchant Taubman Goldie, how he coerced, cajoled, and killed to gain control of the palm-oil trade and how, at the Berlin Conference of 1884 where Europeans divided Africa, he ensured that Britain beat France to two protectorates around the River Niger: the North and the South (115).

We take note that the merchant is also a soldier; thus, implying the possibility of force, threat, death, injury, blood, which are all indices of violence. Nigeria's problem is rooted in economic interests, backed up and combined with political authority; and the economy is controlled through political will with the exploitative, manipulative economic interests of the West being replicated in the economic and political structures of the country. Nothing else matters so long as the political interests of the master are satisfied even if at the cost of destruction or violence.

Irrespective of the people's resistance, irrespective of rebellious opposition, the White racist mission succeeds in Africa, as Odenigbo concedes with the personal evidence of his losing his mother tongue as a vehicle of thought (*Half* 402). The European racist conquest subordinates his thinking to the master's language. Thus, African subordination is perfected not only through a physical military expedition but also through the intellectual violation of the knowledge base. Propagating postcolonial thoughts, Odenigbo lashes out at the imperialist subjectivity of history, such as the claim of the discovery of the River Niger. Thus, he here instructs Ugwu: “They will teach you that a certain Mungo Park discovered River Niger. That is rubbish. Our people fished in the Niger long

before Mungo Park's grandfather was born. But in your exam, write that it was Mungo Park" (*Half*, 11). Odenigbo further argues that Nigeria is an artificial entity and that the idea of Pan-Africanism is misleading:

The only authentic identity for the African is the tribe.... I am Nigerian because a white man created Nigeria and gave me that identity. I am black because the white man constructed black to be as different as possible from his white. But I was Igbo before the white man came (Half 20).

Postcolonial discourse in Africa provides the platform from which to revitalize the Africans' confidence from the harmful impact of imperial conquest and subjugation through violence, which has occasioned the inferiority complex known as "colonial mentality" – the love of everything white. At the root of the nation's "maldevelopment" is the pernicious manipulation of British colonial powers structured into an independence arrangement:

But the British had to preserve Nigeria as it was, their prized creation, their large market, their thorn in France's eye. To propitiate the North, they fixed the pre-Independence elections in favour of the North and wrote a new constitution which gave the North control of the central government (Half 155).

Such a selfish manipulation gave little room for success in the post-colonial context of the country. The exploitative, violent prone power relations between the North and the South, or more specifically, between the Igbo and the rest of Nigeria mainly constructed by the British gave rise to the 1967-70 war. Similarly, in Atta's *Everything*, Uncle Alex, one of the characters rightly

blames the British for the war, which in a way, is the extreme form of violence.

The construction of Nigeria into a nation was a selfish, imperialist policy fraught with conflict from the very beginning; hence, we are told that at "Independence in 1960, Nigeria was a collection of fragments held in a fragile clasp" (*Half* 155). The truth of the matter is that Nigeria was forged as an artificial entity with over two hundred and fifty ethnic groups with cultural disparities, the seed that sprouts into Nigerian politics with the attendant violent crises. The North was, thus, positioned for governance to allow the British access to the country's resources. Both the colonial and the national politics are bound to violence; those who are supposed to belong to the same nation rather see themselves as disparate groups. It is no wonder that Niyi Akingbe writes:

Modern Nigerian political history is etched on the trajectory of chaos, anarchy and successive military coups since it obtained independence from Britain in 1960.... Nigeria as a nation has never played fair, and only exists as a nebulous contraption in the minds of most Nigerians. (Web source).

Violence is, therefore, implicated in the subordination of Africa through racist conquests, and in the defeat and collapse of Biafra. Odenigbo, the rallying point of the Biafran cause, is broken and humiliated; Okeoma, the fictionalized version of Christopher Okigbo, is killed in the war. Both characters had believed that the ultimate vision of revolution and freedom from colonial oppression lay in Biafra. The rising sun of the Biafran flag, symbolic of this optimism and hope, is given expression in one of Okeoma's poems: "If the sun refuses to rise, we will make it rise" (*Half* 411).

But in the end, the optimism in Biafra gives way to pessimism: Okeoma is killed, Biafra is defeated, and Odenigbo ends up a broken man, losing his “masterly” identity and disposition. Everything about his hopes and happy past is corrupted and destroyed with the final destruction of his books and papers by Nigerian soldiers in his university home at Nsukka. In the end, Odenigbo, the pride of African intellectualism and revolutionary thoughts, is pathetically depicted in a sorry state of crumpled defeat:

Master squatted beside him and began to search through the charred paper muttering, ‘My research papers are all here’ After a while, he sat down on the bare earth, his legs stretched in front of him, and Ugwu wished he had not; there was something so undignified, so unmasterly about it (Half 418).

Adichie however, pulls a punch at the idea of a White saviour by denying Richard, the White British character, the right to write the story of Biafra, in spite of his sympathy for Biafra. Instead of Richard, it is Ugwu, the one who has experienced the war most horribly and deeply, the one who started out as a servant, the poorest and least educated that is given the task. And, as it were, in this choice of Ugwu lies a postcolonial, promotional agenda implied in the “empire-writes-back project”. Ugwu, the servant, becomes the hope of the African voice, the hope of reconstruction, after the conquest. Ugwu, therefore, writes a story entitled “Narrative of the Life of a Country,” which he dedicates to Odenigbo, as a tribute to his constructive vision. The theme of hope is, thus, revealed in the benevolent master-servant relationship between Odenigbo and Ugwu, which is

given to mentorship, tutelage, growth and positive development, unlike the colonizer-colonized paradigm that is prone to malignant exploitation. Odenigbo’s vision is granted life and continuity in Ugwu.

Adichie’s *Half* is replete with gory pictures of violent indices – death, decapitation, rape and all sorts of deprivations - acts that rob characters of their humanity. A few echoes from the novel illustrate the point. Olanna suffers from Dark Swoop, a traumatic condition that causes a dysfunction of her legs and bladder, following her experience of the Igbo pogrom in the North, during which her passionately beloved relatives, the Mbaezis, are killed in cold blood. Colonel Udodi Ekechi is fed on his faeces and beaten to death by Northern soldiers; pregnant Igbo women are raped before they are cut up. The terror of the fleeing Igbo is captured in the image of the woman with the decapitated head of her daughter in a calabash (*Half* 149).

Adichie evokes such emotionally charged details to register both anger and condemnation of the gross political ills that led to the Igbo massacre, an act said to have been structured by the Nigerian government, and which finally climaxed into a civil war supported and backed by the erstwhile imperial power and foreign allies. During the war, hunger, starvation and all forms of deprivations took a stupendous toll. Subordination is fully recorded in the scale of indignity and human suffering, represented in Olanna’s feeling: “It was the very sense of being inconsequential; that pushed her from extreme fear to extreme fury” (*Half* 280). This is the point Ojinmah Umelo makes about the universal inhumanity of all wars (Umelo, 2016). Olanna is enraged

because the war has made her inconsequential; in other words, the war has stripped the people of their humanity; and in the end of it, the losses are beyond belief in terms of lives, money and property.

Writing from a hurting Biafran standpoint, Adichie skilfully evokes images of the war that pierce the human core. In one of these images, Kainene recounts the death of Ikejide, her houseboy: "They were bombing and shelling, and a piece of shrapnel cut off his head, completely beheaded him, and his body kept running. His body kept running and it didn't have a head" (*Half* 344). At a refugee camp, the stench from the latrine hits Olanna, going "straight from her nose to her stomach, turning it, churning the boiled yam she'd had for breakfast" (347). And then there is the harrowing picture of hunger, kwashiorkor, death, and human suffering (348). With such evocative artistry, we cannot but perceive a war for what it is: an extreme form of violence with deleterious effect on humanity.

Other dimensions of violence identified in the power conflict between the forces of dictatorship and the subjects in the post-colonial context are recreated in Atta's *Everything* and Habila's *Waiting*. Both novels reflect a moment in the nation's history characterized as an "era of blood, tyranny, oppression, brutal killing, terror and alarming rate of corruption, the era of military dictatorship in Nigerian politics" (Asika, 2014).

Atta's *Everything* tells of the coming-of-age of Enitan, whose life is closely linked to the political landmarks of the nation. Born on the eve of independence, she grows through the years amassing much knowledge about

her country's history from her childhood to maturity and self-discovery as an adult, when she joins in the struggle against the oppressive forces of both the political and patriarchal powers in the land. Through Enitan's narrative, we are given a panoramic view of a country in turmoil, occasioned by persistent corrupt leadership. We see the events and changes the young Republic and her citizens pass through in the post-Independence years, from incompetent civilian rule to military dictatorship. With the flagrant violation of citizens' rights, political activism becomes the order of the day.

Against such a backdrop, silence or passivity is condemned, as Grace Ameh, a writer and an arts editor tells Enitan: "Now that they've driven us into hiding, I do what I can to make sure they don't completely silence us" (262). She goes on: "Use your voice to bring about change. Some people in this country, what chance do they have? It amazes me that privileged people in Nigeria believe that doing nothing is an option" (263). As the country descends more and more into a prison state, writers, journalists, lawyers, trade union leaders and all are thrown into detention without trial or even the benefit of access to family or legal counsel. Sunday Taiwo (Enitan's father), Enitan and Grace Ameh all become victims of detention portrayed as a terror site:

They don't interrogate prisoners in detention; they torture them. Nail pulling, ice baths. If you're one of the lucky ones, they will throw you in a cell and leave you on your own. Mosquitoes? Plenty. Food? Unbearable. Grown men cry inside there. They cry like babies and run away from the country to avoid it. (238-239).

Habila's *Waiting* joins the discourse of "nation" with Atta at the point when the state's will to power against the subjects reaches a level of violence, where one must flee or die fighting for freedom from state thralldom through organized public protest or through the weapon of writing. James Fiki, editor of *The Dial* magazine (one of the characters), comments on Joshua's decision to speak at the planned Morgan Street demonstration: "... in our country there cannot be a peaceful demonstration, the troops will always come, there will be gunshot, and perhaps deaths.... The time has come when a few bruises, even deaths, don't matter anymore" (*Waiting* 193). As Kela leaves for the demonstration, Auntie Rachel, speaking in the plural, tells him: "Go... and always remember, our land is a land of pigmies. We are like crabs in a basket; we pull whoever wants to stand up for what is right" (183-184). The imperative for struggle is underlined in the suggestive echoes of Soyinka's words, "the man dies who keeps silent in the face of tyranny." Hence, Lomba, after visiting the slave museum and realizing "why it is important to agitate against injustice, no matter the consequence," decides to give media coverage of the demonstration.

People denounce the injustices of the state at the risk of their freedom or life. In both *Waiting* and *Everything*, the indices of violence include death, deprivation, arson, exile or political asylum, and incarceration. Dele Giwa, Kudirat Abiola, Ken Saro-Wiwa, June 12 and the transitional government, national strikes, the riots, students' demonstrations, pro-democracy activism, and the arrests – all historical facts of the time – are pointers to violence. The *Dial* magazine in *Waiting*,

launches an assault on the government with its cover caption, "Abacha: the stolen billions," for which reason the entire media house is visited with a state organized arson, abruptly terminating the job of the media staff and sending them on the run. The magazine's editor, James Fiki, who is the symbol of voice and struggle, much like Odenigbo in *Half*, is broken by the impact of the violence, hence "he looks old suddenly..., so grey, so wrinkled, so bowed, so tired" (*Waiting* 216). Indeed, in both novels, writing is a form of activism. Hence, soldiers, armed with rifles, are sent after the writers gathered for a reading session in Emeka Davies' residence (*Waiting* 210); and Grace Ameh and Enitan are picked up and sent to a detention camp from where they are attending a literary reading.

Atta, on her part, gives an insight into the appalling state of women prisoners. Enitan's prison experience, a process of knowing, becomes a turning point for her, awakening and sharpening her crusading vision. Fourteen women are dumped in a cell meant for seven, and in this cell, are women with different woes: one is stench-ridden and rots with the terminal stage of cancer; another is afflicted with schizophrenia; and some others have sores, ringworms and tuberculosis; and then there is a bizarre widow called "Mother of Prison." All have spent many years, still awaiting trial.

Habila's *Waiting*, indeed, begins with prison life. Thus, incarceration is emphatically positioned as the first encounter, even though it should have come last in the order of events, if the novel were to have a lineal plot. Fractured chronologically with multi-vocal perspectives, the novel tells the story of Lomba's life, and from the

pieces of seven narratives, there is something of a chronology. Lomba, a young man from the North, goes to a University in Lagos. A marabout foretells that he will be sent to prison and that death awaits his twenty-one-year-old unnamed narrator of Part 2 entitled “Angel.” Meanwhile, he falls in love with Alice, a general’s daughter. His roommate, Bola, goes crazy after a military truck kills his family members in an accident. Increased military suppression sparks off students’ demonstrations, turning the university to something of a prison, and Lomba drops out of school to write a novel. He joins *The Dial* magazine where he learns that everything is about politics. He meets Joshua, the activist of Morgan Street and gets convinced to get involved in politics. Later, he covers the Morgan Street demonstration and is caught and imprisoned. In detention, he resorts to writing love poetry to maintain his sanity –as he puts it, “to reduce the weight of these walls on my shoulders, to rediscover my nullified individuality” (3). Lomba describes his own life: “This is the sum of my life, I thought. This is what I’ve finally shrunk to; the detritus after the explosion: a comb, a toothbrush, soap, two shirts, one pair of trousers and a pencil” (8). A perfect instrument of terror, the superintendent launches both verbal and physical assaults on the inmates, who are reduced to nothing through sheer brutality. In the superintendent’s metaphors, they are but “insects” and “rats”. Lomba is attacked with vicious violence when he is caught with pencil and papers (9-10). His only hope for freedom is vested in the dream of some miracle of a civilian government offering “amnesty to all political prisoners (15).

Both Atta and Habila strongly feature incarceration as an index of violence in their novels. The metaphor of prison is played out in the larger life of the society. People live in a state of terror and fear and are metaphorically trapped in the prison of oppression. Pushed to the wall, the people resist oppression and end up either in death or in prison; thus, Asika describes the era under focus as one:

filled with atmosphere of blood, fear, terror, hunger, diseases, starvation, denial of self-rights and denigration..., a time in the history of the country when people were willingly waiting for death – an angel of death to take them away from the shocking realities of their lives (Asika, 2014).

Whereas Lomba is incarcerated, Bola goes insane following the killing of his parents and siblings. All three are undergraduates whose life’s dream is truncated by the reign of terror. Habila’s *Waiting* can therefore be read as a “story about a young writer’s coming of age,” which “captures the plight facing an entire generation: just as they came of age, their country disintegrated around them” (Hewett, 2005, p.74).

The postcolonial theory offers not only the platform from which to look at the decentring of the European subject and lash at imperialist Europe, but also affords a critique of the grand vision of nationalism, which resembles the oppressive dynamics of colonial powers. Eritouni (2010), points out that Habila’s *Waiting* does not blame the post-colonial malaise on the effects of colonialism or neo-colonialism. Rather, it considers despotism in post-colonial Africa as “coextensive with the will to power of national rulers, and efforts aimed at countering it through radical means cannot but prove futile, given the

incomparable means of violence available to the state” (145). With the benefit of this insight, it is clear that subordination of the subjects to the powers becomes inescapable. In Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*, this is represented in the metaphor of parboiled rice: “We are parboiled as farmers do their rice. And we take only five minutes to cook” (1988, p.30). Eritouni’s view above is echoed in Kainene’s response to Odenigbo’s question as to what accounts for the success of the White man’s mission in Africa: “You should first account for the failure of the black man to curb the white man’s mission” (*Half* 402). This is also in tandem with Ayi Kwei Armah’s historical vision of the complicity of African leaders in the oppression of their own people as explored in both *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Two Thousand Seasons*.

Another dimension of violence is played out in the male-female power relation, with women as the targeted objects of attack. The subordination of women is often perpetrated through sexual violence. This type of violence is rooted in the biological gender opposition and is, therefore, different from the “we-other” relationship between state powers and the subjects. In this case, women are victims in the hands of men, evoking the idea of a battle of the sexes, of something of a feud between the sexes, which entails an erotic duelling with the penis as the key weapon. This is, for instance, dramatized in the prostitute’s representation of the sex act in such terms as, “A man is useless-ing me” (*Everything* 91), or in the taxi driver’s threat to Enitan and Sheri: “Oh, sharrap both of you. You should feel happy that a man noticed you. If you’re not careful

I’ll sex you both” (*Everything* 140). A woman’s vulnerability subjects her to extra guardianship and protection rules not granted to a man. Thus, in *Everything*, Baba secures the NYSC female hostel and refuses entry to men, eliciting the swipe, “this one was keeper of graduate vaginas” (88). This is a case of benevolent sexism – differential treatment meant to shield women from their biological or physical vulnerability.

The woman’s body upholds a paradox, such that it holds men captive in its power to yield pleasure and provide a site to be “invaded, violated and injured” (Agorde 2008, p.168). In other words, the woman’s body is a site for both pleasure and pain. Violence therefore doubly impacts on women, generally as citizens, and specifically as females in their sexual bodies. This becomes most acute in an anarchic ethos, as enthroned by war in Adichie’s *Half* where women’s bodies are reduced to mercantile assets as a means of barter for food, protection and provisions, or as war loot subjected to domestic as well as sexual slavery. Instances of this abound: Nigerian soldiers “laughed and gestured to the village girls. “Come marry me now, I go give you rice and beans” (412). Again, following the fall of Enugu, we read; “And they choose the best houses and force people’s wives and daughters to spread their legs and cook for them” (285). Eberechi pays for her family’s protection and provisions with her body, offered as kola nut to a visiting army officer (200). Worse still are violent acts of rape employed as weapons of war specifically targeted at the female body. The Nigerian radio is reported to have said “every Igbo woman deserves to be raped” (346) and during the pogrom in the North,

pregnant women were raped before they were cut up (191). Furthermore, complaint is made of a White mercenary commander who demanded more money and raped girls: "He throws girls on their backs in the open, where the men can see him and does them, all the time holding his bag of money in one hand" (323). When Ugwu gets conscripted, he turns into a violent bully joining a group of child soldiers to rape a girl: an act that marks a new kind of tragedy, the tragedy of a corrupt and lost soul, who, though a victim of injustice and suffering, inflicts worse pain on a fellow sufferer. Ugwu however lives to regret the evil act which haunts him, and for which he seeks expiation through writing the painful narrative on Biafra. He also grieves more deeply upon learning of the rape of his own sister, Anulika, seeing it as a just punishment for his own action. He mourns for the evil of rape against women thus: "He remembered the line of women going to fetch water in the mornings, and he sat down on a rock and sobbed" (421).

Rape is a violent act so overpowering in its force that every attempt at resistance is visited with further violence making surrender inevitable. Hence, the only resistance registered by the helpless bar girl to the rape assault by Ugwu and his gang is that "she stared back at him with a calm hate" (365). Anulika is blinded in one eye and nearly beaten to death for fighting back at her assailant by biting him on the arm and drawing blood (421).

In Atta's *Everything*, Mother of Prison is in detention without benefit of trial because she fights to defend herself from a rape assault (*Everything* 275-276). Also, Sheri's life is ruined by rape. It is not only her vagina that is invaded but her womb also, as complications

from abortion, following her rape destroys her womb rendering her barren for life. Sheri's experience sharpens Enitan's horizon for a better perception of the dynamics of sex, bringing her to view her world through feminist lenses in line with the author's vision.

As seen so far, both Adichie and Atta robustly explore the issue of rape as a tool of violence against women. Habila throws a wicker of light on the subject in connection with the students' rioting encounter with the state forces (*Waiting* 73). As women themselves, Adichie and Atta particularly depict rape in all its ugliness and cruelty as the crassest assault on the woman's body, an act often too difficult to resist, given the force of violence that goes with it.

Conclusion

African writers have followed the course of African history characterized by violence, beginning from her encounter with Europe, through the different socio-political phases. Oppressive leadership has been the defining feature of power relations between the ruling class and the citizens, as may be underlined in the metaphor, "power is might." Consequently, the dire political situation in Africa, before and after independence, has prompted and fertilized the imagination of African literary artists towards an unremitting concern with the theme of political domination. Up to the contemporary stage, as establish from the three selected novels of Adichie, Atta, and Habila, writers have continued to display a sense of political responsibility directed at challenging abusive power relations. Thus, in conclusion, the three novels explore violence, with all the various indices highlighted, as an instrument of conquest, destruction,

dehumanization or subordination. The theme of violence and subordination is evidenced in the exploitative, disharmonious, abusive and oppressive

power relations between the empire and its colony, between the state and her citizens and between the male and the female.

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