CHRONOLOGISING IDENTITY DECONSTRUCTION STRUCTURES IN HELON HABILA'S *MEASURING TIME*

Kouadio Lambert N'GUESSAN
Université Alassane Ouattara (RCI)
Enseignant-Chercheur
Département d'Anglais

Abstract

Measuring Time is a manifesto for expression of freedom and a denunciation of political power abuses in Nigeria, which importantly emphasises the role of memory and the past. The history of any national literature mixes up with the history of its nation. Redefining collective identity according to timeline context basically represents a profound questioning of nation and identity. This study aims to analyse Helon Habila's melancholy narrative that denotes a fight against decay and a struggle for hope in a protean world. The literary representations of the nation through identity deconstruction structures involve metaphorical or symbolical thoughts in an expressive way. The deconstructionist analysis of Habila's text revolves the question of [re]constructing the national identity after independence. The theoretical approach for this paper is based on deconstructive criticism in order to demonstrate that Habila's literary creation has logical and consistent meanings while clarifying the political and historical contents of the fictional work.

Keywords: deconstruction, history, identity, nation, Nigeria, space, timeline.

L'étude des événements selon la chronologie des structures de déconstruction identitaire dans *Measuring Time* de Helon Habila

Résumé

Measuring Time est un manifeste pour l'expression de la liberté et une dénonciation des abus du pouvoir politique au Nigeria, qui met l'accent de manière importante sur le rôle de la mémoire et du passé. L'histoire de toute littérature nationale se confond avec l'histoire de sa nation. Redéfinir l'identité collective en fonction du contexte chronologique représente essentiellement un questionnement profond sur la nation et l'identité. Cette étude vise à analyser le récit mélancolique de Helon Habila qui dénote un combat contre la décrépitude et une lutte pour l'espoir dans un monde protéiforme. Les représentations littéraires de la nation à travers les structures de déconstruction identitaire impliquent des pensées métaphoriques ou symboliques de manière expressive. L'analyse déconstructionniste du texte de Habila s'articule autour de la question de [re]construction de l'identité nationale après l'indépendance. L'approche théorique de cet article se base sur la critique déconstructive afin de montrer que la création littéraire de Habila a des significations logiques et cohérentes tout en clarifiant le contenu politique et historique de l'œuvre de fiction.

Mots-clés : chronologie, déconstruction, espace, histoire, identité, nation, Nigéria.

El estudio de los acontecimientos según la cronología de las estructuras de deconstrucción identitaria en *Measuring Time* de Helon Habila

Resumen

Measuring Time es un manifiesto para la expresión de la libertad y una denuncia de los abusos del poder político en Nigeria, que hace hincapié de manera importante en el papel de la memoria y del pasado. La historia de toda literatura nacional se confunde con la historia de su nación. Redefinir la identidad colectiva en función del contexto cronológico representa esencialmente un interrogante profundo sobre la nación y la identidad. El objetivo de este estudio es analizar el melancólico relato de Helon Habila que denota una lucha contra la decrepitud y un reto por la esperanza en un mundo proteico. Las representaciones literarias de la nación a través de las estructuras de deconstrucción identitaria implican pensamientos metafóricos o simbólicos de manera expresiva. El análisis deconstruccionista del texto de Habila gira en torno a la cuestión de [re]construcción de la identidad nacional después de la independencia. El enfoque teórico de este artículo se basa en la crítica deconstructiva para mostrar que

la creación literaria de Habila tiene significados lógicos y coherentes, aclarando al mismo tiempo el contenido político e histórico de la obra de ficción.

Palabras clave: cronología, deconstrucción, espacio, historia, identidad, nacon, Nigeria

Introduction

Born in 1967, Helon Habila is a Nigerian novelist and poet who has authored *Waiting for an Angel* (2003), Measuring Time (2007) and *Travelers: A Novel* (2019). Through Measuring Time, the author accounts for new ways identity is forged and freed in a time and spatial awareness intertwining personal reminiscences with history, politics, colonialism and military power issues in Nigeria from 1960s to 1990s. Characters are realistically portrayed, especially the protagonist Mamo who emerges as a sensitive, conscientious individual determined to record the dignity and resilience of ordinary people in his village. Habila weaves an intricate tapestry that threads the recent history of Nigeria with the lives of twin boys, thereby expanding his vision to illustrate both personal and political challenges facing a people.

Writing as a need and a vocation, helps make sense of identity deconstruction, to cut through the clutter of identity paradigms in political and historical contexts. This identity deconstruction includes some Nigerian literature features and specific political and social issues that lead to a vision of history. The term "deconstruction" connotes to undo the improvement of or the development of, to take to pieces (R. Gnanasekaran, 2015, p.212). Deconstruction is nothing, it is not a method, not a technique, not even an act, because a 'deconstructive reading attends to the deconstructive processes *always* occurring in the texts and *already* there waiting to be read' (M. Payne, 1993, p. 121). Deconstruction denotes the pursuing of the meaning of a text to the point of exposing the supposed contradictions and internal oppositions upon which it is founded. Thus, history and Habila's stories will be confronted to show the relationship between event and narrative. To what extent does Helon Habila's *Measuring Time* contributes to illustrating identity narrative which represents the complex relationship to a sometimes enigmatic past? What are the literary techniques Habila deploys while deconstructing identity structures through *Measuring Time*?

For the sake of clarity, I will first attempt to explore sides of historical backdrops in connection with the Biafra War[1], source of a deep political and social crisis examined as a factor of national, ethnic and individual identity crisis. Then, the analysis will be organised around the notion of nation by representing the nation itself as the reflection of a common unity and identity. Ultimately, the study deciphers the relationship between fiction and political and historical narrative under close scrutiny, from deconstruction as a literary theory to harpoon History both as an agent of identity and a metaphor for literary space.

1. National Identity and Historical Backdrops

The Biafra War represents the main backdrop in Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*. This event constitutes the main historical landmark of the author's narrative since it marks a turning point in the contemporary history of the country. Habila belongs to the contemporary generation of writers who no longer place national identity at the centre of their narratives. So they are no longer concerned with representing Nigerian or African authenticity through their literature. In the contemporary context, the issue of unity linked to the question of national identity and affirmation no longer represents an expectation or an aspiration. Indeed, these assumptions shed some light on the way that political and social issues are approached in this period in Nigerian history. Writing on the subject of postcolonial societies and the preservation of their histories with particular reference to the story telling tradition, Gilbert and Tompkins are of the opinion that, "In most non-literate communities, history was preserved by the story teller who held a privileged place central to the maintenance and sustenance of the group's culture. The story teller relayed the community's history, often in verse form, as an entertainment and educational device" (H. Gilbert et al., 1996, p.126). A correlation of the above assertion by Gilbert and Tompkins with *Measuring Time* as a postcolonial text can reveal that Habila uses this narrative technique or story-telling format and style to reveal the Biafra war History. The reader comes to terms with the fact that Habila is not out just to write some fictional text but actually wants to put certain records in the correct perspective. Habila's fiction is partly set in the early 1960s, right after independence, and the conflict surrounding national and individual identity is palpable. This reflection refers to the goals of colonial narratives writers like Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo or Chukwuemeka Ike who had been educated as the founding elite of the nation. It is interesting to observe that Biafran identity and Igbo identity are put on the same

---

[1] The Nigerian Civil War (6 July 1967 – 15 January 1970), also known as the Nigerian–Biafran War or the Biafran War, was a civil war fought between Nigeria and the Republic of Biafra, a secessionist state which had declared its independence from Nigeria in 1967.

level and are at the core of the same issues stemming from historical backdrops. Achebe deconstructs the process of popular creation of historical narrative, because historical facts about Nigerian past are not recorded enough insofar as they reverberate in the lives of individuals. In his essay *There Was a Country* (2012), through the subtitle "A Personal History of Biafra", Achebe incidentally transposes identity questions he had to consider during his collaboration with General Ojukwu in 1968 as he terms "What did we want Biafra to look like? (…) What did we mean by citizenship and nationhood?" (C. Achebe, 2012, pp.143-144). If Achebe advocates this originality of Biafra in relation to oppressive Nigeria, he evokes principles that coincide with the founding principles of the country at the time of independence since "It did not escape Biafra's founders that a great nation needed to be built on strong intellectual formation" (C. Achebe, 2012, p.143).

Habila's other attempt at the re-enactment of history is in his account of the civil war as typified in Haruna's story. Most of what is known about the Nigerian civil war is from the perspective of people from Nigeria's eastern region. With the inclusion of the incidence of Haruna's return to Keti and his suicide, the reader gets to know about the war from the perspective and experiences of northerners. Toma also known as "One leg" (H. Habila, 2007, p.49) vividly recounts how he, Haruna and others were conscripted into the army and the ravaging effect of the war on them. In Haruna's suicide, the *Nigerian* reader experience the psychological effects of war with considerable physical aftereffects. Haruna's war story was told by his brother-in-arms as a historical fact. In this regard, the author uses an omniscient narrator as an all-knowing voice in the story. This narrator has greater insight into the narrative events, context, and the protagonist's experiences because his voice rose high over other voices as he re-created the past by affirming "This is how it happened" (H. Habila, 2007, p.50). Habila accounts for, through the deictic "this", his own History as he lived it then kept in memory. Imagination therefore takes a greater place than the accuracy and rigour of the factual rendering.

In *Measuring Time*, the historical biography of Mamo creates a writing of the self-halfway between fiction and reliable historical reality. In the Biafran context, the war represents a unifying element to the extent that it represented the nationalist aspirations of the Igbo ethnic group. Generational writers expatiate on the deployment of *Biafra* as a symbolic marker that captures the realisation of an authentic Igbo *national* spirit. Thus, the process of identity construction in *Measuring Time* is a question of seeing how the work [re]constructs the national history of Nigeria after independence and how the colonial imagination is represented.

Although the Biafra War is present as a more or less obvious backdrop in the work under consideration, the narrative voices a political and/or social positioning of Helon Habila. In *Measuring Time,* a relationship of trauma to History is present through representations of the tragic consequences of war. War thus becomes the main trigger for traumatic narratives capable of generating identity crises and transforming the writing of the self. In the Biafran context, the war represents a unifying element. This construction of a collective identity is at the origin of the modes of identification leading to a separation of the inhabitants of Biafra, who have become Biafrans, from others who are either not Biafrans or belong to other ethnic groups less affected by the war than the Igbos. The creation of Biafra can therefore also be seen as a reaction to a traumatic event, or series of events.

If the historical factor represents an identity-creating element, is it still so when war divides a country / society, as the example of Biafra shows? The historical factor is not a factor that creates identity, at least collectively, because this civil war's dramatic consequences on the civilian population and the scars it left have been forever etched in the memory of generations. Given that the Biafra War is considered not only as a simple historical event, but is also elevated to the rank of mythical landmark that transcends chronologically time, the stories it has engendered since then form part of this collective memory and are also structures of a national identity construction, although fragile and contested, from the recently independent country. The term construction refers to the way Habila thinks about the foundations of identity. Helon Habila creates both a panorama of the dark side of Nigeria and a well-constructed plot in a neat and straightforward manner while referring to the Biafra War as an essential landmark for national history and collective consciousness:

> Uncle Haruna was their father's youngest brother. He was only sixteen in 1967 when he left Keti for the war front, and after the war when he failed to return, his comrades swore he had been killed in one of the very first skirmishes of the war. Some of them even mentioned the battle in which he was killed, and how his body, and that of hundreds of others, was abandoned in the heat of the battle, left for wild animals to feed on (H. Habila, 2007, p.43).

The Biafra War trope thus becomes part of the local and national folklore of the narrative fabric of many literary creation works. Through expressions like "his comrades swore", "some of them said" in the fragment of *Measuring Time*, the author insists on the aura that the war gives to Haruna who acquires a supra-human and even supra-historical dimension. Subsequently, the war goes beyond the status of "mere" historical fact or event, it is the Event that everyone talks about or remembers. It is not only present in the minds of most of the characters in *Measuring Time*, but it also represents a turning point in their evolution. The

consequences of such a war, which tears a country apart and divides the population, represents elements which are no longer unifying or constructors of identity, but which, on the contrary, deconstruct unity representation and generate identity crisis. When the armed conflict ended, the memory, the material and spiritual vestiges transformed in an indelible way, through a collective work of [re]memorisation, the identity of characters who will literally never be the same again. The very construction of Biafra is equivalent to the construction of the identity of a republic, especially since populations are very diverse. If the Igbos are the majority, constituting about 65% of the overall population, other ethnic groups also live in the secessionist state:

> Efik, Ibibio, Ijaw, and Ikwerre. Others included the Andoni, Agbo, Degema, Egbema, Eket, Ekoi, Ibeno, Ikom, Iyalla, Kana, Mbembe, Uyanga, and Yako. Biafra was initially divided into eleven administrative provinces with as many administrators. Later the number was expanded to twenty (C. Achebe, 2012, p.150).

The Biafra war aimed at altering the balance of power among several ethnic groups, is also a result of the British colonisation of Nigeria. In its socio-cultural diversity, Biafra looks more like a national puzzle. It gives an image of African literary characteristics not on the basis of community, ethnic or national belonging, but taking into account the experience and perception of this particular socio-cultural universe in all its complexity and in all its diversity. To what extent can a nation be "made" as a space conducive to the creation of its own and original identity?

2. Capturing the Notion of Nation and Identity Deconstruction

The nation as a narrative thus acquires the function of a unifying link between individual and ethnic identities, in the case of Nigeria, in a migratory context where communities are uprooted and forced to live in exile. Bhabha posits that "The nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss into language and metaphor" (H. K. Bhabha, 1990, p.291). However, the fragility of the nation as a space for individual and collective existence leads to two contradictory and complementary movements (H. K. Bhabha, 1990, p.304). The very notion of nation is the product of a historical construction. The national discourse thus has two facets, in that it constructs and deconstructs identities in equal measure. Although nationalist discourse is not a central point, the historical facts evoked in my analysis allude to collective imagination creations as well as literary discourses and they function as unifying community patterns. Finally, the nation is neither more nor less than a notion, a metaphor of collective and individual existence within a community touched by the evils of

civilisation. In *Measuring Time*, the open question "What is history?" (H. Habila, 2007, p.95) written on the blackboard by Mamo during her first lesson in front of her students can be read as a common thread for historical facts, even as a real "issue" raised in novel. This question addressed to the students could also be declined in "what are the stories?" Later, in one of LaMamo's letters, the story he experiences on the battlefield often becomes a pretext for the insertion of explanations or impressions from the character:

> I am a soldier for almost ten years now and I live by fighting but sometimes it doesn't make sense. (…) That's why I wish you are here because you have read many books and you know the meaning of things more than me and you can have explained things to me (H. Habila, 2007, p.154).

These explanations go further than the simple account of the historical events that the character experiences on the battlefield: History and stories are linked. Right after, LaMamo writes what he calls the story of his life, but writes it "his life history" (H. Habila, 2007, p.158). From this sequence Gnanasekaran R. contends that

> "the reader of the text recognizes certain crevices or blanks or blind spots and tops them off by bringing the different social, memorable, and social standards applicable to the content before deciphering the text. He unites the language of the text, history, the idea of structure and phenomena of style" (R. Gnanasekaran, 2015, p.212).

In this try, Gnanasekaran R. derives a few deconstructive components while understanding and deciphering literary texts. As a decipherer, the reader needs to hold the deconstructive methodology of delivering the content instead of repeating what the author thought and communicated in the novel. In deconstruction the significance is neither before nor after, or neither inside nor outside of the text. To put it in other words, the unending bind of signifiers prompts to no conclusion of the text" (R. Gnanasekaran, 2015: 121). It means that deconstruction accounts for how a text's explicit formulations undermine its implicit or non-explicit aspects. It brings to limelight the internal contradiction of the texts. It unmasks the unconscious elements of the text. Deconstructive reading bursts the bubble of the texts under study. J.A. Cuddon, in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms,* says that in Deconstruction:

> A text can be read as saying something quite different from what it appears to be saying… It may be read as carrying a plurality of significance, or as saying many different things which are fundamentally at variance with, contradictory to and subversive of what may be seen by criticism as a single 'stable', meaning. Thus a text may 'betray' itself (J.A. Cuddon, 2000, p.129).

Deconstruction aims to show that the text is at war with itself. If war space is an imaginary literary space, it is nevertheless a fragmented space: spatiality and temporality are shattered at the same time. It is therefore a question of a double function of Biafran literary space and time:

to split the geopolitical unity of the country in order to regroup individual and collective experiences in all their heterogeneity and give an image that is not unitary, but at the kaleidoscopic opposite of a shattered world. The literary landscape imagined by Mamo draws a mental and memorial territory. Thus, the reader can notice a delayering in *Measuring Time* in the form of a mental space which, despite its resemblance to real space, is only a projection of it. Indeed, the fragment translates a process of deconstruction of this territory whose real referent is the open field located behind the school of Keti. This spatial deconstruction finds its counterweight in the desire to reconstruct the past. The image of the puzzle mentioned on page 379 "the jigsaw pieces" in *Measuring Time* is like a work of constructing meaning through memory in close connection with Nigerian fragments. Thus, Nigeria as a synecdoche, is worded with purpose to refer to Africa on the verge of political and cultural change, is thus "arranged" by the thought and the voice of the narrator to introduce both a new historical stage and a new geographical and literary space as an agent of identity deconstruction of nation-narrative. This is possible by virtue of the concept *entextualization* by Karin Barber who asserts that an interwoven structure of texts and oral artistic creations, is the basis for the construction of identity and history of a people or community. It is through stories that History is created and changes form until it blurs the boundaries between reality and imagination. If a historian could capture ordinary lives, including their recollections of their own family's past, then he might come close to writing a true 'biographical history' of a nation (K. Barber, 2007, p.28). All the same, Christopher Norris suggests that

> Writing becomes an exteriorized agency of violence and corruption, constantly menacing the communal values so closely identified with speech. From Derrida's view, on the contrary, writing emerges both within the very *theme* of speech and within the *text* which strives to realize and authenticate that theme. Deconstruction is in this sense the active accomplice of a repressed but already articulate writing (C. Norris, 2002, p.40).

The spatio-temporal configurations of identity writing, considered first in a relationship of continuity with the literary and cultural heritage of the generation of Nigerian writers of the 1950s and 1960s, i.e. the so-called classical "first generation", have constituted the object of a first analysis. Through the representations of space, both geographical and narrative, such as the space of the writing page, the construction of identity is rooted not only in a physical space, but also in an imaginary and a collective memories that create what Bhabha calls "the nation as narration" (H. K. Bhabha, 1994, p.204).

Literarity or narrativity on the one hand, and historicity on the other, thus contribute in equal measure to national identity deconstruction, because the nation is itself a narrative and historical construction. This definition of national identity, which runs counter to John

Edwards' analysis goes in the same direction as a protean identity to the extent that "National identity is both given and periodically reconstituted. Citizens inherit it, reflect on it, and redefine and revise it in the light of their circumstances, self-understanding and future aspirations" (J. Edwards, 2009, p.61). This need to change the form and substance of collective identity reflects a profound questioning of the very idea of identity as a notion. What is known as "identity" translates a journey and an experience that is both individual and collective for the characters, considering the socio-historical backdrops of *Measuring Time*. As a fully omniscient narrator, the storyteller establishes an inextricable link between nation and individual, between collective and individual, between public and intimate. In this regard, the omniscient narrator has an all-knowing perspective on the character's story for the simple fact that "when we refer to a nation, are we not really referring to the people that inhabit that nation, and so isn't it then the story of a nation than really the story of the people who make up that nation? (H. Habila, 2007, p.180). The author uses an omniscient narrator who is all-knowing since he/she has access to every character's thoughts and emotions. When he/she expresses these thoughts and emotions, the omniscient narrator can take on the voice and perspective of a character.

Measuring Time makes a foray into the microcosm of the village of Keti in northern Nigeria and 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 constructs his identity as a writer and historian of the Keti community within that village. While living in this village, Mamo observes several times, through the narrative on pages 92, 93, 290, 295, 381, the surroundings of Keti:

> He went out for a walk. It was a Monday, market day. The streets were busy with people returning from the market: traders still counting their money, women hurrying home to feed their children before they fell asleep, drunks walking hand in hand […] Mamo passed through the dark and silent churchyard with its huge neem trees and gravestones […]
> The sun was still visible over the hills […] The hills circled the village in a horseshoe from west to south, and the scrubby vegetation that covered the hilltops and the stunted trees that slanted on the slopes were now desiccated and leafless from the harmattan wind. […]
> At the foot of the hills was the village burial ground, with its headstones and crude wooden crosses looking as if they had sprouted from the clayey red earth. This had been the village burial ground for generations: new graves straddled older graves, new bones mingled promiscuously with ancient ones (H. Habila, 2007, pp.92-93).

From the above passage, the reader can realise, through Mamo's position, a space construction not only as a framework for social life encompassing "traders", "women", "drunks", but also as a framework populated and built by the human element: the description of the cemetery and the shadows of the deceased that haunt this setting, illustrates Mamo's

anchorage in his birthplace, an anchorage which, however, gives a particular perspective on this village through time. Mamo's identity is necessarily, if not fatally, linked to this place, without being reduced to it, and represents one of her only certainties. Metaphor of a cohabitation between the present and the past through "new bones mingled ... with ancient ones" denotes characters' birth place and the narration, because the village is the first scene's place of the novel centred on the marriage of twins' parents. Tabita and Musa Lamang also represent a metaphor for the spatial membership of community identity, if the community of Keti is considered as a synecdoche of the Nigerian nation itself.

3. Deciphering Historical and Political Features in the Narrative.

History creates historical myths and figures that it projects into the collective imagination with a particular aura. In the context of the General Sani Abacha's[2] military dictatorship (1993-1998), political factor is assimilated to military factor and to omnipresent and protean violence. The dictator's figure creates social, spiritual and political solidarity amongst victims who have become martyrs of Nigerian oppressive regimes. In *Measuring Time*, Habila portrays a close, chaotic and violent history, whose narrative has been hurt and oppressed by war and dictatorial regimes. However, they are each based on opposing narrative and aesthetic choices and, correlatively, a distinct conception of the role that literature can play in the face of immediate history. In *Measuring Time*, the authoritarian figure of the dictator is rather constructed as a kaleidoscope of images like Mai, Waziri or even Musa Lamang and his party. Habila narrates Waziri's nature of predator as to insist a dictator's identity in the chapter with the suggestive title "The Unmasking":

> As he listened to the sweet, Mephistophelean voice, Mamo noticed that despite the Waziri's squint, he had a predator's keen gaze, and he seemed to be always waiting, patient, trying to outguess his interlocutor – and the breath, why hadn't he noticed the foul predator's breath before now? (H. Habila, 2007, p.335).

Contrary to the metaphor of the mask in "Imitation", the masks do not reveal a truth, but other masks, other faces, other "lies". In fact, Hablia's narrative is linked to the notion of waiting and the passage of time. As each character metaphorically watches the clock, their expectations are different, some do not appear to know exactly why or what they are waiting for. On the other hand, Uncle Iliya whose hopes are more clear-cut but frustrating circumstances force him to wait. Not unlike how Mamo waits to hear from – and maybe see LaMamo again.

---

[2] General Sani Abacha (20 September 1943 – 8 June 1998) was a Nigerian military officer and politician who ruled as the military head of state after seizing power in November 1993 until his death. Abacha's seizure of power was the last successful *coup d'état* in the Nigerian Third Republic. He dismissed the elected civilian governors and placed a military Administrator in charge of each state.

The depiction of Mamo, the sick brother who stays in the village to teach and write, is the main focus of narration and embodies the relationship between writing, history and time. The relationship between fiction and historical narrative is represented in the novel by the historical biography, a hybrid genre that tells the life of prominent personalities from Keti. This ambitious undertaking made Mamo the local historian and archivist and gave him the opportunity to recompose the fragmented history of his family. Writing this historical biography means retracing history through the 'little' stories of the witnesses and thus establishes a relationship between the collective and the intimate. Finally, the novel traces the work of archaeology, archiving and architecture of time constantly renewed. For the protagonist Mamo, this equates to time travel as well as self-travel. To conclude, through this problematic relationship with family and local history, LaMamo embodies the tensions with the past and the tradition that he must nevertheless probe in order to build himself. Habila's fiction, in the broader sense of artistic creation endowed with a structure and narrative characteristics, creates the historical being and identity of a community.

Between History and identity there is an equivalence relation illustrated in *Measuring Time*. During his history lessons at Keti's school, the phrase "if we are to be future African leaders", repeated by LaMamo in letters to his brother, gave Mamo the nickname, "the Future African Leader" (H. Habila, 2007, p.118) and illustrates an unintended coincidence that brings the twins even closer. This syntax also represents Mamo's landmark in her hours of classes:

> "See the horizon, there over the hills? That is not the real horizon, there are a myriad other horizons, and you can see that when you climb the hill and stare into the vast open fields beyond, and they only multiply as you approach them. That is the true meaning of history" (H. Habila, 2007, p.105).

Through this new answer to the initial question "What is history?" the adjective "true" which punctuates the end of his argument also later appears in the title of the historical biography written by Mamo, "A True History of the Keti People" (H. Habila, 2007, p.221) as if to give validity, a reliability of historical documentation, in reaction to Reverend Drinkwater's book "*A Brief History of the Peoples of Keti*" (H. Habila, 2007, p.170) which he qualifies as "misrepresentation by foreign historians" (H. Habila, 2007, p.175). By using the adjective "true" in her book, Mamo also wishes to create a story that not only can reconcile the past and the present but also reconcile the events of her own life with her illness and with Nigeria national unity. In effect, Mamo recreates a fictional past to the historical and literary character of Okigbo in an attempt to give him a second life. This alternate reality symbolically

gives Mamo a second chance at healing, the chance to "CHEAT DEATH, BE FAMOUS" (H. Habila, 2007, p.25) and his illness, and ultimately to live multiple lives.

What is more, the question "What is history?" (H. Habila, 2007, p.95) previously stated by Mamo reflects, among other things, the characters' desire not to passively submit to the story, but to re-create it. Therefore, since History is essentially created through discourse, how can one create one's identity from a fictional construction? As an answer to the initial question "What is history?", Mamo gives several definitions in *Measuring Time*: "a true history is one that looks at the lives of individuals, ordinary people who toil and dream and suffer" (H. Habila, 2007, p.180). *Measuring Time* thematises partisan politics as played in Nigeria. The twins' father, a wealthy businessman, attempts a political career with mixed results, allowing the author to expose the many problems of the political system in the recently turned independent state of Nigeria. When political independence is no longer an issue for Nigeria, since the national identity is [or would have been] acquired at least from a political point of view, what relationship do Habila and characters have with History? Nigerian independence was at the centre of national identity [re]affirmation and is [still] part of literary creation, especially through the work of first-generation politicians, intellectuals and writers, nationalistically inclined insofar as emphasis was placed on the pre-colonial political heritage specificity as a resistance to British domination. What is more, *Measuring Time* broaches themes that permeate the African writing arena in general: poverty, political chaos, corruption, civil wars, religious fanaticism, to quote a few.

Helon Habila has not only created vivid characters that stay in the reader's mind, but he has skilfully broadened and deepened the narrative to include a rich account of Nigerian History and politics as they have evolved in Keti. Keeping his story personal and centred on a group of distinct characters, the author finds a sensitive balance between the intimate and the historical context. His evocative power of description, whether of landscapes or human beings, is complemented by his skill as a storyteller in the rich African tradition. As a human interest story, Habila reaches audiences beyond those interested in Africa. 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, Christopher Anyokwu suggests that "Habila constructs a linear progression of historical time. *Measuring Time* confirms Habila as an exceptional voice in African literature" (C. Anyokwu 2008, p.14). In the light of the above, the reader can notice Habila's great skill to infuse the individual and the local with panoramic, historical significance.

In *Measuring Time*, Kopi, one of the prominent characters in the village of Keti, calls the twins "the soldier and the one who writes history" (H. Habila, 2007, p.307). The brothers are therefore seen as actors in History: LaMamo lives and is a direct actor in History, while Mamo is its more distant observer and interpreter. Two twins, living in a small Nigerian village called Keti, measuring time, wondering how they will each achieve fame together. Mamo, the twin who has sickle cell anaemia, measures his time as a child, sick in bed, while his twin colours and entertains him by his bedside. Mamo measures his time, waiting for his father's love. Mamo measures his time, waiting for his twin to come back from numerous rebel armies, trying to "save Africa" from the puppets of the Western Powers. Mamo measures his time, going to school and teaching at a school in Keti that the government will soon close. Mamo measures his time, waiting for Zara, the love of his life to come back to him. While he waits, he measures his time, hoping to achieve fame by writing a biography of the Mai, the leader of Keti. Mamo suffers loneliness, abandonment, and the disillusionment of Keti's corrupt government. Helon Habila's powerful words portray Mamo's acute feelings in detail throughout his childhood and adulthood. The repetition of "measuring" gives access to the feelings and reactions of Mamo as receiver and narrator of Africa's stories through his experience mixing with expectations.

Besides, Helon Habila's story-telling talents are noticeable in numerous ways. As far as the author takes the reader carefully into his gentle and admirable character, he/she can observe "Derrida's depiction of deconstructive perusing is that the deconstructionist as a reader must go for a certain relationship, unperceived by the author" [and that] "In view of the deconstructive procedure talked about in the text, in this study, the deconstructionist gives the reaction of a reader, the depiction of a decipherer, the investigation of an analyst, and/or the perceptions of a critic" (R. Gnanasekaran, 2015, pp.212-213). The deconstructionist critic recognises how the text plays around with the assumptions a reader makes based on the connotations of the words and the images they create, enhancing the tension in the story, and undermining the possibility of the text creating only one meaning. Deconstruction looks for those places where texts contradict, and thereby deconstruct, themselves. It challenges the idea of a frozen structure and advances the notion that there is no structure or centre, no univocal meaning. It also stresses the interaction of reader and text. Habila's narrative of people and events is interwoven with those of his protagonist Mamo, who in later years writes about the people around him and thereby becomes a recorder of the local history. In other words, national history also means appropriation of space which constitutes an agent of identity: construction of the nation,

geographical space, literary space and the writer's public figure are intimately linked. Thus, giving Mamo the dual voice of the growing boy/young adult of the story time line and the retrospective commentary of the future biographer, the author creates an even richer portrayal of the main characters and the times they live in. The author's style of putting across the story is unique and wonderful as far as characterisation is concerned, particularly that of Mamo, the sickly twin. He is a young man that speaks less and lives in much silence, from which he studies his environment very well, and becomes a historian determined to preserve his people's history and tells their story from different angles and from the point of view of several distinct individuals including Zara, the Mai, the Waziri, his father, his uncles as well as his brother. The protagonists of *Measuring Time* live in the same space, and their experiences constantly multiply their paths and their future. Answers to more classic identity deconstruction structures hence would consist in seeking and/or understanding who they really are, there are possibilities of being and possible identities that characters seek and discover as the narrative progresses. Deconstruction would set itself to prove, on the contrary, that meaning is produced only through a constant self-critique which always *defers* the sense of achieved identity.

The text analysis harpoons politics and history to highlight identity deconstruction structures in relationship with family and local events. Thus, the reader views LaMamo as the character who embodies the tensions with the past and the future that he must nevertheless probe in order to build himself. For instance, in the chapter "Widows and Politicians" in *Measuring Time*, Mamo recreates the scene of political debates from sounds and voices of his father Musa Lamang's friends. The visual in literary texts is pushed into the background in the course of history. History is not only this destructive force, because, like individual history in the sense of narrative, it also aims to deconstruct national and individual identity. Identity is itself a historical process: since identity is constantly revisited and questioned, this process can also be seen as a personal experience as well as a national, communal or individual one.

Conclusion

Through *Measuring Time* written in the form of embedded stories, I have explored Helon Habila's narrative with the purpose to scrutinise the notion of identity deconstruction, which is ultimately made up of the sum of encounters and experiences of characters in relation to time and space constructions. Beyond geographical and historical references, the notions of politics, or identity deconstruction and the West represent interior projections of staged characters who bear the brunt of whatever vicissitudes' time inflicts on the nation.

From African historical context analysis of vivid characters' stories, I have attempted to show how the author considers the writing of identity as a spatio-temporal construction, through the relationship with the independence story timeline and its heritage for this third generation writer. The common thread of this study has been to analyse the new dimensions and configurations of identity. From a postcolonial perspective, this study has shown that Habila's literary creation aims to deconstruct an individual identity, which evolves in the liminal space of historical significance.

Works cited

CHINUA Achebe (2012). *There Was a Country.* Allen Lane: London.

ANYOKWU Christopher (Spring 2008). "Inheritance of loss: Narrative and history in Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*". *California Linguistic Notes*, Volume XXXIII, No. 2. Available at: https://english.fullerton.edu/publications/clnArchives/pdf/Anyokwu%20-%20Inheritance.pdf Accessed 20 November 2022.

BHABHA Homi K. (1990). *Nation and Narration.* Routledge: London and New York.

--------------------. (1994). *The Location of Culture.* Routledge: London and New York.

DERRIDA Jacques (1995). *Points . . . Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf and others. Stanford University Press: Stanford, California.

CUDDON J.A (2000). *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. Penguin: London. Print.

EDWARDS John (2009). *Language and Identity: An Introduction.* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

GNANASEKARAN R. (2015). *An Introduction to Derrida, Deconstruction and Post-Structuralism. International Journal of English Literature and Culture*. Vol. 3, No.7, pp.211-214. Available at: http://www.academicresearchjournals.org/IJELC/Index.htm Accessed 27 December 2022.

GILBERT Helen and TOMPKINS Joanne (1996). *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice Politics*. London: Routledge. Print.

HABILA Helon (2007). *Measuring Time.* London: Penguin.

KARIN Barber (2007). *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics. Oral and Written Culture in Africa and Beyond.* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

NORRIS Christopher (2002). *Deconstruction Theory and Practice* (3rd Ed.). Routledge: London and New York.

PAYNE Michael (1993). *Reading Theory*. Blackwell: Oxford.