

# **A New Historical Interrogation of Liwhu Betiang's *The Cradle on the Scales***

**Mariastella Umoren**

Department of General Studies, Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic  
Ikot Osura, Akwa Ibom State

**Kufre A. Akpan**

Department of English, Akwa Ibom State University,  
Nigeria

## ***Abstract***

*One of the major tasks of New Historicists is to examine how the writer's time affects their work, and how their work also reflects the undercurrents of the time. This arises from the popular position that society is an inter-web of consistent change, and as it changes, it equally affects every sphere of life including literature. Thus, the writer being a sensitive member of the society is left with no option than to conceive, portray and examine social changes in a specialised creative manner depending on their level of consciousness and commitment of such writers. It is against this backdrop that this paper critiques Liwhu Betiang's *The Cradle on the Scales*. Through close reading and analysis of some extrapolations from the text and using New Historicism as theoretical framework, the paper reveals that the period within which a novel is written affects the configuration of the narrative. The paper concludes that the socio-political and economic concerns explored in the novel create a vivid fictive universe that is realistic of the Nigerian Society of the 21st century.*

**Keywords: New Historicism, Socio-economic, Change, Nigeria**

## **Introduction**

New Historicism is a term coined by Stephen Greenblatt to designate a body of theoretical and interpretive practice that began largely with the study of early modern literature in the United States. A major dictum of this theory is that one can only know the textual history of the past because it is embedded in the textuality of the present with its concerns. This simply implies that texts and contexts are less clearly distinct in New Historicist's practice. An equivalent of this theory in England is known as "Cultural Materialism", a Marxist approach to evaluating how the discourse of a text challenges an ideological position. According to Rick Duerden, "the name and much of the impetus spring from Raymond Williams, whose sympathetic attention to problems of Marxist thought has led him to develop materialist theories that are less economic and more cultural in aim" (237). John Peck and Martin Coyle also say that cultural materialism

"combine studying the implications of literary texts in history, theoretical methods and political commitment, and how texts relate to the particular institutions of cultural production" (183). It is the above explications that give New Historicism a functional bearing.

New Historicism is a post-structural theory whose emergence was spear-headed by Michel Foucault, a French historian, Archeologist and Philosopher. The theory emerged as a polemic to challenge earlier theories like structuralism and deconstruction which tried doggedly to erase history, politics, the author and his world from literary criticism. Prior to its emergence, structuralism which relies much on the revolutionary work of the Swiss Linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, insisted that literature and literary criticism should be divorced from politics and history.

They also believe that a text is an autonomous entity that should be essentially adequate in itself for accurate interpretation. Roland Barthes, a strong exponent of structuralism argues that "linguistics formulation rather than the world is the concern of literary criticism. Literature is subject to infinite proliferation of meanings or interpretation (signification) because it conveys a system of signs and not meanings" (361). It was largely for this reason that New Historicism emerged to challenge the fallacies that characterised earlier theories. Contrary to Structuralism, New Historicists believe that literature should be studied and interpreted within the context of both history of the author and that of the critic in a specific cultural milieu. A New Historicist looks at literature in a wider historical context, examining both how the writer's times influence the work and how the work reflects the writer's times and also recognises the current cultural contexts that colour the critics' conclusion.

New Historicism underscores the fact that literary criticism is not permanent. The age of digitisation where new cultures spread predatorily further complicate any notion of sanctity and static structure of meaning or interpretation of experience (David Udoinwang and Ikpe Akpan 2023). New Historicism thus acknowledges the idea that, as times change, so will the understanding of a literary work change. In examining a literary text, a New Historicist looks out for taints of culture and environment, the use and dispersion of power and the marginalisation of social classes within the work. As has been noted earlier, Michel Foucault is reputed to have been the pathfinder in redirecting literature and its criticism back to history. In the opinion of Eve Barnet "Foucault has consistently tried to breakdown the familiar units, categories, continuities and totalities through which history, society and symbolic orders are traditionally interpreted. (Qtd from Lynn, 30 Foucault in *The Order of Discourse* states that:

Culture, institution and society create principles of limitation through which control is placed over the production and insists that it would of course, that absurd to deny the existence of the individual who writes and invents since he writes and what he does not write and his handling of these material are prescribed by the author function, as he receives it from his epoch, or as he modifies it in turns (59).

His view of history is complex. Like other poststructuralist, Foucault considers discourse a central human activity. To him, the circulation of literary and non-literary texts produces relation of social power within a culture. Thus, Foucault recommends that “We must call into question our will to truth, restore to its character as an event and finally to that of the sovereignty of the signifier (66).

New Historicism is also eclectic in its approach to the study of literature. It is often in conjunction with feminists and also covers a wide range of other subversive view of an interest in social class politics, gender and cultural institutions. It interrogates the experiences of the downtrodden, the poor women, and the dispossessed, and examines their lives in relation to the society and power. John Peck and Martin Colye posit that it overlaps with feminism and Marxism criticism in taking a questioning view of the past, looking at the production and status of literary text" (183). All these have led to a renewed effort in linking literature and its criticism to history. It is in this spirit that this paper critiques Liwhu Betiang's *The Cradle on the Scales*.

### **Skewed Humanity and the Writer's Vision in *The Cradle on the Scales***

Liwhu Betiang is one of the new voices in the Nigerian literary sphere. In his *The Cradle on the Scales* published in 2011, Betiang vehemently exposes the inhumanity, apprehensions and contradictions that have plagued humanity. He succinctly evaluates a human society that is grossly stratified and characterised by hegemonic tendencies. This is in consonance with Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle's argument that “literary text are embedded within the social and economic circumstances in which they are produced and consumed” (119). In other words, the meaning derived from a text is authenticated by the socio-political conditions that underpin the period and locale from which it ensues.

It is worthy of note that the novel pontificates an unfortunate scenario where humanity takes delight in self-destruction by erecting harmful structures that turn around to hurt it. Thus, a cursory examination of *The Cradle on the Scales* leaves no iota of doubt that the social, cultural, economic and religious universe of the novel is very realistic of the present Nigerian society, where the realities of human existence is so complex and fraught with uncertainties, a society where the less privileged perpetually occupy the fringes of the society's economic and socio-political schema. The plot of this novel revolves around three major characters; Andoukye, Unimke and Iyayi who are unfortunate victims of the inhumanness of humanity. Through these characters and other minor ones, Betiang chronicles human experiences in a society that is not only utterly debased but sits at the brinks of an abyss, whose depth no one can fathom. In this novel, Andoukye, a circumstantial orphan and a victim of fosterage system becomes a very apt instance of the hypocrisy associated with human relationship. Upon the death of her mother at child birth, her father thinks it is wise for her to be raised by a catechists and teacher, Isaac Igbang, and thus, is taken to this new home. Her father has always reasoned that her moral and educational development is guaranteed by sending her to be fostered by a teacher and catechist.

However, what befalls her in the catechist's home grossly betrays her father's genuine

intention. Andoukye is not only reduced to a slave, but also a victim of rape. "Madam Ungieuba, the catechist's wife known in the novel as "Madam" insists she eats burnt soup "whose pungent smell she could not stand for a minute while her biological children bask on the delicacy of fried fish in Ugbaru soup with Apu, a treat she will never trust with the house girl" (8). She is constantly beaten and humiliated. Betiang describes the chaotic atmosphere in the catechist's home thus: "...in the catechist home, it had become at regular routine as offence was committed, aloud cry in the morning or night, the click of the door key and dreadful bashing and wailing" (4).

This calls to the mind a similar scenario in Kola Onadipe's *Call Me Michael*. In this story, the height of Michael's stepmother's wickedness and inhumanity is exposed and through this, Onadipe reveals how debased and mean fosterage system can be. Michael, the main character in this story is reduced to the level of a dog, as his stepmother insists he competes with a dog for a piece of meat and plate of food. The height of her insensitivity is seen when she insists that Michael answers "Mikkie" a dog's name any time she calls: "Call me Michael If you like call me Mike but please do not call me Mikkie. That brings to my mind many things I like to forget that I once shared a name that name Mikkie with a dog. My stepmother did it. She bought a dog and named it "Mikkie" (20). This cry from the heart captures the gravity of the emotional and physical abuse suffered by a foster child.

Within the social context of the novel, cases abound in Nigerian cities today where children, in the name of fosterage, are driven into child labour either as "house helps or store keepers. As a matter of fact, some Nigerian Governors have launched operation rid the streets of children through such programme as free and compulsory education. Also the signing of Child's Right Acts into law by some governors has put foster parents in check in order not to constitute machinery for recruiting child labourers to their advantage and to the detriment of society.

Betiag also exposes the vulnerability of children, especially the female in their foster homes. In this story, the catechist's first son Akomaya rapes Andoukye, gets her pregnant and forces her to swear never to divulge the act to anyone. Following this pregnancy, Andoukye dies, like her mother, giving birth to a son; Unimke. Unimke's birth becomes a paradoxical presentation of evil creation in the society. This is yet another unfortunate victim of fosterage system. His birth and childhood crystallises the fate of motherless children who live in foster homes. Thus, "Growing up in catechists household, it seemed as if he almost took over the existence of his mother. Madam hated him" (37).

In order to further deride his confidence, Madam's children constantly refer to Unimke as a bastard, "a child picked from some kind of gutter" (59). "You think my mother is your mother? She is not your mother. You have no mother, you are a bastard" (59). This situation provides a point of reference and perspective for readers on the pain and suffering that can be part of growing up as a foster child (Akpan, 151). Madam's atrocities are constantly contrasted with the warmth, love and serenity a biological home could offer and this situation sets the stage for Unimke's inevitable escape from

the horror that is catechist home, to an equally horrible life with armed robbers, prostitutes and other street urchins.

Unimke believes that “nature does not seem to be fair” (37). “He sees the world as a cruel place where selected people were accepted as human beings and others, if they were accepted, were on some sub-human basis” (37). Betiang captures the inequality in the human society through the eyes of young Unimke. For children suffering this fate, western education, the only way out of the morass of poverty, only exists in a dream. The reality of their lives is toils and pains. Unimke engages in hand labour to raise money for his school but the powerful madam robs him of the opportunity. She steals the money and even threatens to quite her marriage with catechist if any money is given to Unimke as school fees. That night madam got really disagreeable. She asked her husband where he would get all the money to pay the boy's school fees when there were so many other things that needed immediate attention. She swore she will simply pack out of his house if he as much gives a kobo to Unimke by way of school fee...

Betieng further observes that apart from the high-handedness and insensitivity on the part of foster mothers, exemplified by the catechist's wife and the cowardice on the part of catechist Igbang, humans engage in wars, killing one other and forcing some others, including women and children to take refuge in strange lands.

This situation has great potential for revealing how harsh humanity can be to those deprived of the normal protection of family life (Affiah, Amaku and Akpan, 64). Akomaya, the catechist's son bares his mind on this when he: “...remembers during the early days of the incursion of refugees from the northern neighbours, such like this one were taken to bed by unscrupulous, promiscuous men who took advantage of their persistent changing to the people they begged from” (61). Menace of refugees, sexual abuse and children beggars have now become real ugly national statistics in Nigeria. War torn communities, especially in the north east of Nigeria, have emptied their citizens into the street and refugee camps in other neighbouring communities. David Udoinwang and Kufre Akpan Argue that: “By this understanding, African writers consistently use their creative works as channels to expose the misdemeanors that characterise societies and put the citizenry on unnecessary flights and turn them to unwanted refugees elsewhere” (342). Also, in their study of the causes of migration in Nigeria, Kufre Akpan and Monica Udoette assert that “Nigeria, in particular, has been plagued with insurgent wars that have decimated a significant percentage of its citizens” (64). The above situation is further worsened by the existing phenomenon of socio-economic disparities in society, with the ever-widening gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots”.

In this story, Iyayi who later introduced Unimke into a criminal group known as "Big O" reveals in a conversation that her predicament is as a result of war that claimed all that she had; humanly and materially. According to Iyayi “One evening I came back home to find our house a heap of ruin” (67) Following this, she moves in with her aunt and gets raped by her husband, a man she calls uncle. "One day he tried to take me by force as I tried to defend myself, I hit him without knowing and gave him a black eye"

(68). Her aunt, armed with a spurious account from her husband, insist Iyayi leaves. She is later introduced to her niece whom she stays with and continue her education up to form five. Her niece later introduces her to male friends and when she objects, “she simply told me I had no option, but to learn to enjoy it” (69). This is the point she moves into the street, as she strategises to keep life going.

The Iyayi saga provides adequate insight into an often ignored side of the much acclaimed African extended family system, that is, the contradiction and tension that characterise surrogate parenthood in a society that exercises great pressure on relations to cater for the extended family (Okpiliya and Akpan, 30). Betiang laments this decaying human society through the character of Akomaya who ponders: “whatever it was that drove them out of their beloved country; was it penury, starvation, drought or something worse?... and concludes: surely, there can never be a natural love for paupery” (41). If their societies had not forced them, these women would have been respectable women with kids and right to a good home and life like anyone else.

It is noted that the problem of humanity is created by humans themselves, for nature had created one "Monolithic humanity", same in body and soul. The many compartments were man-made to create the illusion of power, the sole instrument of sadism-the stuff humanity was elementally made of. It is sad to observe that most of the armed robbers and other perpetrators of anti-social behaviours today were victims of fosterage system. After trying so hard to earn the love and affection of his foster parents to no avail, Unimke takes the devil's alternative. First he gets introduced into child trafficking and later to the real world of organised crime. He is initiated into a criminal organisation known as "Big O". Within this organisation, there is a church where fraud skills are perfected. The Pastor of this criminal church intertextualises the biblical Ananias and Saphira who coerced members to steal the church's money. “Unimke likens this practice to that of a man, Moses Abraham in his village who was an "archetype of modern con-man commonly known as 419” (115).

The novelists also critical of the law enforcement officers who no longer protect citizens but offer protection to criminals. The Boss of the Big 'O' lamentably observes: "Our police protection is getting too costly" (116). This informs Kufre Akpan and Naomi Okon's assertion that “The system is so decayed that the Nigerian police officers, whose major duty is to protect the citizens now condescend to forcefully taking tips from motorists on the road” (6). Politicians who are supposed to lead the people by example collaborate with criminals to inflict pains on the people. The Boss reveals: "our research team thinks we should patronise our politicians whenever they call on us to do politically motivated kidnapping jobs (117). No wonder many armed robbers and kidnapers in Nigeria often confess to being backed up by prominent politicians in the country. Some village heads especially in the Niger Delta region, shield kidnapers from the law because they share in the proceeds of the kidnapping.

Betiangu also captures the prevailing situation in Nigeria where a group of perverts who

call themselves Boko Haram rain terror on innocent souls in the northern part of the country. Lyayi who witnesses a gruesome murder of a young man by Boko Haram fanatic laments: “I wonder when we'll stop deceiving ourselves in this country. Some truths should be told. Tell me, what has the poor woman and her four children got to do with whatever cartoon by the crazy Oyibo man?” (166). Here the society is seen as one that recycles evil. Unimke re-enacts the circumstances of his birth by raping Mary his aunt, thereby committing incest. This symbolises the perpetuation of evil in the society. Mary is pregnant but decides to break the cycle by aborting the child. Unimke's pardon also symbolises the willingness to reform the society instead of continuing in the wastage of human lives.

### Conclusion

The analysis above aptly reveals that *The Cradle on the Scales* chronicles events and experiences within the human society that exposes the fact that the home is the very crucible and cradle of our tomorrow. Without justifying crime, it takes a compassionate empathetic look at Unimke, a product of rape, domestic abuse in a society where humanity has been debased with the craze for materialism and tends to condone domestic slavery. Liwhu Betiang has doggedly called for restoration of humanness, love, true spirituality and humanity-reforms in all strata of the society. However, the solution, Betiang seems to argue, lies both in the structural changes in the society and the individual's inner resource and power.

### Works Cited

- Affiah, Uwem, Offiong Amaku and Kufre Akpan. “The Centrality of the Narrative Storytelling Performance Strategy in Sam Ukala's Ideological Framework”. *European Journal of Literary Studies*. Vol. 4, Issue. 1, 2022. PP: 63-81.
- Akpan, Kufre. “Queer Childhood, Gender Panic and Homophobia in Unoma Azuah's Blessed Body”. *UTUENIKANG: Ibom Journal of Language and Literary Review*. Vol. 1, No.1, 2021. PP: 150-162.
- Akpan, Kufre and Naomi Okon. “Tears in Verses': Leadership and Social Disillusionment in Tanure Ojaide's Poetry”. *Middle East Research Journal of Linguistics and Literature*. Vol.1, No.1, 2021. PP: 1-8.
- Akpan, Kufre and Monica Udoette. Migration, Identity and Reconstruction of Female Migrants' Experiences in Chika Unigwe's *Better Never Than Late*. *European Journal of Literary Studies*. Volume 4, Issue 2, 2023. PP. 63-80
- Barthes, Roland. *The Death of the Author*. In *Image-Music-Text*, 1977.
- Bennett, Andrew and Nicholas Royle. *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*. 4th Ed. Pearson Education, 2009.
- Betiag, Liwhu. *The Cradle on the Scales*. Author House, 2011.
- Delahoyde, Michael. *Critical Theory: Introduction*. /Public.wsu.edu/
- Foucault, Michel. *Order of Discourse*. Rutledge, 1986.
- Literary Theory. (Encyclopedia of Philosophy) [www.iep.utm.edu/literary](http://www.iep.utm.edu/literary)

- Lynn, Stephen. *Historicity of Text and Textuality of History*, Heinemann, 1986.
- Jacob, Udofot Okon. Theater Design, Climate Change and the Nna Enin 2023 Community Theater Experience in Nigeria. *Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS)*. Vol. 6, No 4 (Dec. 2023) pp45-59.
- Okpiliya, James and Kufre Akpan. "The Journey as Structural and Instrumental Technique in Nigerian Children's Fiction". *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*. Vol.4, No.6, 2016. PP: 28-33.
- Onadipe, Kola. *Call Me Michael*. National Press, 1969.
- PANA/2016/116/00. Noah [punafricanjournal@yahoo.com](mailto:punafricanjournal@yahoo.com)/FRB/11/5/2016
- Peck, John. and Coyle Martin. *Literary Terms and Criticism*. Rutledge, 1988.
- Purdue Owl. (2012). *Literary theory and schools of criticism*. Owl.english.purdue.edu.
- Question Online Research Library. [www.questia.com](http://www.questia.com)
- Udoinwang, David and Kufre Akpan. "The Writer, The Muse and Revolutionary Incitement in Joe Ushie's Poetry". *Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies*. (SGOJAHDS), Vol.6 No.2 June, 2023. PP: 341 – 350.
- Udoinwang, David & Ikpe Justice Akpan. Digital Transformation, Social Media Revolution, and E-Society Advances in Africa: Are Indigenous Cultural Identities in Danger of Extinction? SSRN, 2023. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=4349795](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4349795)