



**An Eco-heritage or an Eco-curse? - A Postcolonial Ecocritical Study
of Helon Habila's *Oil on Water***

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Abstract

Nigerian literature has been strewed with much political activism and ecological degradation. It has brought to the fore the connivance of oil companies, government agencies and a few members of the local communities in devouring the sacred land of Nigeria. The fictional literature of the Niger Delta takes into account the socio-cultural and political factors that revolve around the management of environmental problems in Nigeria. Rapid industrialization and excessive oil mining leave devastating ecological imprints on the flora, fauna and the landscape of the Delta. The fundamental issues of capitalism, globalisation, and exploitation of natural resources that cause the obliteration of Nigeria's ecosystem are the themes of numerous literatures seeping out of the Niger Delta. Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* works in the creative space to divert attention towards real-life issues that threaten the ecological sustenance of Niger Delta. The present paper analyses the novel by raising questions about the unethical practices being executed in the name of development. While being socio-ecologically intertwined, the novel also provides a postcolonial discourse on the corruption of moral order that plagues the fabric of Nigerian society.

Keywords: Oil, Niger Delta, Eco critical, Postcolonial, MNCs, ecological sustenance.

Nigerian literature has been strewed with much political activism and ecological degradation. It has brought to the fore the connivance of oil companies, government agencies and a few members of the local communities in devouring the sacred land of Nigeria. The fictional literature of the Niger Delta takes into account the socio-cultural and political factors that revolve around the management of environmental problems in Nigeria. Rapid industrialization and excessive oil mining leave devastating ecological imprints on the flora, fauna and landscape. The fundamental issues of capitalism, globalisation, and exploitation of natural resources that cause the obliteration of Nigeria's ecosystem are the themes of numerous literatures seeping out of the Niger Delta. Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* works in the creative space to divert attention towards real-life issues that threaten the ecological sustenance of Niger



Delta. The novel raises questions about the unethical practices being executed in the name of development. While being socio-ecologically intertwined, the novel also provides a postcolonial discourse on the corruption of moral order that plagues the fabric of Nigerian society.

In the recent times, the narratives of exploitation, ecological destruction and underdevelopment have formed the major themes of Nigerian literature. It is largely believed that the Nigerian rulers and multinational corporations have played crucial roles in the pillaging of resources and widening of the chasm between the centre and the periphery. These activities of over exploitation manifest in gas flaring, oil spillage, air pollution and other forms of despoilment, resulting in farmlands that are submerged in layers of thick crude oil. Rivers and drinking water are contaminated with this toxic oil leading to the large scale destruction of the aquatic life. Along with ecological degradation, these activities also bring forth ignited militarism and tension in the Delta region in particularly and Nigeria at large as the youths take up arms to resist unjust exploitation by the Nigerian ruling elites, the multinational companies, and their cohorts.

In 1979, a constitutional amendment gave the federal government full ownership and rights to all Nigerian territory and also declared that eminent domain compensation for seized land would “be based on the value of the crops on the land at the time of its acquisition, not on the value of the land itself.”(*Human Rights Watch* 1999) This allowed the Nigerian government to distribute the land to oil companies as it deemed fit and as it suited their economic interests.

In the third world countries, especially in Africa, the effects of large-scale environmental destruction have been seriously felt in the form of destructive extraction of resources. Not only has this generated serious climatic concern but has also borne major inter-ethnic disputes among communities particularly in the Niger Delta. Numerous literary writers have given voice to this undesirable trend through the pages of their fictional framework. These writers have laid great emphasis in painting a realistic picture of the crisis while also registering a warning for the future of the Niger Delta. The writers from the Niger Delta have advocated social equality and environmental justice to tackle the menace of oil extraction that has virtually devoured the whole of Niger Delta environment. Writers such as Helon Habila and Christie Watson who are not Niger Deltans have also joined in the collaborative effort of bringing about environmental justice against the despoliation of the environment perpetrated by the connivance of the government and the oil companies. The major catalyst for the Niger Delta literary engagement is the activities of the oil companies on their land and the unjust seizure of



the native land. This has catapulted the region into a grave ecological crisis and has become a sore issue among native communities. Nnimmo Bassey (2013) blames the cause of the crisis and conflicts on the scramble and the grabbing of resources. He says that:

The resource conflicts in Africa have been orchestrated by a history of greed and rapacious consumption. We ask the question: must these conflicts remain intractable? We will connect the drive for mindless extraction to the tightening noose of odious debt repayment and we will demand a fresh look at the accounting books, asking when environmental costs and other externalities are included: who really owes to whom? Isn't Africa the creditor of the world, if we take seriously the North's 'ecological debt' to the South? (2013: ix)

Helon Habila remains one of the important voices to have emerged from the African continent in recent time. Till date, he has published three novels, each of which has garnered (or been shortlisted for) an award: *Waiting for an Angel* (2002) (Winner of the Commonwealth Prize for Best First Novel, Africa Section, 2003); *Measuring Time* (2007) (Winner of Virginia Library Foundation's Fiction, 2008); and *Oil on Water* (2011) (Shortlisted for Orion Environmental Book Award, 2012; Pen/Opera Book Award 2012; Best Novel Commonwealth Writers Prize African Region 2011). Some of his short stories have equally won some awards, including but not limited to 'Love Poems' (Winner of Caine Prize, 2001), and 'The Hotel Malogo' (Winner of the Emily Balch Prize (2008).

Habila, in his writings, has been interrogating myriads of problems plaguing Nigeria, particularly with respect to the issues of bad leadership, corruption, poverty, reckless nature of the military regime, poor infrastructures, and many more. In *Oil on Water* explores the experiences of two journalists, Rufus and Zaq, sent by a white petroleum engineer, James Floode working with one of the oil companies in the Niger Delta region whose British wife, Isabel has been held on ransom by militant-abductors. However, as it later turns out, Isabel's abduction is nothing but a mere event in the context of the larger picture of the war that is ravaging the Niger Delta region. Habila foregrounds the plights and perils of people whose land and water have been left in ruins, culminating in mass deaths, dislocation, sicknesses, avoidable accidents, serious violence and many more. Rufus, the narrator of events in the novel, throws light on the disturbing contamination and degradation of the Niger Delta due to oil spillage and gas flaring. He, in fact, paints a dark picture of a nation trapped in irredeemable ruins caused by the reckless actions of the military, the government officials, and the transnational companies. The novel delineates the grim effects of the reckless actions and inactions of these forces on the environment, the society (man), and other living things.

The pristine state of the physical environment in the Niger Delta celebrates nature and the ecological wisdom in ensuring that the earth is not damaged in any way. The air, for instance,



is presented as having healing powers to cure all manners of diseases. This is evident in the speech of Naaman, the Chief Priest of the shrine at Irikefe village. When Rufus expresses a misgiving regarding Zaq's decision to stay back at the shrine in spite of his failing health, Namaan interjects: "We have a nurse here and she will attend to you (Zaq). But perhaps you won't need her. The air alone will heal you. I have seen it happen" (86). Again, during the conversation that ensues between Rufus and Gloria, Gloria emphasises the healing powers of the uncontaminated sea. In fact, the Irikefe villagers believe so much in the powers of nature that they worship the sun. Rufus' sister, Boma, also finds comforts in nature. Following her ordeals in life and in marriage, she decides to stay with other worshippers at the shrine in Irikefe. Although Rufus, at first, has some reservation, he acknowledges the changes in Boma, which she confirms:

Boma was with the group of women at the hearth...She was laughing as she bustled about...She looked really happy.... She had joined the worshippers, walking with them in a procession every morning and every evening to immerse herself in the sea and sing a hymn to the rising and the setting of the sun...I (Boma)'ve made up my mind to stay...I like it here, I like the people and I can feel myself relaxing in a way I haven't in a long time. My spirit feels settled (172, 223, 226- 227).

The Niger Delta people are fishermen make "their living on the river that poured its water into the sea" (108). Rufus also reminiscences of his childhood: "the sea was just outside our door, constantly bringing surprises, suggesting a certain possibility to our lives. Boma and I used to spend the whole night by the water, catching crabs, armed with sticks and basket...We usually sold our catch to the market women, but sometimes to make more money, we took the ferry to Port Harcourt to sell to the restaurants by the waterfront. That was how we paid our school fees..." (26). Rivers and lands that used to be the sources of sustenance for the local people have now been contaminated beyond measure. The erstwhile sources of livelihood have now become poisonous due to oil spills and toxic waste contamination: "Midriver the water was clear and mobile, but towards the banks it turned brackish and still... a bat flying overhead, a dead fish on the oil-polluted water...We drifted almost aimlessly on the opaque misty water. The water took on various forms... Sometimes, it was a snake, twisting and fast and slippery, poisonous...Their rivers were already polluted and useless for fishing, and the land grew only gas flares and pipelines" (3, 4, 34, 40).

Rufus draws a sharp contrast between the present state of the physical environment of the community and the one known to him in the past, noting how unrewarding the villagers' efforts at seas are as they merely succeed in catching 'a handful of thin wiggling fish'(25). Gloria later



adds her voice, stating that many islands around her used to be a big habitat for bats, but now have a few dozen due to the gas flares that kill them (120). At every direction now, one sees “...dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fish bobbed white-bellied between tree roots... The patch of grass growing by the water was suffocated by a film of oil...” (8-9) The realisation of the extent of the damage caused by the pollution of the environment through the activities of the oil companies, makes the old man that serves as a guide to Rufus and Zaq plead that they should take his son back with them to Port Harcourt as a way of securing his future and not to waste away, joining the militants: “He no get good future here... see, wetin he go do here? Nothing. No fish for river, nothing. I fear say soon him go join the militants, and I no wan that’ (36) Apart from revealing the terrible effects of environmental degradation on the survivals of animals, fishes, birds, grass, rivers and creeks, Habila also delineates some of the dire consequences of these activities on the host communities. For instance, Doctor Dagogo-Mark, in one of his discussions with Rufus, concisely captures the health hazards faced by local people, lamenting how he daily helplessly watches the hapless villagers succumb to different forms of diseases which ultimately result in termination of lives: “I’ve been in these waters five years now and I tell you this place is a dead place...The villagers...got... quenchless flare...then...the livestock began to die and the plants...wither on their stalks...I took samples of the drinking water and in my lab I measured the level of toxins in it... In one year it had grown almost twice the safe level... So... people started dying... More people died... More fell sick, a lot died... Almost overnight I watched the whole village disappear... A man suddenly comes down with a mild headache, becomes feverish... develops rashes... a vital organ shuts down... those whom disease doesn’t kill... violence does...” (142, 144-146). Doctor Dagogo-Mark’s attempts at drawing attention to the pitiful state of the Niger Delta, are ignored by the government which ‘dumped the results’ of his tests in ‘some filing cabinet’ (145).

Nnimmo Bassey (2013) blames the cause of the crisis and conflicts on the scramble for grabbing the resources. He writes:

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Habila's reference to the attitudes of the government and the multinational oil companies is a damning indictment of the type of government the nation is cursed to have. Of course, the government's action could be 'excused' on the ground that the nation depends largely on crude oil, and so, it would be unreasonable to point accusing fingers at the mouths that feed them. But should such stand be maintained when fully aware of the calamitous consequences of the actions of these oil companies on the environment and people, at large? The oil companies instead of shutting down Dr Mark, bribe him with lucrative job offers.

The common people represented by the likes of Boma, also suffer a severe permanent damage. One side of Boma's face is completely damaged due to an oil explosion that ravaged her village making her lose her husband, who is pushed "one to blaspheme, or to rob a bank, or to join the militants" (89). This brings out the stark reality that while some commoners join the militant movements in hope of saving their nation's environment, providing hygienic living environments to their counterparts, but a few join purely out of financial compulsions. Thus, they engage in despicable activities like oil bunkering, pipe-line vandalism and kidnapping, among others. The tragic thing here is that the vibrant youth that should have served as future leaders are drawn to the theatre of war with the government-backed transnational companies leading to their inhuman tortures and eventual extermination in the hands of angry military men who consider them expendable commodities, not worthy to lay claim to their rights as humans. Responding to Rufus' question as to whether or not militants captured by Major and his men will be tried in court, Major asserts: "You journalists, with your fancy ideas about human rights and justice... all nonsense. There are no human rights for people like him (them). You jail them and in a year they'll be out on the streets. The best thing is to line them up and shoot them" (149). Rufus, in fact, notes: "...I saw how much my father had changed. He had turned his back on his religion, and now smoked and drank ogogoro almost nonstop" (65). This fact registers the moral implications of oil activities in the Niger Delta region, indirectly calling on all concerned individuals to swing into action so as to preserve every sense of dignity remaining in man. The displacement of people and the mistrust built in them remain another consequence of oil activities in the Niger Delta nation.

For instance, due to the enticing offers by the oil companies (often assisted by government representatives), many communities sell out their lands to the oil companies, while those who refuse are conspired against and then charged with terrible acts that often result in their deaths-like the case of Chief Malabo. The villagers later bear the brunt of their action as they now daily flee to where they consider a safer zone. While not oblivious of the necessity for the



people to move to a safe environment, particularly as he leads his own town people out of their ancestral land, the reality of their condition makes Chief Ibiram to be pessimistic, his eyes cloudy. Rufus captures Chief Ibiram's mood in this manner: "Gradually the community was drifting towards the big city, and sooner or later it would be swallowed up, its people dispersed, like people getting off a bus and joining the traffic on the city streets" (186). His description of his village is, no doubt, intended to elicit sympathy from the reader: "Once upon a time they lived in paradise... They lacked for nothing, fishing and hunting and farming and watching their children growing up before them, happy. The village was closeknit... (now) the close, unified community was divided... tempted... with a lot of money, more than any of them had ever imagined..." (38-39).

Sokari Ekine and Firoze Manji in their reading of Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* opine that "a great read of Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* reveals that it is impossible to separate the actions of the oil multinationals operating across the Niger Delta from the actions of the Nigerian government. Hence, in exchange for the oil removed from the Niger Delta, the oil companies, with the support of the Nigerian state, have left behind ecological disaster, reducing the whole towns and villages to rubble, causing death by fire and pollution by the guns of the Nigerian Military (27). Before the unparalleled force of globalization history indicates that in the recent past in African communities (like in Niger Delta), "there existed in traditional society a partnership between humans and nature" (Mazrui 29). Thus, "many African societies, despite their complexities and differences, are drawn to an ethics of the earth" within which "certain nonhuman forms, including animals, plants, and so on, are considered viable life forms worthy of respect" (Iheka 2018, 7). From an ecocritical viewpoint, Habila's *Oil on Water* reinforces the depleting condition of Nigerian ecosystem in the midst of post-modern thoughts, thus enforcing the idea that there is a connection between the treatment of the flora and fauna and the treatment of subjugated societies. To suffice, Habila's *Oil on Water* questions human accountability to the ecosystem, environmental awareness, and to the notion of environmental praxis.

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