

Oil Pillage of the Ecosystem: A Study of Helon Habila's *Oil On Water*

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Abstract

The environment of the Niger Delta has greatly been threatened due to the numerous oil explorations by most oil companies operating in the Niger Delta communities. Oil exploration activities have wreaked havoc on the entire ecosystem of the oil-producing communities. Evidential documents and papers that show the environmental pillage and devastation of the Niger Delta, which emanates as a result of oil exploration, have been written by researchers. Many literary scholars have included these gory scenes and horrible situations in their literary works. A lot of other environmental humanists and eco-critics have read these works and have also given eco-critical interpretations of them. This research therefore uses the eco-critical theory to discuss the environmental issues that emanate from the Niger Delta as a result of oil explorations. Using Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* as a primary text, it adopts a qualitative methodology for data collection and analysis. The focus of this research is on the effect of oil on the ecosystem of the Niger Delta. This study reveals that Habila's *Oil on Water* is a reflection of how the landscape, the fauna and flora, and the entire ecosystem of the Niger Delta have been destroyed as a result of oil explorations and spills. This study recommends that the government should try to streamline the functions of the various agencies charged with the responsibilities of implementing environmental laws and that the oil industry should work closely with government agencies, universities, and research centres to combat the menace of oil spill incidents.

Keywords: *Ecosystem, Pillage, Environment, Niger Delta.*

Introduction

The Niger Delta is essentially considered to be situated within the nine coastal regions of the Southern Nigerian States, which comprise all six states from the South-South geographical zone, one state (Ondo) from the South-West geographical zone, and two states (Abia and Imo) from the South-East geographical zone. This area was the British Oil Rivers protectorate from 1855 until 1893. When it was expanded and became the Niger Coast Protectorate. The core Niger Delta later became a part of the Eastern region of Nigeria, which came into being in 1951 (one of the three regions, and later, one of the four regions). The majority of the people were those from the colonial Calabar, Itsekiri, Annang, Ibibio, Oron, Efik, Ijaw, and Ogoni people.

The Niger Delta covers a total area of over 70,000 km² (27,000 sq m) and contributes about 7.5% of Nigeria's land mass. Historically, its geography consists of the

present-day Bayelsa Delta, but in the year 2000, Obasanjo's regime included Abia, Akwa Ibom, Cross Rivers State, Edo, Imo, and Ondo states in the region. It houses about 31 million people from more than forty ethnic groups who speak about 250 different dialects. The Niger Delta consists of mangrove, lowland, rainforest, freshwater, and aquatic ecosystems that are of great benefit to the inhabitants of that region.

According to the Nigerian National Petroleum Commission, oil was first discovered in Nigeria in 1956 at Oloibiri, a small community in Ogbia local government area, Bayelsa, after half a century of exploration. The discovery was made by Shell-BP, at the time the sole concessionaire. Nigeria became an oil producer in 1958 when its first oil field came on stream, producing 51,000 bpd. After independence, exploration rights in onshore and offshore areas adjoining the Niger Delta were extended to other foreign companies. By the late sixties and early seventies, Nigeria had attained a production level of over two million barrels of crude oil per day.

Since then, oil exploration has been ongoing in Nigeria, and a good quantity of it has been drilled. Petroleum production exports pushed agriculture, the traditional mainstay of the economy, to the background, and currently, it accounts for about 90% of the country's gross earnings.

Mohammed Abubakar, the former minister of environment, disclosed that Nigeria recorded 4,919 oil spills between 2015 and March 2021. He disclosed this at a town hall meeting in Abuja, organized by the Ministry of Information and Culture. Also, premium times (2022) note that the National Oil Spill Detection Agency (NOSDRA) data shows that the number of oil spills cost by collation is 308, operational maintenance is 106, sabotage is 3,628 and yet to be determined is 70, giving the total number of oil spills on the environment to 235,206 barrels of oil, which is monstrous to the environment.

However, the spill volume may likely be inaccurate since companies may underestimate the real quantity, but these spills are vast and have a huge effect on all that lives in the ecosystem of the Niger Delta, and this has contributed to ecocide in the region. The destruction of mangroves affects not only plants and animals but also humans, who may benefit little or nothing from the petroleum exploration. Oil spills have also destroyed water bodies and the habitats of aquatic organisms. It endangers fish hatcheries and contaminates valuable fish. It exposes the people who live in such areas to health hazards and robs them of clean water, clean food, and their occupation, which is predominantly fishing and farming.

This study is therefore important as it examines the environmental pillage, degradation, despoliation, and exploitation of the ecosystem of the Niger Delta as a result of the oil exploration of the zone by multinational companies. It also analyzes how the concerns of environmentalists have found expression through fictional texts such as Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. The rationale for this is predicated on the premise that literature, being the people's voice, is a representation of our sociocultural milieu and environmentalists' reservations. It is gratifying to note that what started out as a nagging disquiet has developed into an evolving debate as environmental degradation and its consequent threat to humanity is now a major subject of discourse by literary scholars.

Review of Related Literature

The literature of any society usually engages the prevailing social, political, or economic realities—what scholars have described as the 'social commitment function.' Oil exploration has led to oil spills in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, and this has resulted in pollution of the environment and the ecosystem at large. The pollution of the environment has caused many scholars and writers to churn out a harvest of literary works as a reaction

against the injustice done to nature. Green politics have taken center stage at international conferences and debates as a result of growing awareness of environmental degradation. These issues include global warming, the dangers of acid rain, several fires in the Niger Delta region, as well as oil spills and gas flare-ups in some regions of Africa. Onyechigoziri and Wosu, in their paper entitled "Human-Nature Interactions in the New Normal World: A Study of Selected Pandemic Poems," avers:

Anthropogenic activities, especially industrialization, increase in the number of factories, indiscriminate mining activities, oil exploration, and technological advancement have accentuated the abuse and corruption of non-human forms, depleted the ozone layer, and forced other life forms into extinction. Green campaigns have flooded the main stream in literature to draw attention to the negligence and lack of respect for the environment and the attendant environmental issues. Such activities that destabilize the environment have featured conspicuously in global literature in the last three decades. (Onyechigoziri and Wosu 3)

According to Esamagu Ochuko "in recent times, there has been a surge of African writings chiefly committed to preserving the earth, originating most especially from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria." (Esamagu 243) Even though there have been attempts to depict the exploitation of nature in African literary works, injustice and environmental crises continue to be important problems that call for additional research into how they are shown and explored in modern African literature.

Heba-t-Allah Badr Abd El-Wahab investigated the environmental injustice in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. According to her, Habila's *Oil on Water* is:

Ecocritical exploration of the intersection between the neocolonial manipulation of the Niger-Delta region in Nigeria and its environmental devastation... Habila skillfully delineates the struggle of the Nigerian people against these injustices and their modes of resistance to neocolonial control and manipulation of the natural resources of the area. (Heba-t-Allah 69)

Without doubt, untold hardships have indeed befallen Nigeria's physical environment as a result of wanton resource extraction from nature and oil pollution, particularly in coastal regions, pipeline routes, road networks, swamps, and mangrove farmlands, among other places. In the words of Adeyanju, "the creeks and coastal areas are noted for oil pollution hazards resulting from exploration and transportation, and fresh water areas are polluted through waste disposal generated from oil and industrial effluent (sic)." (Adeyanju 217)

Commenting on the negative effect of oil exploration on the environment, one could sadly say that the Niger Delta's oil-producing regions are also most severely affected by gas flaring, with myriad detrimental impacts on agriculture, food security, public health, and basic human rights. As Aghalino opines:

There are three main effects of oil exploration on the communities that produce oil and minerals: first, it causes environmental pollution; second, it destroys the ecosystem and the people's ways of life; and third, it makes the communities that produce oil even poorer (cited in Dawodu, 3).

Ray Ekpualigns with Aghalino in his assertion that:

The story of the Niger Delta people is the story of a paradox, grinding poverty in the midst of vulgar opulence. It is the case of a man who lives in the bank of a river and washes his hands with spittle: It is the case of people who live on the farm and die of hunger (Aghalino 10)

Ekpu compares the average residents of the Niger Delta region to a man who lives by a river, meaning that despite the region providing the majority of the nation's wealth, it is unable to boast of even a single borehole or well from which its citizens can obtain clean drinking water. The negative impact of the oil boom, which has metamorphosed into doom, on the area is discussed in the study.

The wanton destruction of the region by the activities of the multinationals and the corrupt nature of the government have resulted in the emergence of militants who oppose the destruction of their environment. Sule Emmanuel Egya, in his description of this opposition, avers that this militant opposition to the continual annihilation of the environment and its inhabitants is "a form of militancy that is provoked by a tripartite system of ruination, namely the multinational oil corporations, the federal soldiers, and the local militias, who call themselves the militants." (Egya 94)

This paper is therefore predicated on the human actions that have led to a climatic and environmental disaster in the Niger Delta region, including oil spillage, gas flaring, sewage, oil theft, and war. Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, which demonstrates the effects of these human activities on the ecology, the biosphere, and the terrain in the Niger Delta Region, increases awareness of these effects.

Theoretical Frame Work

This study conceptualizes its idea in terms of the theory of ecocriticism. It was first originated by Joseph Meeker as an idea called "literary ecology", in his *comedy of survival: studies in literary ecology* in 1972. The term "ecocriticism" was coined in 1978 by William Ruckert in his *essay Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. Ecocriticism is a theory that analyzes the works of authors, researchers, and poets in the context of nature and environmental issues.

Glotfelty Cherlyu's working definition in *The Ecocriticism Reader* is of the view that "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xxviii), and one of the implicit goals of the approach is to recoup professional dignity for what he calls the "undervalued genre of nature writing" (Glotfelty Cherlyu and Fromm Harold xxxi).

Ecocriticism is a very broad approach that is known by a number of other designations. It is in this regard that Zapf Hermann observes that even though, at the beginning, it "met with considerable resistance from academia," ecocriticism "has an increasing recognition as an important new field of research and teaching that opens up a broad spectrum of new perspectives and that can help to reaffirm the relevance and responsibility of the humanities and of literary studies" (Zapf 136).

Although ecocriticism embodies some issues, which include the different terminologies used to refer to it, its broad approach, its evolution and waves, and propositions that have either been added or removed from it by scholars, it still maintains the ability to respond to and adapt to contemporary concerns while remaining open to new contributions.

Since ecocriticism primarily deals with the study of literature and ecology, which often involves scholars analyzing texts or literary works that pose environmental concerns, it is deemed suitable to adopt it as a theory for this research work.

Oil in the Abandoned Villages in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

Oil in the novel is practically everywhere. It shows the connection between the Niger Delta oil communities. The novel states clearly that some villagers have been forced by oil-related

issues to flee the villages. It exposes the dangers that are faced by the people who live in the Niger Delta oil-producing communities.

Habila's *Oil on Water* reveals the state of the Niger Delta. It follows two journalists, the ambitious young Rufus, who happens to be the narrator of the story, and the aging, experienced, sick yet inquisitive Zaq, who is out on the Rivers of the Niger Delta in search of the British kidnapped wife of one of the oil workers in Port Harcourt.

However, in the course of finding the kidnapped woman, they came into contact with some more traumatizing and dangerous situations. The first horrific thing that they discover is an abandoned village in which the villagers were forced to flee because of fights, which resulted from the presence of oil in the community.

Rufus describes the village as if a deadly epidemic had swept through it. There is an abandoned oil drilling paraphernalia stream around a concrete platform that dominates the village center like some sacrificial altar. An inspection of the abandoned houses by the journalists reveals dead and decomposing animals. This probably would have happened because the air is polluted by oil-related materials, thereby resulting in the animals inhaling contaminated air, which led to their deaths.

The narrator describes the next villages as replicas of the former. It has, The same empty squat dwellings, the same ripe and flagent stench, the barrenness, the oil slick and the same indefinable sadness in the air, as if a community of ghosts were suspended above the punctured zinc, roofs, unwilling to depart, yet powerless to return (Habila 8).

The quotation above shows the sad situation of the Niger Delta communities, the gory pictorial description, the barrenness of a once fertile land, and the dashed hope of the villagers who have probably been forced by these circumstances to flee the village.

Rufus, who is perhaps thirsty or putting on the inquisitive nature of journalism, bends over to have a drink, but to his uttermost shock, he is forced to reel away due to the stench that veered out of the well. He describes it as the smell of something organic, perhaps that of a decomposing human, mixed with an unmistakable smell of oil.

As they move from the village towards the river, he also observes that “the patch of grass growing by the water is suffocated by a film of oil, each blade covered with blotches like the liver spots of a smoker's hands” (Habila 89).

This statement shows that oil is virtually everywhere in that village. Not only is it visible everywhere, but by comparing the stain of oil on the blade of grass to a liver spot on a smoker's hands, Habila shows or draws the comparison of how destructive oil is to the ecosystem of the Niger Delta, just as smoking is to a smoker.

Rufus, when trying to spark a conversation with the boy and the girl whose name is Ali, recalls his childhood memories of how he usually catches crabs with his sister. In response, the boy and girl replied that there are no more crabs in the water; they also added that the water is not good. This shows that the dangers of oil on the ecosystem of the Niger Delta are known to everyone, even children.

Habila carefully draws out these children's characters with full awareness of what has become of their environment—their water. Rufus then falls into a nostalgic moment and recalls,

I wanted to tell them about my childhood in the village not too far away from here. I realized how very much like theirs my childhood must have been, but the sea was just outside out door, constantly bringing surprises, suggesting a certain possibility of our lives. Boma and I used to spend the whole night by the water, catching crabs 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 water fronts. That was how we paid our school fees

when our father lost his job (Habla 26).

Rufus nostalgic recollection simply shows how Habla constructs the benefits of unpolluted nature to man; it brings joy to man. Also, wandering in nature was thrilling. It serves as a source of support that enables man to achieve his goals. Rufus and Boma, for example, were able to sustain their lives and pay their school fees without the help of their father. Thus, with a serene nature, man can sustain independence, and man can also return to nature for financial assistance if his other means of finances get thwarted, just as in the case of Rufus and his family:

... others carried the days catch in plastic buckets and wicker baskets, and from what I could see, it wasn't bountiful. The boy and the girls took from one boat a basket with a handful of them wiggling fish at the bottom (Habla 28).

In this statement, Rufus draws a comparison of the catch that occurred in the present with that of the past, when he was a boy. He describes the fish as a handful of these waggling fish. In his comparison, he asserts that the catch was not bountiful and could not be compared to that of the past, when he was a boy. The reason for this is not far-fetched. It is simply because, as of the time he was a boy, nature was still nature—unpolluted, virgin, and venerated—unlike the present, where nature has been toiled with, desecrated, and polluted with oil. This has in turn dashed the source of livelihood.

Gloria, while conversing with Rufus, reveals that "these islands used to be a big habitat for bats, but now only a few dozen remain here (Habla 120).

When Rufus questions the reason behind the disappearance of bats, Gloria goes further to reveal that gas flares kill not only the bats but other flying creatures as well. This draws back to page 89 assumptions that were earlier coined out of these pages; it concurs with the earlier assumption, hence making it a fact. In relating it to the real world of the Niger Delta, it represents the fauna that has been destroyed, and some endemic species of organisms are almost extinct in the Niger Delta Ecosystem as a result of gas flares and oil spillage.

Two years after their plea, oil was discovered in the village. The villagers feasted for weeks. They got their oranges planted firmly over the water at the edge of the village. It gave them light both night and day, so the villagers had no further need for lamps. They developed around the fire: village meetings, a night market, and even church evening services. They nicknamed it Fire of the Pentecost.

Habila also illustrates the vulnerability of the villagers. Although their ignorance, quests for wealth, deceptive promises, and more of a force from the military and government led them into this plight, they cannot opt out. They just stay there and wither in their own land.

The doctor writes to the government with the belief that since it controls and makes decisions, it would help matters, but instead, it turns deaf ears to the reports. The reason is probably because a large percentage of its income is from this oil, which has become more of a curse than a blessing to those who live in oil-producing communities.

The hope of the people that oil would bring education, development, and wealth is dashed. Oil eventually takes away their previous means of livelihood, shatters the future of the youth, and destroys their means of survival. In the end, it leaves the people in a poorer and more pessimistic state. This is evident in the book when the old man begs Zaq and Rufus to take his son Michael with him. "Yes, he no longer gets a good future here", When the journalists disagree, he adds, "But see, what is he going to do here? Nothing. No fish for the river, nothing. I fear saying soon he will go join militants, and I do not want that" (Habla 36).

Here, the researcher sees a snatched source of livelihood that was previously achieved by an uncontaminated nature (water and farmlands), a jeopardized future, and a state of hopelessness. When Zaq and Rufus seem to disagree with the idea of taking Michael to Port Harcourt, disappointment sets in the man's face. Michael begins to cry. In an attempt to make him feel okay, the journalist assures him that Michael will be taken to Port Harcourt. Michael feels excited by the promise and runs to hug Zaq, who pushes him away.

The old man persuading Zaq and Rufus to migrate Rufus to the city also shows that oil production in Nigeria also serves as a negative factor for urbanization (Feldner Hand 524), having a huge effect on its landscape.

Oil on Water and its Effects on Man

Helon repeatedly states the co-relationship between man and his physical environment. This is continuously made known by describing the status of water and how it has greatly affected man. It has been observed first that the status of water that has been described by Rufus is that of poisoned and polluted water, which destroys the water body and kills aquatic bodies. This, in turn, becomes a great loss to man, who previously benefited from the precious state of water before the oil pollution.

The second way of its effect is the direct dangers it passes to man. Helon uses Zaq as a point of contact to refer to other people who have been sick as a result of the contaminated water of the Niger Delta. Zaq could represent the entire people who have encountered this plight and those who have died as a result of it.

This particular effect occurs either from direct contact with the water or the effect of it has no remedy. The water becomes so toxic since it combines both its toxicity from oil and that of the toxic bugs that the polluted water now breeds. The very end of it is the danger it passes to men who come into contact with it:

Your friend, I'm sorry is dying... what exactly is wrong with him doctor? It's a hemophilic fever, very dangerous. It kills quickly if not treated immediately. Is that what he has? No, it's a similar strain, quite new, still nameless... you mean he won't live?... somewhere in these god-forsaken waters, that's where he must have picked it up (Habila 141-142).

From the conversation above, which is between the doctor and Rufus, the sickness that Zaq has contracted from the water is nameless, and the end product of it is death. This can be related to the situations of those who live in the Niger Delta oil communities; their life span is cut short by nameless disease that surrounds the region as a result of oil toxicities issues.

In addition, the doctor says that a man, despite having what serves as a good source of wealth for the nation, barely has access to good health services that can at least help diagnose the exact disease they have contracted from the polluted water. "A man suddenly comes down with a mild headache, becomes feverish, then develops rashes, and suddenly a vital organ shuts down" (Habila 146). This can be related to Egya Sule's observation that "afflictions to the environment translate as damage and injury to the humans inhabiting the environment" (Egya 101)

Conclusion

That literature mirrors society is a fact that is greatly accepted by a vast number of people. Indeed, literature reflects society—the good, the bad, and the ugly. It serves as a corrective agent that films societal happenings and plays them back to society, making it realize its mistakes and, hence, make amends. This fact is not far-fetched, as it has been

buttressed in Habila's *oil on water*, which in this case mirrors the Niger Delta. Habila presents real-life happenings in his fiction. It shows how oil has destroyed virtually the entire ecosystem of the Niger Delta while the government does little or nothing to salvage the situation. Habila presents Dr. Dogo as a symbol of all those who have stretched beyond measures to get the government's attention to abate the situation of oil destruction. These people in real life may not be doctors by profession; they may include indigenous people, scholars, environmentalists, humanists, eco critics, etc. who have tried their best to get the government to work but only end up getting little or no attention. The overall effects of oil spills on the ecosystem of the Niger Delta are tremendous. Oil interferes with the functioning of various organ systems in plants and animals. It creates environmental conditions unfavorable to life; for example, oil on a water surface forms a layer that prevents oxygen penetration into water bodies, which ends up in the starvation of oxygen in some aquatic bodies. The toxic components of crude oil cause mortality in plants and animals. The gas flaring associated with oil production, as portrayed in Habila's *oil on water*, is very harsh to the ecosystem of the Niger Delta.

The harmful effects of oil exploration on the ecosystem are numerous. The Niger Delta Mangrove Forest, which is the third-longest in the world, the Mangrove Forest, which provides medicines, wood for fuel, and shelter for the local people, the water bodies that house fish, and a vast number of aquatic bodies have all been threatened. Finally, the commitment to preserve the ecosystem of the Niger Delta is the responsibility of all Nigerians. Writers are therefore encouraged to embrace the modern trend of utilizing writing to contribute to environmental conversation, regardless of their ideological stance.

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