

Delta Life in Terror: Unraveling the Curse of Oil Extraction, Eco-fragility and Human Suffering in Habila's *Oil on Water*

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Abstract

*In today's world, both human survival and the ecosystem have been greatly suffering due to unlawful human activities. It's truly heartbreaking to witness the impact on our planet and communities. The growing ecological awareness and heightened sense of urgency in recent years have prompted writers worldwide to reflect on this issue. This paper attempts a close reading of Habila's *Oil on Water* to examine the devastating consequences of oil extraction on the environment and landscape in the Niger Delta, as portrayed in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, which is damaging the lives of indigenous people living there. The environmental crisis has sparked a conflict as inhabitants strive to protect their environment from government and multinational oil corporations. This study undertakes an extensive textual analysis to meticulously examine eco-fragility caused by oil spills, including gas flaring, threats to aquatic life, lethal diseases, deforestations and other catastrophic impacts. Water has been severely polluted by oil, rendering it unusable and posing a detrimental threat to inhabitant's lives. It further aims to explore how environmental deterioration led to socio-cultural disintegration exposing the corrupt intrigue of Nigerian Government. The novel follows a gripping narrative in search for a kidnapped British Woman, revealing the destructive exploitations of colonialism as well as the darker truths of journalism practices in Niger Delta. Ultimately, this study aims to encourage sustainable practices and mitigation to the devastating consequences of anthropogenic actions that jeopardize human well-being and ravage the environment.*

Keywords: Niger Delta, Oil Extraction, Nigerian Government, neocolonialism, militancy

Introduction: The novel *Oil on Water* generally explores the consequences of neocolonialism of Nigeria, where foreign investors and multinational companies established a large-scale industrial operation to exploit oil resources, resulting in degradation of the Niger Delta's ecosystem and the displacement of indigenous communities. The Nigerian government's partnership with multinational companies to exploit the crude oil reserves in delta region has threatened the environment and accelerated human suffering. The unchecked manufacture of petroleum products has ruined the ecosystem, threatening the balance of the biotic community, where the government has chosen to turn a blind eye. This reckless pursuit of money laundering has resulted in the death of many human and non-human

species, jeopardizing the very survival human existence. The novel tells us about a metaphorical journey of Rufus and Zaq, two journalists who are on their voyage to get a story to publish on their newspaper about the British woman who is being kidnapped by the militants for ransom. Due to oil spillage and its consequences which ravaged both the land and the water of the delta region which gave rise to poverty, illness, unemployment. In such moment of crises, oil extraction in the delta region brings about war between federal government and militants who seek to protect their natural habitat. Militants have taken to kidnapping expatriate and their families, seeking substantial ransom demands in exchange for their release. This context resonates Fanon's notion on colonialism where violence is employed by the colonized against the oppressors to sustain them. According to Fanon, the native is compelled to use violence as a means of self-defense and protection in the face of colonial oppression (qtd. In Victor and Ogunpitan 52). In the novel one of the prominent characters, Zaq, refers to these militants as "Gangsters or Freedom Fighters?" (Habila 28). The militants after kidnapping made it public and allow some reporters in a secret island to negotiate ransom and when their demands were met, the militants released the hostage unharmed. While visiting each island in search of the militants and the British woman, Rufus and Zaq were shocked to see oil rigs and pipelines still intact. They were confused as to why these had not been destroyed yet. They assumed it might mean that either oil companies or the soldiers had paid the militants not to do so: "Or perhaps the oil companies pay the soldiers to keep the militants away" (35). The study through an exploration of the textual analysis seeks to highlight the interconnected issues of environmental degradation and imperiled lives due to oil exploration in Niger Delta as discussed in Habila's *Oil on Water*. Although oil is a crucial resource on Earth, and many of us are unaware of its significance, leading to illegal oil extraction and oil spillage, which are gradually devastating our planet. The contemporary literature takes a challenge to demonstrate current environmental and cultural crises some of which are directly or non-directly related to postcolonial or neocolonial discourse, which comes under the heading of Environmental Humanities or Ecocriticism. Similarly, literature that explores the ramifications of oil business on society, environment and people's lives, can be classified under the category of Petro-fiction. The concept is propagated by Amitav Ghosh, which "denotes the interplay between oil and literature, not only in terms of content but also in terms of the economic, social, and cultural systems to which this interaction refers" (Fiorini 4). LeMenager argues that our current era should be called "petro-modernity" since our modern lifestyle relies heavily on affordable energy systems fueled by petroleum. However, the extraction of petroleum comes at a steep cost, jeopardizing the lives of local communities and devastating the environment. Habila's *Oil on Water*, presents a stark reality, where rampant oil spillage and gas flares have led to devastating consequences: loss of life, environmental degradation, and water pollution, ultimately rendering oil a 'curse' to the natives' lives.

A Brief History of Oil Ramifications and Sabotage in Delta Land

The oil discovery in the Niger Delta has been a curse rather than a blessing for the local population. According to Huggan and Tiffin, oil exploration in Niger Delta has made it, "One of the most ecologically endangered regions in the world" (qtd.in Fiorini 23). Since British Shell's unsuccessful oil expeditions began, the Niger Delta has been suffering. Even after gaining independence in 1960, from British rule, they have made a significant presence in the country's oil industry and soon Nigeria started experiencing the negative impacts of neocolonialism, where the exploitation and oppression continued even after formal colonial rule ended. Nigerian government granted to continue extraction to multinational oil companies, which led to air and water pollution, environmental degradation and social unrest.

Despite knowing the hazardous effects of gas flaring, oil companies continued this activity, ignoring the government's deadline to end it by 2020 (Fiorini 26). Meanwhile, oil spills have ravaged the environment, destroying vegetation, contaminating soil and water and killing aquatic life. This has severely impacted local business, as majority of Nigerian life is based on fishing and agriculture, leading to poverty and incurable diseases. This poor condition ignited frustrated in them and gave rise to militancy, where angry local youth create violence, claiming their share of oil revenues to government (Fiorini 27). Militants started kidnapping the families of expatriates and collecting ransom, as they thought they belonged to this delta region and the oil money only belonged to them. Such kidnapping incident of a British Woman Isabel Floode, revolves around the entire novel *Oil on Water*, where the readers witness the terror of delta life.

One of the greatest examples of militancy resistance could be seen in the movement called MOSOP. Their leader was an author, activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, who fought the minor Ogoni people against oil companies and government and whose fight, according to Huggan and Tiffin, became emblematic of both local and global struggles against the depredation of international capitalism and the right to clean earth (qt.in Fiorini 27).

'Resource-Curse'

The resource curse phenomenon suggests that countries rich in non-renewable natural resources often struggle with stagnant economic growth and slower development, plagued by numerous challenges. These issues are often found in countries of the Global South, which are frequently exploited by Global North, perpetuating a cycle of poverty, violence and underdevelopment. Countries with abundant mineral wealth are often exploited by powerful nations that offer money to them, gradually leading to a situation where resource-rich nations deplete their non-renewable resources. As a result, the countries of the Global South, are most likely to suffer from poverty, pollution, displacement and lack of opportunities. Rob Nixon argues that simply having an abundance of natural resources does not guarantee a country's prosperity. Effective leadership is also crucial, he must possess the ability to control power and make strategic decisions to avoid the pitfalls of the resource curse:

That said, the resource curse, when invoked as a free-floating cultural explanation bereft of history, can mislead. Australia and Canada are resource-rich but not resource cursed. Is that merely because they are stable, long-established electoral democracies that have avoided the extreme concentrations of power that have blighted monoeconomies like Nigeria, Libya, and Angola? The historical answer is more complicated than that. (Nixon 70)

He further talks about how the huge amount of country's wealth is being siphoned off into offshore, rather being invested in social programs or infrastructure of the resource-rich country. Rulers prioritize on their personal gain, indulging in luxuries, rather than developing their country:

in such societies, a highly concentrated revenue stream is readily diverted away from social and infrastructural investment and into offshore bank accounts. The ties between rulers and ruled are typically weak: the despots or oligarchs prefer to depend—for their private wealth, consumer sprees, extravagant military spending, and power displays—on controlling the central resource than on strengthening civic expectations by introducing taxes, elections, and a diversified (and therefore less controllable) economy. (Nixon 70)

Even after gaining independence, newly independent countries were not allowed to fully control their own resources. European and American nations declared resources were not

owned by nations but by belonged to all humanity and old colonial treatise were upheld which allowed for resource transfer, maintain western control (Nixon 71).

Helon Habila's novel highlights the devastating consequences of the resource curse in the oil-rich Niger Delta region. By depicting the desertification of the land and the immense suffering of the people, Habila sheds light on the tragic irony of a region blessed with abundant natural resources yet plagued by poverty, environmental degradation, and social injustice.

manipulate these native people with empty promises to buy the land from them, claiming they would send their children to Europe and America to become engineers "Some of the neighbors were bragging that the oil companies had offered to send their kids to Europe and America to become engineers, so that one day they could return and work as oil executives in Port Harcourt" (38). However, the native people saw through these deceitful tactics and remained adamant, refusing to surrender their land despite the persistent temptation as they considered themselves as the custodian of the land where they lived there all lives. They witnessed the devastating consequences that befell neighboring villages, which had succumbed to selling their lands to oil companies. The native people testified how the land and water had been irreparably ravaged, and they were firm not to suffer the same fate, "And just look at the other villages that had taken the oil money: already the cars had broken down, and the cheap television and DVD players were all gone, and where was the rest of the money.... Their rivers were already polluted and useless for fishing, and the land grew only gas flares and pipelines (39). But all hope was lost when chief Malabo was arrested soon with false charges of supporting militants and kidnapping expatriates. Soon after, Chief Malabo was secretly killed in the dead of night, and the village was captured, forcing the dwellers to move. "The rigs went up, and the gas flares, and the workers came and set up camp in our midst, we saw our village change, right before our eyes..... We didn't take their money. The money would be our curse on them, for taking our land, and for killing our chief" (40). The displacement of native people has led to a sense of hopelessness, as poverty has ravaged the land, leaving it barren and lack of opportunities. Tamuno, the old man and the guide of Rufus and Zaq, requested them to take his son to Port Harcourt where he can find a job. Tamuno sees no future for his son Michael, and instead fears that due to lack of money, Michael might join the militants someday. The supposed blessing of crude oil in the Niger delta region has turned into a curse, perpetually terrorizing the lives of its inhabitants, "Though the area had huge oil revenues, it does not benefit the locals who live in poverty and lack the basic necessities of life like water, health, security, education and good transport network" (Abianji-Menang 9).

As the story unfolds, it reveals human sufferings, violence and environmental degradation, while also shedding light on the aspects of journalism in the Niger Delta and exposing the dark and pathetic truths of behind it. The entire narrative is presented from the perspectives of Rufus and Zaq, two journalists on a quest to find the professor and the British woman. They visit different islands and eventually got caught by federal soldiers. There, they witnessed the horrifying images of oil extraction, pollution, violence, and ecological fragility- they saw it all. Rufus, reminiscing about his past before becoming a journalist, reveals the destitution of the native people's lives. We witness after oil companies took charge of the islands and villages, how life in delta became unpredictable. Lack of opportunities, made people work for oil companies: "They all worked for the ABZ oil company, and now the town once awash in oil money, watches in astonishment as the streets daily fill up with fleeting families, some returning to their hometowns and villages, some going on to Port Harcourt in the hope of

picking up something in the big city” (Habla 61). After returning from Port Harcourt where he completed his course on photography, Rufus witnessed how his village was devastated by petroleum pollution and poverty. He could smell petrol everywhere. Later on, he learned that the only means of livelihood still thriving in his village was the buying and selling petroleum. They bribed the police to protect themselves, but it was clear they would eventually get caught and business would be taken over. Therefore, his father urged Rufus to find a job; otherwise, survival would be difficult: “I don’t want you to be here when that happens. And when you do, don’t forget us. Don’t forget your mother, and specially your sister” (Habla 64). The Niger Delta region is further plagued by rampant sabotage and oil siphoning, which not only exacerbate environmental degradation but also perpetuate a cycle of destruction and devastation (Abianji-Menang 10). Even after becoming a journalist his sorrow didn’t end there. During his quest through river when he was trapped by soldiers, he witnessed another side of cruelty, where soldiers were waging war against militants and torturing ordinary people suspecting as militants both physically and mentally. Rufus was stunned to see that the island lacked even the most basic necessities for survival: “Far away in the swamps we could hear the bullfrogs bellowing, we could see the glow of gas flares like distant malfunctioning stars. Though it was humid and airless, our blankets were pulled to our necks- they were our protection from the mosquitoes” (Habla 60). Oil drilling and gas flares made the land uninhabitable. The air was heavy to breathe, the contaminated water carried incurable diseases, and the infertile soil hindered vegetation; “Now it was deserted: the people with their chickens and goats and pots and pans, must have escaped rippleless down the river in their dugout canoes after the first shot was fired.... The smell of burning hung in the air. In the centre of a compound a hut had been hit square on its conical roof, causing the thatch to cave in, and now the grass and the rafters all lay in a big pile of ash in the middle of the hut” (70).

Toxic Environment, Toxic Bodies

The emission of hazardous pollutants into the air and water has devastating consequences for human health, causing a surge in respiratory and waterborne illnesses among people living in the affected regions. After several days of sickness, Dr. Dagogo-Mark informed Rufus that his friend Zaq was dying due to dengue fever and liver damage: “it’s a haemorrhagic fever, very dangerous. It kills very quickly if not treated immediately” (89). The doctor suggested him to take Zaq to hospital, as after five years of living here, he has witnessed the deadly nature of the water-related diseases; “I’m going to write a book on that someday. I’ve been in these waters five years now and I tell you this place is a dead place, a place for dying” (90). The doctor goes on reminiscing his early days when oil was discovered in the water. Initially, the villagers allowed the gas flares which ‘illuminated’ everything, being oblivious to the catastrophic consequences that would soon unfold, “A night market developed around that glow, and every evening women brought their wares. Some came from the neighboring villages, they bought and sold, they set up portable iron hearths and fried akara and fish which they sold to happy children under that fire..... They’d dance, their faces raised up to that undying glow, singing their thanks and joy, their voices carrying for miles over the water” (92). However, as the days passed, the doctor was alarmed to see livestock perish and plants wither away. He conducted tests and was shocked to discover toxic levels of contaminations in drinking water, “I took the samples of the drinking water and in my lab, I measured the level of toxins in it: it was rising, steadily (92). Despite sending his reports to the government, he received only appreciation but no concrete action was taken. Consequently, people began to succumb to illness, resulting in numerous deaths on the island, which the doctor had the misfortune of witnessing: “A man suddenly comes down with a

mild headache, becomes feverish, then develops rashes, and suddenly a vital organ shuts down. And those whom the disease doesn't kill, the violence does" (93). The doctor also sheds light on the dire economic circumstances of the native, poverty has become so entrenched in their livers that diseases is merely another hardship to endure, no longer a source of fear and worry: "But I soon discovered that the village's chief discontent was not over their health; they were a remarkably healthy people, actually. One day an elder looked me in the face and said, I am not ill. I am just poor. Can you give me medicine for that?" (91). Habila exposes the tyrannical and corrupt nature of the Nigerian government, revealing how, despite receiving large revenues from natural resources, they have chosen to sustain poverty.

Militancy: Stories of Human Suffering

Habila portrays militancy as a form of resistance against federal government and war for the protection of environment, land and water. The oil companies paid both soldiers and militants to set war against each other, while they unleash violence on the environment, releasing toxins that ultimately lead to the devastation of human and animal lives, causing irreplaceable harm and loss (Egya 103). Polluted environment, lack of opportunities, poverty, and impoverishment have contributed to the rise of militancy in the region (Alharbi 23). However, the torture inflicted by the major on the militants or in the gunmen in the novel stirs people deeply: "The Doctor shifted on his foot and I heard his sharp intake of breath as the Major raised the can and started to pour the water on the head of the man on the outer right. Then the unmistakable acrid smell reached me" (54). The major drenched them in petrol, which made the air heavy and filled with pungent odor, "Already I felt sick and dizzy from the fumes" (55). Even though they were innocent the old man and his son were still subjected to torture. When, Rufus insisted on freeing them from the torture, the major responded: "Insist? Did you say insist? Do you know what's going on out there? There's a war going on! People are being shot. In Port Harcourt oil companies are being bombed, police stations are being overrun, the world oil price is shooting through the roof. You insist! I can shoot you right now and throw you into the swamp and that's it. Now, get out" (59). These brutalities shook Rufus to his core. As a journalist, he meticulously documented every detail, intending to write about it later. The sleepless and restless nights of Rufus and Zaq led them to reflect on the harsh realities of human relationships and exposed them to the grim realities of their profession, where they had witnessed loved ones being killed or snatched away, never to be united. Their only role was to witness and reflect, with no power to act (60). Major asking Rufus about how they ended up on the island despite knowing the life-threatening risks, Rufus explained that he and Zaq had been assigned to interview the British Woman and found themselves stranded on the treacherous island of Irikefe. This response highlights Rufus' unshakable dedication to his profession, even in the face of danger: "I told him almost everything, but I did not tell him about Boma, and how I found her waiting for me that day when I returned to Port Harcourt" (99).

The doctor shares the story of the professor, whom Rufus and Zaq are searching for as he has captivated the British Woman, revealing how he transformed an oil company employee to a militant. Previously, he worked in the oil industry, but witnessing the environmental devastation drove him to militancy. The major also discloses the dark truths about militancy, stating that these deserted villages were once populated, now abandoned due to fear of militants. According to him, militants are "rebels, terrorists, kidnappers" (96). The person who is known to be as 'Professor', is actually Ani Wilson, a school dropout, who killed the leader of the kidnapping gang (who used to be known as professor as well) which he joined later and seized both the power and the title of "Professor". In the Major's words, these

militants should not have any human rights and, “The best thing is to line them up and shoot them” (97). The militants seek to end the environmental degradation caused by oil company’s ruthless activities, but their violent methods bring a new wave of terror to the region. Thus, the novel *Oil on Water*, reveals that the human sufferings caused by the pollution and deterioration of the ecosystems are actually ultimately driven by human greed (Alharbi 9).

Egya argues that in the novel both the environment and human beings are victims of violence and he categorizes the violence in two different forms- Physical violence, which we witness through the torture enacted by the soldiers and the government forces. The other one is non-physical, which Rob Nixon calls- “Slow violence”, that can have a more lasting and profound impact than physical violence. The impact is even more devastating for the communities (Egya 101).

Irikefe Island: A Journey to Uncover the Buried Truth

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from Solomon’s desire for revenge against his former girlfriend, Koko, who had cheated on him and become pregnant with James Floode’s child. The kidnapping was a fabricated scheme of Solomon and his friends aimed at extracting ransom from James, despite Isabel’s disapproval and reluctance to be part of it. However, the kidnapping plan took unexpected turn when the professor, after gunning down Solomon’s friends, with his cunning tactics seized control and took both Isabel and Solomon captive, “Believe me, you are more likely to get hurt in the hands of these idiots than with us. We will get in touch with your family and everything will be settled in few days” (204). The kidnapping story spread like wildfire with media channels dedicating extensive coverage to the story. The professor decided to transported these two to Irikefe islands and raised the ransom to ten million dollars to James Floode, as; “the money wasn’t even coming out of his pocket: the oil company always pays the ransom” (200). However, on their way to Irikefe, the professor’s group was ambushed by the soldiers, resulting in fierce and chaotic battle but the professor managed to slip away and escape, while Isabel and Solomon found themselves trapped in the camps of the soldiers. However, one night, these two made a perilous break from the camp, risking their lives to escape and ultimately achieving their goal, “We rowed for many hours till we got to a village, and luck was on our side. They were good people. They listened to our story, and they helped us” (206).

In Nature’s Care: Finding Hope and Healing:

We are near at the end of this kidnapping journey. Tragedy struck as Zaq Succumbed to his illness, and Solomon met a fatal end at the hands of the professor while attempting to escape. The professor released Rufus to visit James Floode to negotiate the ransom otherwise his wife will be killed. Ironically, despite his trail of violence and bloodsheds claim to be an environmental activist, wherein he plans to burn an oil depot soon. He also claims, “We are not the barbarians the government propagandists say we are. We are for the people. Everything we do is for the people, what will we gain if we terrorize them?” (209). The professor is going to set up a war soon as “the soldiers forcing us to escalate violence every day” (210).

As time passes, amidst the devastation and chaos, a glimmer of hope emerges. Despite the destruction of nature and the violence, people begin to rebuild and restore harmony with the natural world. People worshipping the nature and offering prayers, thinking nature would heal with the time, same with the people. The doctor is setting a dispensary in the island. Boma would find joy and contentment in this newfound harmony between humans and nature. Rufus think Isabel would also heal from her long tiring mental and physical trauma, “A fortnight hence and she’d look back and this would all be nothing but a memory, an anecdote for the dinner table” (215).

Conclusion

The discovery of crude oil in Niger Delta by European nations became a curse for the native inhabitants, leading to forms of postcolonial dominance and exploitation of natural resources (Alharbi 19). The novel *Oil on Water*, portrays how the neocolonialism of multinational companies and malignant nature of the government are the root cause of environmental degradation, poverty, human suffering, and various social ill in Niger Delta. Their delayed recognition of this exploitative tactic led to a surge in militancy, kidnapping and severe health crises. The relentless war and violence between militants and federal soldiers have perpetuated a cycle of hardship for the people, forcing them to flee their homes and seek refuge elsewhere, leaving the delta region largely deserted. The paper serves as the paradigm for the corrupt government’s insensitivity to people’s predicament, stemming from corrupt leadership (Ntamu and Iortyer 1). The ecological Marxist perspective reveals how the capitalist pursuit of profit expansion is responsible for the ecological crises, which in turn deteriorates the relationship between humanity and the government (Bose 3).

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