



# Environmental Degradation, Corruption and Militancy in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

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## ABSTRACT

Many African writers have continually embraced nature writings, land issues and ecological themes that are relevant to local, cultural and national development. This paper critically evaluates themes of environmental degradation as a result of exploration of natural resources, corrupt leadership and the resultant reaction of the immediate communities by way of militant confrontation in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. Adopting eco-criticism as a theoretical framework, the paper explores the extent of pollution and oil spill and their effects on the ecology of the host communities who are mostly fishermen and farmers. The paper links these atrocities to government's insensitivity to the people's plight as a result of corrupt leadership. This leads to militancy. Using the purposive sampling technique, the paper selects quotations from the text to evaluate Habila's portrayal of poverty in the midst of plenty through his characters and the landscape of the community. It establishes the link between the writer and his community as the mouth-piece for the down-trodden masses of Africa.

## INTRODUCTION

Many African writers today are environmentalists because they have continued to pay close attention to African 'green' in their numerous literary works. They either depict the beautiful African green or the degradation of that as a result of human activities by way of exploration or man-made disasters.

Land to Africans is an important asset which cannot be played with. It constitutes the environment as

an important entity. Majority of Africans are farmers whose source of livelihood is the land which forms the environment they live in. In traditional African society, land was a family or community inheritance and was collectively owned by the family. Land therefore has always been a source of conflict and violence between people uptill now. Ngugi Wa Thiongo like many other African writers have always placed the issue of land as central in most of his literary works. Land and the environment in general formed the basis of the Mau-Mau

resistance against the colonists in Kenya in pre-independence days. To the Gikuyu people of Kenya and the Niger Delta people in Nigeria, land is tied to the people's culture, spiritual and physical inheritance, bearing in mind that they are principally farmers and fishermen respectively. Ngugi supports this in the Gikuyu creation story in *Weep Not, Child* thus:

And the creator, who is also called Murungu took Gikuyu and Mumbi from his holy mountain. He took them to the country of ridges near Siriana ... God showed Gikuyu and Mumbi all the land and told them. "This land I hand over to you. O man and woman. It's yours to rule and till in serenity sacrificing only to me, your God, under my sacred tree." (24)

The above quotation explains why the exploitation of the environment – land in Kenya by the white settler for the production of cash crops and water and air by multinationals in corroboration with the insensitive government of Nigeria in the oil producing Niger Delta have generated controversies. These communities regard land and the environment in general as God's gift to their fore-fathers and should not be toyed with, especially by "outsiders." Of the Niger Deltans, any attempt at disturbing the ecosystem means taking away their lives.

The issue of land alienation of the Niger Delta and Kenyan peasants from their ancestral lands by their leaders and the elites forms the basis of conflict in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*. These two novelists share common bonds because their concern is the alienation of the down-trodden from their source of livelihood. To these two communities, land mean more than just material wealth, land which are paid for with blood like Ken-Saro-Wiwa and others in the Niger Delta and Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya among others. In Kenya for example, land is more cherished than any form of material wealth. Ngugi captures this thus:

If a man had plenty of money, many cars but no land, he could never be counted as rich. A man who went with tattered clothes but had at least an acre of red earth was better off than the man with money (*Weep Not, Child*, 9).

This is how important land is to the African. This explains why there is always controversy, conflict and violence anytime somebody makes a move to annex lands belonging to African societies. There is no ecosystem without land, and land which is the source of all life is guarded jealously by Africans.

Chimalum Nwankwo gives credence to the above assertion while describing the importance of land to the Gikuyu people of Kenya, for example that:

The Gikuyu are an agricultural people; like all agricultural people, land and its ownership must be of supreme importance to their existence. The importance of land ... does not end with their agrarian existence. It is part of their spiritual existence because the origin of the people is inseparable from the origin of their land (112).

The above assertion is not different from the Niger Delta region which accommodates different minority groups, with different cultural affiliations and places of origin. It is therefore, no wonder that the area has witnessed several uprisings and agitations against the Nigerian government which has become culpable and multinational oil companies who have continued to devastate the region with reckless abandon

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for the analysis of this paper is ecocriticism which is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. This implies the relationship between man and nature. Ecocriticism therefore relates to ecology, environmental degradation and depredation of land and other living creatures. This is because the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support system thereby causing harm to the environment. When this theory is brought to bear on Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, it provides a better understanding of the predicament of the Niger Delta people.

### Environmental Degradation in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

Environmental issues have become popular themes in most African literary works in the last decade because of the havoc wrecked on the environment and the people living around such areas. The arguments have been on the need to preserve and conserve the flora and fauna as well as endangered species in order to preserve the ecosystemic chain. Many African writers before now have been more concerned with the immediate socio-political issues of colonialism and corruption and have now seen the need to focus on environmental problems which have continued to dwarf Africa in the neo-colonial era.

For decades, oil companies like Shell and Chevron oil companies which are situated in the Niger Delta region have continued to wreak environmental, economic and social havoc in the region. Members of these oil producing communities have suffered untold

hardship as a result of activities of these oil companies who have been exploring oil in the area for decades. It is against such atrocities and a bid to correct such ills that the non-violent environmentalist, Ken Saro-wiwa paid with his blood. Rob Nixon buttresses this fact this way:

The Abacha regime executed Saro-Wiwa, making him Africa's most visible environmental martyr. Here was a writer – a novelist, poet, memoirist and essayist – who had died fighting the ruination of his Ogoni people's farmland and fishing waters by European and American oil conglomerates in cahoots with a despotic African regime (715).

It is therefore common place that exploitation of minority resources of the Niger Delta to develop other areas while neglecting the region has led to severe environmental degradation, pollution and loss of traditional occupation of farming and fishing. This in turn gives rise to militancy, kidnapping, oil theft and unimaginable health hazards. These are the issues depicted in Habila's *Oil on Water*. He has depicted widespread degradation of the environment and pollution in a glaring manner:

We followed a bend in the river and in front of us we saw birds dropped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fish bobbed while – bellied between tree roots (8).

This is what the reader finds in the novel as the protagonist, Rufus recounts his ordeal as they moved from one deserted village to another. The level of destruction is only imagined. The author captures these events in a vivid manner to take the reader on a journey into the heart of the sufferings and agonies of Niger Deltans. The gory pictures are pathetic. This is the case in another village:

In the village centre, we found the communal well. Eager for a drink, I bent down under the wet, mossy pivotal beam and peered into the well's blackness, but a rank smell wafted from its hot depths and slapped my face; I reeled away, my head aching from the encounter. Something organic, perhaps human, lay dead and decomposing down there, its stench mixed with that unmistakable smell of oil.... The patch of grass growing by the water was suffocated by a film of oil, each blade covered with blotches like the liver spots on a smoker's hands (8-9)

Most African literary artists today use concerns about environmental decline to oppose neo-colonialism and its negative ideology, implying that to engage in anti-colonial struggle is also to fight against environmental degradation. Habila's novel follows this line of thought to fight against corrupt leadership and environmental degradation of the Niger Delta and elsewhere in Nigeria and beyond.

Infact, Simon, et. al. argue that "the degradation and pollution (of the Niger Delta) are threat and danger to the wellbeing of individual and the society" (385). These health hazards, coupled with militant activities of the protesters and constant raids by the army have continued to push surviving villagers to relocate to other areas which ordinarily are not habitable. This creates poverty at its peak as glaringly portrayal by Habila:

The houses were made from weeping-willow bamboos and raffia palms and bits of zinc and plywood and cloth and it seemed anything else the builders were able to lay their hands on. The whole scarecrow settlement looked as if the next strong wind or wave would blow it away. (14)

Such is the poverty level of the host communities that keep Nigeria going as a country in terms of oil export revenue. Nigerian government must do the needful by securing her citizens and protect them against these hazards caused by oil exploration.

Elsewhere, Rufus describes Michael, the small boy who had been their guide with his father in this way:

The boy looked no more than ten years old, but he might have been older, his growth stunted by poor diet. His hair was reddish and sparse, his arms were bony like his father's. They were both dressed in the same shapeless and faded homespun shirts and trousers, their hands looked rough and callused from seawater, they smelled of fish and seemed as elemental as seaweed (5).

This is poverty at its peak and a clear indication of malnourishment. These are some of the issues that push those who are matured into armed men who frequently resort to sabotage, kidnapping, demands for jobs and money for alleged environmental degradation. Okonta and Douglas (quoted in Coffey, 46) attests to the level of degradation of the region that "As a consequence of oil companies' activities ... many of the region's ecosystems have been disrupted, damaging land beyond repair and driving certain animals and plant species into extinction." The sad outcome of all this is that many people from these communities see no hope for the future as they are constantly exploited. This

accounts for much of the danger of massive urban migration to seek shelter elsewhere thereby promoting city vices.

Such is the plight of Niger Delta communities who are constantly denied sleep because of the activities of oil companies, militants, robbers and the Nigerian army.

### Corruption in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

Corruption has become an issue of great concern because of its atrocious impact on modern society. Infact, it is one of the greatest impediments to development in Africa and other developing countries of the world. Today, corruption has eaten deep into African polity. This has brought about untold hardship on the masses like underdevelopment, poverty, unemployment, violence and militancy just to mention but a few. All these ills mentioned above are what one finds in Habila's *Oil on Waters*. The relevance of an artist is his ability to portray, project and illustrate in clear terms events, issues and problems of his time. In doing this, he reflects the social realities of that society. Barth Oshionebe and Jonathan Desen Mbachaga affirm the relationship between the artist and society that:

Every artistic expression reflects the social realities and aspirations of that society. The issue of corruption and the attendant problems it poses to the overall wellbeing and development of our environment is a matter of concern that has received serious attention from the pens of our writers and composers in Africa (1).

This is where Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* finds relevance and strong roots to reach out to a wider reading public. He captures the reality of displacement and disillusionment because of the Nigerian government's failure to the nationalizing process. The government of Nigeria has continuously undermined minority groups in the country like the Niger Delta thereby creating viral problems that have continued to work against nationalist ideals. Viewed from this point, one discovers that there is no other way of escape for the people of the region other than to get back at the government that is insensitive to their plight. Habila shows a community or people that are poverty-ridden in the midst of plenty. All these atrocities give rise to the crime wave witnessed in the region and elsewhere in the country.

Corruption in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* can be viewed from two different angles. The first is the people of Niger Delta themselves and their representatives on one hand and the Federal Government of Nigeria on the other hand. The people's corrupt nature is illustrated in Chief Ibiram's narration of how they came to live where Rufus found them. He recounts his uncle, Chief Malabo's stance on keeping their ancestral lands which

he considered as their ancestral heritage. Chief Malabo's refusal to sell the lands to the oil companies was quite against some of the families and the young men who went behind and sold their lands. This necessitated Chief Ibiram and his village members moving from one place to another.

The novel also shows clearly how the people's representatives collude with the external forces to further impoverish the peasants as exemplified by the politician in the novel:

... A politician, who introduced himself as their senator, came all the way from Abuja and assured them that their situation was receiving national attention, it was in the papers and he was going to fight to see that chief was returned to safe and sound. With him were two whitemen, oil executives. The villagers chased them away. Others came, but they were all liars, all working for the oil companies (40-41).

This is the picture of what happens in the Niger-Delta. Even when the Federal Government decides to bring in any little support, some of the people's representatives divert such assistance for their personal benefits. By this, they leave the poor peasants at the mercy of God. True developmental assistance hardly reach the target population in its full package because of corruption. The indigenous population is most times offered lip services by their leaders who claim to be patriots in the fight against environmental degradation and poverty in the area.

The Federal Government of Nigeria on her own part also has a fair share of the blame as a result of corruption and the governments' complexity in handling sensitive issues in the Niger Delta.

The state's murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa in November, 1995 heightened protest and revolts in the Niger Delta. All these were a result of poor handling of issues by the military leadership. These events allowed oil companies like Shell which was fingered most in the atrocities in the Niger Delta to go unabated. While later regimes after Abacha were not so blunt like before, some of them still looked the other way and allowed Shell and other oil companies to ravage the region with oil spill, gas flares and continued degradation of the people's land.

It is also important to note that while all these persisted, some of the militant groups became profit making entities and abandoned the ideals of genuine protest. Habila illustrates this complexity in the words of the professor thus:

... I am aware that, out there, there are criminal elements looting and killing under the guise of freedom fighting, but we are different. Those kind of rebels, they are our enemies. That is why I am letting you go, so you can write the truth ... (*Oil on Water*, 221).

This and many more are the complexities of the Niger Delta crisis as portrayed by Habila in *Oil on Water*.

### Militancy in Helon Habila's *Oil of Water*

The socio-political realities and insecurity in the Niger Delta region may make it difficult for some people to travel into the interior where militant groups, the army and Local government are always at odd and in alliance with one another. This is where fiction offers a mode for writers to explore space where journalists and other academics cannot get funding to visit because of the threat to life. The novel in fiction particularly does that. This affirms Tirop Simatei's assertion that:

The novelist's relevance to society is attained through a conscious intervention in the unfolding of history: an intervention which as a kind of artistic mission, is already over-determined by the inhuman politics of both colonial and post-colonial epoch(10).

The unfolding socio-political realities in Africa have continued to form the central message in most contemporary African literary works. As social crusaders, the strength and power of African writers depend on how skillful they deploy their literary style to depict the society in which they find themselves. Habila portrays this in *Oil on Water* as he skillfully and vividly paints a picture of the level of poverty and environmental hazards affecting the major Delta people as clearly seen through his mouthpiece, Rufus' description of events and incidents.

*Oil on Water* is therefore about militancy as a response to petroleum extraction and the harm to communities and the ecosystem. Jennifer Wenzel argues that:

The novel's most compelling writing is its vivid and varied descriptions of hastily abandoned villages, eerie drilling installations and land and water scapes choked by oil (www.academia.edu).

Rufus, the journalist and protagonist of the novel travels through this region in search of the kidnapped wife of an oil Director, Mr. Isabel Floode. The two historical moments, the post-Saro-Wiwa phase of Abacha's

dictatorial regime and the 2009 militant insurgencies are critical to the understanding of today's Niger Delta situations. Habila links the prevalence of kidnapping to poverty, corruption, lack of jobs among others. Salomon, who is Mrs. Floodes' graduate driver is betrayed by his boss (Mr. Floode) who impregnates his girl-friend, Koko, the cook. Together with his neighbour, Basse and Jamabo (a police officer), Salomon hatched the kidnap plan in order to raise money through ransom to better their lives. In this instance, Habila indicts the police that should protect lives and property (Simon, et. al., 386).

The kidnapers sent strands of Isabel's hair to her husband to prove that she is alive and demands a ransom of five million dollars as well as five reporters to confirm her safety. The kidnapers and militants took Mrs. Floode to Irikefe and deceived Naman, the assistant head priest that they had killed and buried her there in order to distract attention. This results in the subsequent clash between militants and soldiers on the island, leaving many people dead and the shrine destroyed. The villages are left at the mercy of the rampaging soldiers:

But the soldiers came early the next morning. First, they came in a boat, and there were only five of them. They were on routine patrol; they hadn't known that the militants were there, and they ran into an ambush – it was a massacre. They were all killed instantly. The militants had machine guns and grenades ... this morning the helicopter came and started shooting everything beneath it ... the water turned red. Blood, it was blood. In the confusion, the rebels slipped away and left the villages to face the soldiers ... everything is in ruins (*Oil on Water*, 154).

The above quotation explains why many communities in the Niger Delta region in the novel keep relocating to new settlements as a result of the destructions caused by these contending forces. Government on its part has failed to address the contentious issue and has decided to use the full force of the military in resolving issues. The contradiction with such government approach is that it is innocent defenseless masses and villagers that suffer the consequences of such actions. Simon, et. al. have argued that "environmental degradation, pollution, poverty, lack of social amenities as well as insensitivity of the Federal Government and multinationals in the Niger Delta region are the major causes of youth restiveness in the region" (Simon, et. al., 385).

This is how insensitive and corrupt government is to the yearnings and cries of her citizens because of selfish desires.

### CONCLUSION

Literature is therefore an important tool in the struggle for national liberation and the formation of national consciousness. However, the specific historical conditions that dictates a writer's response to such events differ from place to place. The writer's response and criticisms are thus directed to the immediate historical forces shaping these events – the ruling class. The writer therefore serves as the mouthpiece of the down-trodden masses of Africa. This criticism of the political elites affirms Salman Rushdie's assertion that:

Writer and politicians are natural rivals. Both groups try to make the world in their own images; they fight for the same territory. And the novel is one way of denying the official politician's version of truth. (14).

Therefore, Habila's *Oil on Water* is a glaring picture of the rivalry between the writer and the political class as he showcases the sufferings of the Niger Delta people to the world. The novel is therefore a searchlight on Nigeria where the diverse problems of the Niger Delta are multidimensional. *Oil on Water* is therefore about environmental degradation, militancy against the insensitive Nigerian government in cohort with multinational oil companies that perpetrate untold hardship on the people and harm to communities and the ecosystem in the Niger Delta and finally, poverty. All these have far reaching effects on the development of the area and Nigeria as a whole. The constant confrontation between the militants and the army can only heighten wanton destruction of not just the ecosystem but also promotes poverty.

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