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Stains of Oil in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

Ruchika Singh

Assistant Professor (English) at PG Department of English, Mehr Chand Mahajan DAV College for Women, Chandigarh

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to comprehend how environmental concerns and representations of the oil's presence are captured in literary and other cultural forms, and how these representations facilitate an understanding of the social world of the Delta in relation to oil production. Habila uses militancy and kidnapping as a defining context for understanding the oil encounter. Again, the issue of oil control is emphasised in this novel, but the author makes an intriguing point about how the militants gain access to the oil wealth using the hostages they have taken. In this novel, an amateur journalist, Rufus, is tasked with investigating and writing the story of the kidnapped wife of an oil company expatriate official. This raises the difficult question of authorship. He becomes embroiled in the conflict. In order to tell their story, Rufus is compelled to experience and witness firsthand what it means and how it feels to exist in the oil scrublands of the Niger Delta. Habila adopts a journalistic perspective to project a semblance of objectivity, but in doing so, he also seeks to authenticate what is already known through participatory engagement. Consequently, he emphasises experience and participation as the criterion and condition for negotiating meaning, which can only be realised by observing and immersing oneself in the quotidian space of the Delta (5). Habila appears to urge the reader to enter this troubled space and relive the Niger Delta's existence through their imagination.

> We must understand that oil is not just a patrimony. It is something that is woven around the identity of the people. It gives a certain measure of control of the resources they have, that they have control over the environment they live in; this all enhances their sense of identity.[1]

Rise of Ecocriticism in Niger Delta

In the countries of the third world, particularly in Africa, the environment has been brutally violated as a result of the extraction of destructive resources. This has contributed to the severe climate crisis and interethnic conflicts among communities, especially in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. This dreadful trend has received considerable attention in the vast body of literature produced by the authors of this neighbourhood. In all three literary genres, writers from the Niger Delta region advocated for social equality and environmental justice, which had eluded the region since oil extraction began to devastate the Niger Delta ecosystem. Even authors who are not from the Niger Delta, such as Helon Habila and Christie Watson, have joined the collaborative effort to achieve environmental justice against the environmental degradation perpetrated by the government and oil companies. The major impetus for the literary ephemera of the Niger Delta is hypothesised to be the activities of oil companies on their land and its unjust expropriation, which has thrown the region into ecological crisis and sparked conflict between the local communities. Nnimmo Bassey (2013) attributes the causes of the crisis and wars to the scramble for resources. He asserts 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? (ix)

Nnimmo seeks to examine the ecological crisis wreaking havoc in Africa from the vantage point of the control of the resources, particularly oil, and how this has culminated in political, economic, and social factors with environmental issues and changes. He attempts to demonstrate how the disorganisation and plundering of resources leads to devastation and marginalisation, environmental conflict, inadequate conservation and control, environmental identities, and social movements (Robins 14). The environmental devastation in the Niger Delta and the magnitude of its effects on the sociopolitical and socioeconomic lives of the people necessitate an immediate reevaluation and critical analysis.

The writers from this region have indicted the government, oil companies, and some despicable individuals for engaging in politics that revolve around the destruction of the Niger Delta ecosystem. Works such as JP Clark's All for Oil, Ben Binebai's

[1] Saro-Wiwa, Ken. *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy*, Port Harcourt: Saros International, 1992: 36

Drums of the Delta, Ojaide's The Activist (2006), Agary's Yellow Yellow (2006), Nnimmo Bassey's We Thought It Was Oil but It Was Blood (2002), and Ibiwari Ikiriko's Oily Tears of the Delta (1999) have been prominent voices condemning the disastrous state the oil barons have plunged the region into. Recent works with the same theme include Helon Habila's Oil on Water (2010), Christie Watson's Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away (2011), and Chimeka Garricks' Tomorrow Died Yesterday (2012). This thriving subgenre of Nigerian literature, dubbed "Niger Delta Literature," was spawned by the dedication of these authors, including the upcoming ones. Ibiwari Ikiriko, one of the region's most prominent poets, asserts, "The oil boom in Nigeria has spelled doom for the Niger Delta." Now, the doom is beginning to erupt in blood" (7).

The government and its agencies have been unable to enact environmentally friendly policies to mitigate the situation and ensure the proper construction and management of the people and the environment. Instead, they play a deep-seated political game with the ecology, and the resulting effects are evident in the unequal distribution of costs and benefits, as well as the reinforcement, rather than reduction, of the existing social and economic injustice in the Niger Delta. While the local communities bear the consequences of having their lands ravaged and looted for the purpose of oil extraction, the rest of the nation reaps the benefits of their suffering. This has resulted in severe socioeconomic and political injustice for the Niger Delta's inhabitants. This study investigates and reveals the politics performed on the environment as depicted in a selection of literary works classified as "Niger Delta literature." Through Helon Habila's Oil on Water, this paper stages a literary/cultural analysis that investigates and analyses how a complex arena of violence is instigated and performed in contemporary representations of oil modernity in the Niger Delta. The context for this paper is the Niger Delta after the death of Ken Saro-Wiwa. In the absence of government responsibility, Nigerian journalists have taken it upon themselves to monitor the illicit oil trade, frequently at great personal and professional risk. Ken Saro-Wiwa, an environmentalist and writer, was executed by a military tribunal in 1995 for speaking out against the government. The significance of Saro-Wiwa, the champion of environmental rights, to the paper lies in the role that his activism and political philosophy have played in the context of the Niger Delta conflict. Helon Habila, a novelist from Nigeria, continues this tradition of intertwining politics and literature.

Sight of Turm(oil): The Delta

In recent years, the Niger Delta has appeared in the global imagination as an "oil landscape" rather than as an ecological landscape inhabited by humans and surrounded by flora and fauna. Even in scholarly writing, the Niger Delta appears to be reduced to the language of groundbreaking statistics. The American scholar Michael Watts, for instance, describes the Niger Delta with the utmost candour:

> To put the matter as starkly as I can: The Niger Delta is a [vast oil basin] of some 70,000 sq. km. […] a population of roughly 28 million; it possesses a massive oil infrastructure consisting of 606 fields, 5284 wells, 7, 000 kilometres of pipelines, ten export terminals, 275 flow stations, ten gas plants, four refineries and a massive liquefied natural gas (LNG) sector. Currently the Delta is, more or less, ungovernable. ("Petro-Insurgency" 639)

Watts' statistical description of the Niger Delta is without a doubt precise, captivating, and incredibly informative. It would be futile to find fault with his representation of the Niger Delta given his commanding knowledge and expertise on the subject. Curiously absent from his analysis, however, is the human and ecological diversity that inhabits this "vast oil basin" (639). Watts, a distinguished scholar, fails to recognise the immense freshwater and ecological diversity of innumerable species of aquatic life forms that are threatened by hydrocarbon pollution as a result of oil extraction. Reading Watts's statistics would lead one to believe that the Niger Delta is a vast "oil complex" (his own term: 643) devoid of human and ecological presence. The Delta is one of the world's most populous regions. It has an estimated population of 31 million and more than 100 linguistic communities out of Nigeria's more than 400 languages. Its size is approximately 75,000 square kilometres (Darah 4). It is the second largest freshwater wetland in the world, after the Amazon Delta (Obi and Rustad 3). Because almost fifty percent of the landscape is covered by water for the majority of the year, the environment has uniquely shaped the culture of the Niger Delta's inhabitants, who depend on the water for their survival. They are compelled by geography to engage in three interdependent occupations: fishing, farming, and small-scale commerce. Sule Egya, a Nigerian scholar and author, writes that the majority of Niger Delta residents are rural farmers and fishermen. The soils have been degraded, the water has been polluted, the air has been invaded by permanent gas flares, and the fauna and flora have been depleted, making the population extremely vulnerable (62). Recent events have demonstrated that this vulnerability morphs into anxiety, which manifests in violent acts and protests for environmental and social justice. More troubling is the degradation of this increase into destructive acts of violence and other criminal activities by opportunistic entities.

In this region of southern Nigeria, the longest river in West Africa, the Niger, flows into the Atlantic Ocean. James Tsaaior describes the region as a "reservoir of priceless mineral resource [...with] rich, fertile and alluvial wealth in addition to a prodigious crude oil deposit" (72). Due to its history of producing palm oil and, later, crude oil for the Nigerian government, this vast region of wetland is also known as the Oil River. This history dates back to the 1890s and the palm oil trade, which occurred both before and during colonialism in Nigeria and led British colonialists to name the region "Oil Rivers Protectorate."

At the time, palm oil and palm kernel were the primary exports of the Niger Delta, and the British Royal Niger Company established a monopoly on these commodities. Palm oil flowed into Britain and the rest of Europe, where it powered the machinery that propelled Europe's industrial growth and colonial expansion (Peel 37).

In 1956, Royal Dutch Shell discovered commercial quantities of crude oil in Oloibiri, an Ijaw town in the Niger Delta, and exportation began in 1958. Nigeria is the largest oil producer in Africa, producing an average of 2.6 million barrels of oil per day. There are currently over 606 oil fields in the Niger Delta. Nigeria is the second-largest oil-producing nation in Africa, after Libya, with 32 billion barrels of proven crude oil reserves. From 1975 to 2006, approximately three-quarters of government revenue and ninety-five percent of national export earnings were derived from oil, making Nigeria the most oil-dependent economy in the world. Every day, a significant portion of the natural gas extracted from oil wells in the Delta is flared and lost to the atmosphere. In reality, gas flaring releases and pollutes more than 70 million cubic feet annually.

In reality, gas flaring pollutes the environment by releasing over 70 million cubic metres of gas per day into the Delta's atmosphere. According to Chinyere Nwahunanya, the Niger Delta represents "the symbol of the ironic contradictions of the consequences of capitalist exploitation by multinational economic interests and the local comprador bourgeoisie" (xiii).
It is essential to note that Nigeria lacks well-defined environmental laws and policies governing potential natural and environmental disasters. For instance, the 1998 Jesse pipeline fire disaster in Delta State, Nigeria, for which neither the Nigerian government nor the oil company accepted responsibility for the loss of lives, limbs, and property. The environmental destruction caused by the oil industry and the inequitable distribution of oil wealth have sparked numerous environmental movements and interethnic conflicts in the region, including recent guerrilla activities by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the Niger Delta People Volunteer Force (NDPVF), and other resource-rebel groups.

Much has been written in the disciplines of anthropology and politics about the relationship between violence and natural resources in Nigeria. The causes of the petroleum-related violence in the Niger Delta include, among others, incompetent governance, a lack of moral fortitude to implement people-oriented policies regarding natural resources, and weak laws governing the distribution of wealth. Involvement of a global oil bunkering cartel, which finances and fuels militancy, makes illicit trade in crude oil possible as a result of the region's permeable security condition, which is caused by regional unrest.

Ken Saro-Wiwa: Nonviolence Poetics

Since Nigeria's independence, violent acts have been interpreted as a means of protesting oppressive regimes. This was not always the case, however. There have been additional anti-oppression strategies. However, this was not always the case. There have been additional forms of opposition to oppression. Long years of discontent resulting from Petro-induced dissension in the Delta have integrated into the Niger Delta's ethnic consciousness and are expressed through civil disobedience, cultural performances of various types, and literary expression. According to Godini Darah, the literary and artistic output of the Niger Delta is animated by the contradictions and rage generated by the ruling class ("Revolutionary Pressures," 11). However, this geopolitical resistance owes a substantial amount of its personality to the environmental rights activist Ken Saro-Wiwa. In the context of socioenvironmental and geopolitical discourses in the Niger Delta, his life and writings have generated considerable scholarly interest. Using a nonviolent strategy of cultural protest and creative writing, Saro-Wiwa successfully challenged the State's authority over oil revenue during his lifetime; however, he died tragically in the process. For many people in Nigeria and beyond, Saro-Wiwa was a writer, scholar, and advocate for environmental rights. He is well-known in Nigeria as a politician, successful businessman, newspaper columnist, television scriptwriter/producer, and prolific author. His opponents demonise him for his participation in the Nigeria/Biafra Civil War of 1967-1970; he was said to have supported the Nigerian state against the secessionist Biafrans, for which he was awarded the position of Sole Administrator of Bonny Council in the Eastern Delta. In the 1990s, he campaigned against the lopsided geopolitics of Nigeria's federal government, which he had previously benefited from. To the international community and his admirers in Nigeria, he will always be remembered as the champion of environmental rights and social justice, particularly for the Ogoni and other minority peoples worldwide. His campaigns against environmental pollution and the decimation of the Ogoni People's agricultural economy, in which the Nigerian Government and Shell Oil Corporation were complicit, attracted international attention; for example, he was successful in incorporating Ogoni (minority) agitations into the project of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) in The Hague.

In May 1994, four Ogoni chiefs and senior members of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni Peoples (MOSOP) were lynched to death by a mob of protesters who accused them of betraying their community and selling their principles to the federal government for personal gain.

The alleged perpetrators of this atrocity were youth members of MOSOP who were loyal to Saro-Wiwa, the organization's spokesperson at the time. Along with eight other Ogoni leaders, he was arrested and accused of killing the elders. Saro-Wiwa consistently staged nonviolent international campaigns to embarrass the Nigerian government and the oil corporations regarding the atrocities oil production has brought to Ogoniland. In hindsight, it is possible to suggest that Saro-Wiwa was marked for destruction by the Nigerian government and, possibly, the oil corporations (especially Shell) for stirring up international sentiments against their activities in the Niger Delta. Despite the fact that the accusation of complicity in the murder of the four Ogoni elders was unfounded, it gave his opponents the justification they needed to finally silence him. As a result, this murder accusation provided the Sani Abacha junta with the appropriate text to carry out their plan and drive his organisation underground.

On November 10, 1995, Saro-Wiwa and eight other individuals, Barinem Kiobel, John Kpunien, Baribor Bera, Saturday Dobee, Felix Nwate, Nordu Eawo, Paul Levura, and Daniel Gbokoo, were executed on the implausible charge of inciting the youth to murder the four Ogoni elders. His death had the exact opposite effect of what his accusers had intended. The ripple

effect marked the start of a new, more radical paper in Nigerian oil geopolitics. It brought forth a vigorous and intensely conflicted opposition to the legitimacy of the oil extraction industry and a depiction of its impact on the ecology of the Delta. It also increased the international notoriety of Nigeria's dictatorship under Abacha. This led to international sanctions and the expulsion of Nigeria from the Commonwealth Group of Nations in 1995.

The'moral albatross' of Saro-assassination Wiwa's by executive decree has tarnished Shell's (also known in Nigeria as Shell Petroleum Development Company, SPDC) corporate image in the eyes of the international community. Shell offered (actually agreed) to pay the family of Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni $15.5 million as part of an out-of-court settlement for their role in the'murder' of Ogoni leaders and environmental rights activists. This was not done out of kindness.

The Petropolitics and Ecology of *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila

Environmental issues can be classified as political issues because they cannot be separated from the interaction of political forces within a society or nation. Through an analysis of *Oil on Water*, this paper aims to reveal the politics ingrained in the government's plan to gain absolute control of the Niger Delta, the exploits of the oil conglomerates, and the people's role in the gross mismanagement of their environment.

Oil on Water, the third novel by Helon Habila, is a potent revelation of the angst of the people of the Niger Delta regarding the ongoing destruction of their environment. The novel exposes the nefarious activities of the Nigerian government and the exploitative practises of oil corporations. It also reveals the collaboration between the federal government and oil companies in the environmental destruction of the Niger Delta. This story captures the extent of environmental destruction and its devastating effects in the Niger Delta region. The novel, narrated by an amateur journalist, explores the ecological crises that have plagued the region's environment. While it depicts the magnitude of the federal government's atrocity in displacing the people from their homes, it also condemns the rapacious activities of the oil conglomerates and the corrupt practises of some of the community leaders, revealing the lethality that accompanies such horrendous environmental damage. The novel describes a series of events as experienced by Zaq and Rufus, two journalists on a perilous assignment commissioned by James Floode, an oil executive, to negotiate the release of his wife Isabel Floode, who is being held hostage by Niger Delta militants on the fictitious island of Irikefe Island. As the journey progresses, the journalists become disheartened by the extent of environmental degradation and its lingering effects on the local population. They observe "the polluted waters, the abandoned villages, the gas flares, the stumps of pipes from exhausted wells with their heads capped and left protruding from the oil-scorched earth, and the ever-present pipelines that emerge far from the parent tree.." (182). Zaq and Rufus risked their lives in the perilous mission in order to not only negotiate Isabel's release, but also to uncover the truth behind the destruction of the Niger Delta environment, including the illegal activities of the Nigerian government, the exploits of the oil conglomerates, and the militants' fight for the restoration and repair of the degraded environment.

They also discover the truth about what the oil companies have done to the region, including how the government brutally tortures the people in order to evict them from their land and persecutes them so they will stop revolting and interfering with the oil companies' operations. They discover that the deterioration has reached such a critical level that there are almost no birds, fish, or other aquatic animals. Not only were the people displaced, but also the animals were wiped out. While some people accept relocation without protest, sometimes not because their land was usurped but because they could not bear the brunt of the militants' brutality, others resist relocation despite having been demonstrably displaced (Rob Nixon).

The case of Karibi, who is falsely accused of fraternising with militants, exemplifies the dirty politics employed by the government to ensure that certain deviants are dealt with severely before they can cause a commotion. The experience of Zaq and Rufus with chief Ibiram and his people reveals how long the people have been brutalised and persecuted. People have been tormented in order to teach them to always suffer in silence. Chief Ibiram relates to Zaq and Rufus his harrowing experience in his village, which was once a paradise where nothing was lacking. As was the entire Niger Delta prior to the oil boom. They were composed of fathers, mothers, uncles, aunts, cousins, and siblings who lived in harmony until the oil corporations spread the plague of violence. In order to acquire their land, the oil companies lied that they would send their children to Europe and the United States to become engineers, so that they could one day return to Port Harcourt as oil executives (Habila 39). In spite of numerous attempts to bribe the village chief, chief Malabo, who was also chief Ibiram's uncle, is adamant that their land is not for sale. He is so determined and resolute in his assertion:

> This was their ancestral land, where their ancestors and our ancestors' ancestors were interred. They were born here, they were content here, and although they may not have been wealthy, the land had been good to them; they never went without. What kind of land stewards would they be if they sold the land? (39).

After intense persuasions and mounting pressure, the chief refuses to reverse his decision. Then he begins to lose control of the families' decision regarding the land's use. Eventually, the oil conglomerates and the federal government find a convenient way to eliminate the chief. This calculated manoeuvre is disclosed in the following passage:

> One day, the patrol came upon two oil workers piling soil samples into a speedboat. There was a brief skirmish, nothing too serious – one of the oil workers escaped with a swollen jaw, the other with a broken arm – but the next day the soldiers came. Chief Malabo was arrested, his hands tied behind his back

> as if he were a petty criminal, on charges of supporting the militants and plotting against the federal government and threatening to kidnap foreign oil workers. (40)

In the subsequent events, oil companies and treacherous politicians infiltrate the village, deceiving the villagers that their situation is receiving national attention and that they will fight together to ensure that their chief returns safely. They deceive the public with their unfulfilled promises and lies. Eventually, it is reported that chief Malabo has died, but in reality he was murdered by the oil company with the assistance of the government. The oil conglomerates arrive with an entire army the day after his death, brandishing weapons and appearing to be serious about conducting business. They claim to have a contract signed by chief Malabo before his death selling them all his family's land (41). The oil companies are ultimately successful in encroaching on their land, forcing the inhabitants to relocate. They forcibly remove them from their homes. They establish their camps, erect their oil rigs, ignite their gas flares, and begin the extraction process. In this event, the novel laments the government's treachery and the oil companies' hypocrisy. It demonstrates how deceitful oil companies are in stealing people's land.

Deception on the part of the government and hypocrisy on the part of oil companies establish unequivocally the horror of their treachery and the emptiness of their promises. Habila exposes openly the sleazy politics employed by oil companies and the government to make citizens' lives miserable. The government and oil companies appear to have engaged in extensive deliberation to devise a plan that will provide them with the land and oil they so desperately need. This is evident in the manner in which they threaten and bribe individuals. The manner in which they seized the people's land and the associated activities demonstrate that they did not wish the people well. Clearly, their mission was more vital than the lives of innocent Niger Delta citizens. So, there was a well-thought-out plan to subject the populace to incomprehensible misery.

In addition, James Floode's brazen bias regarding the safety of his wife strongly contradicts his inhumane disposition toward the people of the Niger Delta. While he is unconcerned about the miserable condition of the people, he is concerned about the safety of his wife. "And remember, make them (the militants) understand that nothing must happen to her," he instructs Zaq. She is a British national (32)," Zaq responds, recognising hypocrisy in his statement, "Does that make her more significant than, say, if she were Nepalese, Guyanese, or Greek?" (32) In this witty remark, Zaq asks ironically, "Is she more important than the deplorable Nigerians whose rights have been grossly violated and whose lives have been destroyed by the actions of the oil companies?" Evidently, oil companies have nothing to do with people's lives; rather, they commodify them and view their misery as a necessary means to an end.

In addition to exploiting the environment, whites have an innate desire to take what does not belong to them, as evidenced by James Floode's abduction of Koko from her fiancé Salomon. Salomon very likely would not have conspired with Jamabo to kidnap Floode's wife for ransom if Jamabo had not abducted and impregnated the woman Salomon intended to marry. There is nothing improper about James marrying Koko, but he does not do so with dignity. He seduces Koko with oil money until she succumbs sheepishly. And despite knowing that Koko and Salomon are in a relationship, he still betrays his most loyal employee. Salomon laments, "The Oga had insulted me severely; he had stripped me of my pride, my dignity, and my manhood, despite the fact that I had been serving him honourably and diligently. I had faith in him (210)." This demonstrates that the white cannot be relied upon.

Moreover, in a brief but critical argument between Rufus and James, the latter blames corruption for the deplorable state of the nation and asserts that the people are harming themselves by vandalising pipelines, causing the government and oil companies to lose millions of dollars. But in a rebuttal, Rufus implicates the government and oil conglomerates and absolves the people of any blame that could have been assigned to them for the destruction of their environment. He states:

> But I don't blame them for wanting to get some benefit out of the pipelines that have brought nothing but sufferings to their lives, leaking into the rivers and wells, killing the fish and poisoning the farmlands. And all they are told by the oil companies and the government is that the pipelines are there for their own good, that they hold great potential for their country, their future. These people endure the worst conditions of any oil-producing community on earth, the government knows it but doesn't have the will to stop it, the oil companies know it but because the government doesn't care, they don't care. And you think the people are corrupt? No. They are just hungry and tired (97).

Through the character of Rufus, Habila is able to expose the corruption and poor leadership that continue to perpetuate poverty and suffering, turning the Niger Delta into an ecological nightmare and the nation into a ship without a rudder. No reasonable effort is made to remove the people from their miserable situation. The nation continues to decline. Similarly, the novel suggests that oil conglomerates cannot claim ignorance of the negative effects of their activities on the populace. Undoubtedly, they are aware of how slowly the devastation has been killing the populace and 'decentering' them. Even when community members raise the alarm about an imminent threat and demand restitution, they either criminalise them or bribe them to keep quiet. Occasionally, they offer fictitious employment opportunities to recruit compradores. This clearly demonstrates the lengths to which oil companies will go to endanger the lives of the people in order to achieve their goals. The doctor attached to the island's military group, Dagogo-Mark, expresses his displeasure to Zaq and Rufus:

> When I confronted the oil workers, they offered me money and a job. The

> manager, an Italian guy, wrote me a check and said I was now on their payroll. He told me to continue what I was doing, but this time I was to come only to him with my results. I thought they'd do something with my results, but they didn't. So when people started dying, I took blood samples and recorded the toxins in them, and this time I sent my result to the government. They thanked me and dumped the results in some filing cabinet. More people die and I sent my results to NGOs and international organizations, which published them in journals and urged the government to do something about the flares; but nothing happened (145).

Numerous community members have brought the deteriorating situation in the region to the attention of the government and oil companies, but nothing sensible has been done. Instead, they ignore the agonising experience of the people. The magnitude of the injustice and callousness is alarming. One wonders if the leaders were imported from other nations, such as Sudan or Iraq, because they do not understand the suffering of the people. The individuals are considered illegal immigrants or refugees. Their situation continues to deteriorate. According to Achebe, it is a disgraceful lack of imagination to place oneself in the shoes of others. Moreover, he asserts:

> We're totally wrong when we imagine that self-centeredness is smart. It is actually very stupid, an indication that we lack enough imagination to recreate in ourselves the thoughts that must go on in the minds of others, especially those we dispossess. A person who is insensitive to the suffering of his fellows is that way because he lacks the imaginative power to get under the skin of another human being and see the world through eyes other than his own… No, indifference to suffering is not clever at all (112-113).

The Nigerian government has taught the people how to fight back by subjecting them to oppression and atrocities until they have been completely pushed to their limits. And according to Morris K. Udall, "the more we exploit nature, the fewer options we have until we are left with only one: to fight for survival" (qtd. in Jacob 52). The people are fighting for their lives, but the government and oil companies accuse them of being criminals. The government seems to have forgotten that they are responsible for the misery and wretched conditions of the people. They have irreparably abused, exploited, and violated the people. They have become violent militants, kidnappers, and pipeline vandals, transforming from peaceful people.

This results in the youth's egregious social inhibition. The militant group's leader, Professor, expresses his displeasure by kidnapping and destroying oil pipelines. He craves media attention and wants the government to be aware of his activities so that they are compelled to find a concrete solution to environmental destruction. He instructs the journalists to report the truth about the nighttime flares and oil on the water. This includes soldiers compelling them daily to escalate the violence. He states, "We are persecuted daily in our own country." Where do they wish for us to go, please? Tell them we are not moving forward. This territory is ours (222)." Evidently, the people have reached a point where they can no longer endure the horror of oil spills and gas flaring or endure the pain. Therefore, they are forced to resort to kidnapping for ransom, vandalising, and bunkering oil pipelines in order to survive.

Soldiers' contributions to the escalation of violence in the Niger Delta have been deemed disturbing and nearly indescribable. The act of dousing innocent people with gasoline is heartbreaking. Major, the leader of the island's troupe, disagrees with the islanders' claim that they want complete control over their resources or even a fair share of the wealth generated by their land. While dousing the captives in gasoline, he exclaims, "You want resource control? In any case, this must be managed. How does it feel?" (56).

In addition, it will be practical to indicate that the government's plan is to make life unbearable for the populace, necessitating the deployment of the major and his unit to the island. This is reflected in the Major's ancestry and how he comes to spend three years on the island. He was court-martialed prior to his deployment for shooting the son of one of the country's most powerful politicians, who had raped his daughter.The government did not perform their duty and arrest the perpetrator. Consequently, the Major became insane as a result of what happened to his daughter. This turns out to be one of the government's plots to use him to eradicate the populace from their land. As a result of the Major's aggression and desire for vengeance, he became enraged with the populace; he would torture or murder them at the slightest provocation.

In *Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the Poor* (2010), Rob Nixon examines the academic neglect of the reciprocal relationship between post-colonialism and environmentalism (ecocriticism) in Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the Poor. He asserts that literary scholars appear uninterested in recognising the interface that is prominently highlighted in literary scholarship's harmonious dialogue between theories. He asserts that both environmental studies and postcolonial studies have exhibited an activist perspective that reflects their preference for social transformation movements (233). In terms of social re-engineering, Nixon considers the theories to have a balanced equilibrium. Therefore, it is appropriate to note that any literary work that connects the fundamental tenets of postcolonial studies and environmental studies has unmistakably contributed to this direction of analysis.

Placing Oil on Water within the context of postcolonial ecocriticism demonstrates the author's strong commitment as a social crusader, humanist, and advocate for social change, decrying injustice and lamenting environmental degradation. His daughter was raped by the most powerful politicians. Habila presents his work as a clarion call for change to purge society of all social ills. Overall, his novel unequivocally reveals the various incapabilities and failures that undermine Nigeria's

value system. Above all, the novel is potent in its condemnation of the perpetrators of social injustice and environmental destruction resulting from the collaborative plunder by those Saro-Wiwa dubbed "internal colonialists."

Conclusion

The connection between postcolonialism and ecocriticism in environmental studies enhances a sophisticated critical study in terms of analysis of characters, events, and issues, thereby contributing significantly to current debates regarding socioeconomic development in many former colonies. In this study, it was discovered, for instance, that leadership failure resulting from post-independence disillusionment exacerbates social inequality and environmental injustice in the Niger Delta. The inequitable distribution of oil wealth and the flagrant violation of basic human rights have resulted in a shattered social system and a devastated ecosystem in the region.

Through postcolonial ecocritical study of the devastation wrought by the oil conglomerates and the pitiful conditions of the Niger Delta people, one is able to observe that the fundamental human rights of the people have been violated and the government is unwilling to make a reasonable effort to end the gross sociaeconomic inequality (Nixon 15).

The application of postcolonial ecocriticism's premises reveals the post-independence disillusionment's effects on environmental crises. It is discovered that authority mismanagement and power abuse, which result in corruption of the moral fabric and environmental problems, exacerbate the suffering of the people of the Niger Delta, rather than alleviating it. Due to the incompetence of the leaders, the ecological genocide in Niger Delta is ongoing. In Habila's *Oil on Water*, issues such as corruption, neglect, injustice, displacement, environmental degradation, moral bankruptcy, murder and kidnapping, military brutality, and overall disruption of the social and ecological order occupy a central position. As a result of the unfavourable effects of environmental devastation and social injustice prevalent in the region, the people are evicted from their land and must seek alternative sources of income. It is possible to scatter without sowing. People are uprooted from their communities with nowhere else to go. Nixon coined the term "environmental refugees" to describe them. Habila bemoans the atrocities of the Nigerian military men who, on the government's orders, repress and terrorise the people in order to demonstrate the government's indifference to the people's needs.

Nobody can deny that man is a product of his environment and that everything that occurs in it, whether directly or indirectly, positively or negatively, affects him. Since the environment of the Niger Delta has been deteriorated to such a degree, people should not be blamed for expressing discontent through violent behaviour, as they are the victims of a systematic process. The postcolonial-ecological analysis of *Oil on Water*, the analysis of the major characters in the works, the authors' diction, and the author's thematic preoccupation all indicate that Helon Habila is critically engaged in movements for social change such as those of Saro-Wiwa. The narrative is extremely caustic, and its language condemns the Nigerian government and oil companies for their collaboration in the plunder of the Niger Delta. Even though Habila is not from the Niger Delta, he has taken it upon himself as a socially conscious author to reflect on the region's misery.

This study provides sufficient literary and postcolonial-ecocritical evidence to debunk the environmental politics currently in play. The analysis of the selected novel for this study reveals that environmental damage has numerous effects, including displacement, moral corruption, violence, killing and kidnapping, proliferation of lethal weapons, and overall disruption of social and ecological systems. Only the current application of postcolonial-ecocriticism to the evaluation of literary works can vividly demonstrate the mutual benefits of combining postcolonial and environmental issues.

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