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The Devastating Toll of the Petroleum Industry on Postcolonial Communities: An Ecocritical Reading of Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

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Abstract

This research paper sets out to delve into the human and environmental toll of the petroleum industry on postcolonial communities, using Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* as a stepping-stone. The paper argues that decades after the end of the straightjacket of colonization, Africa (which bore the brunt of that gruesome enterprise of profit-driven dehumanization) continues to reel from it. Key to teasing out the scope of the multifaceted challenges facing postcolonial communities, not least those of black descent, is a consideration of the earth-shattering human cum environmental ravages of the oil industry. The violence resulting from oil exploitation in parts of Africa endowed with mineral resources has, so the article posits, spawned a bottomless pit of environmental crisis whose consequences on human and nonhuman life are nothing short of unfathomable. Little wonder that postcolonial African literature has shifted from its time-honoured depiction of racial injustice to gritty representations of environmentalism and its attendant woes on formerly colonized communities. The burgeoning phenomenon of armed militants with its retinue of kidnappings and killings, oil slicks, atmospheric pollution – and suchlike – are foregrounded as being dismal fallout from decades of unchecked, undisguised, relentless, rapacious scramble for oil extraction. Habila's lead character, Rufus, is a journalist assigned along with his seasoned colleague Zaq to do reporting about a kidnapped British woman in the Niger Delta region. Their no-nonsense call to spotlight the miseries of oil exploitation by bearding the lion in his den as they seek to interview a notorious rebel commander about the kidnapped woman has brought the best in journalism. Zaq and Rufus have cheated death many times without throwing in the towel. The harrowing scale of the devastation of their voyage to Irikefe Island literally hits home. The hazards of the assignment are such that they start questioning the soundness of their acceptance of it. The paper argues that lack of political will, corruption, bribery and graft compound the predicament of impacted communities who, as a last desperate resort,

espouse armed militancy as the only off-ramp to betterment. Methodology wise, I tap into a three-pronged approach in my endeavour to do justice to the paper, namely close textual analysis, ecocriticism as well as perspectives from the social sciences cum postcolonial theory.

Keywords: postcolonial ecocriticism, oil extraction, anthropocentrism, environment, resource curse, ecological imperialism, place attachment.

Introduction

Over six decades after the demise of colonization, every facet of life in postcolonial nations keeps being impacted by that gruesome enterprise of profit-driven human dehumanization. Key to teasing out the scope of the multifaceted challenges facing postcolonial communities, not least those from Africa, is a consideration of the earth-shattering impact of the oil industry. The wantonly rapacious exploitation of Africa's oil reserves by Western powers is, to all intents and purposes, a gruesome throwback to the colonial era. It's no wonder then that as a type of literature the aim of which is to debunk the mythology of colonization, and critically assess its harrowing legacies, postcolonial fiction delivers a withering indictment of Western-driven oil exploitation with its environmental and human ravages.

The scholarship in postcolonial green humanities bespeaks an awareness about the violence of the oil petroleum. Perhaps more significantly, it betokens a deep consciousness about the driving necessity to move from an anthropocentric standpoint to a more holistic approach in order the better to grapple with the travails bedevilling post-independence Africa, viz. environmental injustice. There is no denying that postcolonial studies and ecocriticism are interrelated as American pundit on environmental humanities Elizabeth DeLoughrey appositely posits:

The growing concern with the global scope of climate change has given a planetary dimension to both fields of study; thus both ecocritics and postcolonialists share an interest in theorizing the planet as a whole and in examining literature's part in shaping consciousness of the globe. (320)

The burgeoning currency of environmental literature stands as a sobering reminder that humans and non-humans make up an interconnected whole. Cajetan Iheka avers that the term 'non-humans' "encompasses the other life forms in the environment, including plants, animals, and forests but also the abiotic components of the ecosystem including soil and water" (1). Getting to the root causes of the woes plaguing postcolonial African societies entails studying environmental damage as a leftover from the colonial era. In his signal book Culture and Imperialism, the late Palestinian-born American thinker Edward Said foregrounds land as the key driver of colonialism: "To think about distant places, to colonize them, to populate or depopulate them: all of this occurs on, about, or because of land. The actual possession of land is what empire in the final analysis is all about" (78). In Said's estimation, the land issue in a colonial context is so crucial that in the aftermath of decolonization, it becomes a bone of contention between colonialists and formerly colonized societies. He writes:

At the moment when a coincidence occurs between real control and power, the idea of what a given place was (could, might become), and an actual place-at that moment the struggle for empire is launched. This coincidence is the logic both for Westerners taking possession of land and, during decolonization, for resisting natives. Imperialism and the culture associated with it affirm both the primacy of geography and an ideology about control of territory. (78)

Land is the be-all-and-end-all of human existence. It is a statement of the obvious that life on earth is impossible without land as it is a source of livelihood. Any damage done to the land has unmistakably adverse consequences for human beings and 'other life forms.' Over and above the prestige associated with land possession, it is part of a person's identity. Conversely, land dispossession

amounts to unspeakable violence, no less. Said writes that, “For a colonized people, the most essential value, because it is the most meaningful, is first and foremost the land: the land which must provide bread and, naturally, dignity” (9). The dignity of the colonized is a dignity of sorts in that his humanity is negated through moral and physical violence. Said contends that “All he has ever seen on his land is that he can be arrested, beaten, and starved with impunity” (9). It bears stressing that the unabashed scramble for oil extraction in formerly colonized African societies carries undertones of historical continuity. Exploitation of natural resources of the colonized in colonial times has taken a new hue in postcolonial nations with oil extraction.

Postcolonial African nations bear the brunt of what Alfred Crosby calls “ecological imperialism.” Serpil Oppermann defines ‘ecological imperialism’ as “the systematic exploitation and re-shaping of the local ecosystems of the peripheries for the economic welfare of the centre” (181). Just as colonization was disgustingly conspicuous by land acquisition and invasion, so are neo-colonial forces hell-bent upon brazenly cashing in on the natural resources of postcolonial societies through oil drilling, thereby giving rise to an environmental disaster of epic proportions. This is a matter of huge concern as the future of Africa, and by extension all postcolonial nations endowed with oil reserves, hangs in the balance.

Postcolonial African novelists’ call to broach the ills of environmental degradation engendered by oil extraction reflects a concern about the future of the continent. The likes of Helon Habila Ngalabak are steeped in the consciousness of art as a mode of resistance to injustice in any shape or form. In this sense, they fit into the lofty role of the African novelist in the postcolonial context as adumbrated by the late Nigerian thinker Chinua Achebe. He writes:

It is clear to me that an African creative writer who tries to avoid to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being irrelevant (...) like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a flat fleeing from the flame. (162)

It is in the spirit of staying true to this Achebeian conception of fiction writing that postcolonial African novelists made the call to move away from the trope of colonial racial oppression to exploring more excruciating contemporary ills plaguing the continent. It goes without saying that an ethical engagement with environmental racism entails debunking hegemonic Western-centric discourses and practices which have spawned unequal power relationships heavily weighted against the Third World. Emphatically, historical continuities are inscribed in the unabashed exploitation of African mineral resources by the West. Colonialism had a beginning but it has no end in that its harrowing consequences are ever-lasting. In his preface to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Homecoming*, the late Nigerian academic and literary critic Ime Ikeddeh argues that the perpetuation of the race-based oppression of colonialism shows in the multifaceted challenges facing post-independence Africa. He writes that:

There can be no end to the discussion of the African encounter with Europe because the wounds inflicted touched the very springs of life and have remained unhealed because they are constantly being gashed open again by with more subtle, more lethal weapons. (XII)

Relentless and unregulated oil exploitation are lethal wounds that stymie Africa’s bumpy journey to all-out development. Our choice of Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* lies in its gritty portrayal of the human and ecological ravages of the oil petroleum in postcolonial Africa. From a methodological perspective, I tap into close textual analysis, the lens of (postcolonial) ecocriticism and theory as well as other perspectives from the social sciences to do justice to the paper. The article is structured around three pillars. Firstly, I’ll lay out the theoretical framework of ecocriticism. Secondly, I’ll address the toll exacted by multinational oil companies on the environment and on the postcolonial community of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Thirdly, I’ll delve into postcolonial ecocritical literature as an act of resistance to capitalist domination against a background of environmental degradation.

I. Theoretical framework

Ecocriticism has gained traction in scholarly circles since its emergency in the early 1990s. Its wide-ranging appeal speaks to the growing interest in the interconnectedness of literature and the environment. Ecocriticism - aka green literature, ecopoetics, environmental literary criticism, and green cultural studies (Glottfelty xx) - invites a new way of considering the natural habitat and its challenges from an environmental-conscious standpoint. Due to the intricacy associated with ecocriticism, quite a lot of definitions have been adduced in a scholarly endeavour to grasp its purport. The green humanities pundit of American extraction, Lawrence Buell, traces the beginnings of ecocriticism to the inception of the 1990s. He is at pains to point out its Anglo-American origins as follows:

As a self-conscious critical practice calling itself such, ecocriticism began around 1990s as an initiative within literary studies, specifically within English and American literature, from two semi-coordinated and interpenetrating influences: British romanticism, with a genre focus especially on poetry in that tradition (including its twentieth-century Anglo-American filiations), with a genre focus on , especially on the Thoreauvian imprint. (89)

The adjective 'Thoreauvian' in the foregoing quotation is not perfunctory by any means. Actually, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller are celebrated as the top-most exponents of the iconic American literary movement gone by the name of Transcendentalism. The commonality of the said triadic writers was their unflagging love of nature as a key pathway to finding truth. Thoreau's submission that "*All nature is my bride*" (30) says a mouthful. In his seminal book *Nature*, he views nature as "*essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf*" (17). Transcendentalists loftily regarded nature as they felt it was possessed of spiritual and moral values which could help man in his search for truth and meaning in life. As Ralph Waldo Emerson contends:

Nature, in its ministry to man, is not only the material, but also the process and the result. All the parts incessantly work into each other's hands for the profit of man. The wind sows the seed; the sun evaporates the sea; the wind blows the vapour to the field; the ice, on the other side of the planet, condenses rain on this; the rain feeds the plant; the plant feeds the animal; and thus the endless circulations of the divine charity nourishes man. (23)

Arguably the seeds of ecological consciousness were sown in early nineteenth-century nonfictional nature writing. The driving need for man to eschew exploitation of nature on penalty of shooting himself in the foot was uppermost in the minds the transcendentalists. Ecocriticism has become a common province as a result of its holistic approach to teasing out the interrelation of literature and the environment. Environmental literature is a theoretical approach that serves, to all intents and purposes, as a wake-up call to stave off an ecological disaster. Plainly, it exposes human propensity to tame nature as being at the root of the environmental crisis and at the same time witheringly critiques Western capitalist multinationals for their reckless resource exploitation of postcolonial nations.

Lawrence Buell lays out a two-pronged typology, that is, first- and second-wave ecocritics. Without wishing to pour cold water on the contribution of the former, Buell points out that the impactful traction of ecocriticism over the years is a measure of the soundness of the praxis of second-wave ecocritics who have "*sought to press far beyond the first wave's characteristic limitations of genre, geography, and historical approach*" (92). Second-wave ecocritics pushed the envelope of their love and concern for the environment by moving beyond glowing literary depictions of Nature -which was the stock-in-trade of the first-wavers - to take cognizance of the untold damage done to the environment by man. In this sense, they emphasize the need for climate justice in order for the natural environment and those living in it (human and nonhuman alike) to, in the words of William Rueckert, "*coexist, cooperate, and flourish in the biosphere*" ((107). Interestingly, prominent American literary scholar and

ecocritic pundit, Cheryll Glotfelty, has put forward a workable definition of ecocriticism. In *The Ecocriticism Reader*, which she co-edited with Harold Fromm, she states:

Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. (xix)

It's noteworthy, though, that the term ecocriticism was first floated by the American scholar William Dodge Rueckert in a seminal 1978 essay titled *Literature and Ecology: An experiment in Ecocriticism*. He advocates what he calls an 'ecological vision', namely that nature and nonhuman forms should be shielded from man's disregard for the environment. The idea that abiotic forms, the natural habitat and animals should have champions that articulate their rights features prominently in Rueckert's ecological vision. His definition of ecocriticism captures a sense of urgency in the face of 'self-destructive or suicidal motive' which, in his estimation, "is inherent in our prevailing and paradoxical attitude to nature" (107). He views ecocriticism as,

The application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world we all live in of anything that I have studied in recent years. (107)

To study the interrelation of literature and the environment helps, doubtless, bring in stark relief the manifold toll wrought by the environmental crisis with an eye towards, if not calling time on it, at least curbing it. Ecocriticism shifts from a tunnel vision approach that misguidedly regards humankind as solely being on the receiving end of ecological devastation to a holistic approach that takes cognizance of nonhuman life forms. An anthropocentric view tends to overlook environmental tragedies meted out to the nonhuman world, hence its shallowness. Human rights and environmental protection intersect. It then becomes an ecological necessity to put a halt to the human damage to the environment, or else it will spell a collective suicide engulfing the ecosystem and those living in it all together. A seasoned twentieth-century American academic and ecologist, Aldo Leopold speaks of 'biotic,' arguing for an expansion of human ethical compass to what he calls "the third element in the environment," namely "soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land" (2). An extension of human empathy to the nonhuman will surely go a long way to stemming the widening scope of land despoliation.

Ecocriticism takes on a particular hue in the postcolonial African context. That is, the coinage of the term 'postcolonial ecocriticism' is not perfunctory by a long shot. It is rather something of a pushback effort, a gap-filling exercise whereby writers from formerly colonized societies seek to analyse environmental degradation through the lens of colonial legacy. The unimpeachable coloniality of resource exploitation and its attendant retinue of human cum environmental devastation is foregrounded in postcolonial African literature. Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley contend that "There is ample scholarship demonstrating that Western discourses of nature and the environment have been shaped by empire" (10). Lynn White Jr. sees eye to eye with DeLoughrey and Fromm when he posits: "the present increasing disruption of the global environment is the product of a dynamic technology and science which were originating in the Western medieval world against which Saint Francis was rebelling in so original a way" (14). The short shrift given to the plight of postcolonial communities (especially those from continental Africa) in Western ecological epistemology has given rise to the term 'postcolonial ecocriticism.' Postcolonial environmental literature posits that there is no divorcing colonial praxis from the Western-sanctioned culture of land and resource exploitation in formerly colonized societies. Deeply conscious that, as the late prominent Martinican-born novelist, essayist, poet, philosopher, and cultural theorist, Edouard Glissant, said "the individual, the community, and the land are inextricable in the process of creating history" (106). The postcolonial writer uses the ecocritical frame to foreground the primacy of oil

exploitation and land despoliation as the drivers of environmental disfigurement, with its attendant gruesome fallout in formerly colonized societies.

Oil on Water: a synopsis

Oil on Water came out in 2010 to critical acclaim and criticism. It recounts the untold devastating toll of the oil petroleum in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria through the perspective of two Nigerian journalists commissioned by their respective journals to go to Irikefe Island in order to interview a notorious rebel commander, and get proof of life of the kidnapped British woman. The seasoned journalist Zaq and his younger colleague Rufus were not privy to what they were letting themselves in for when they accepted the assignment in the first place. A few days into the voyage to the oil-rich region of the Niger Delta, they came to the glaring realization that their task was not a push-over by any means. Militants and government soldiers are embroiled in a bloody war. As the full-scale horrors of oil exploitation and the ongoing armed conflict opposing Nigerian federal forces and militants of the Niger Delta hit home – the narrator speaks of “*bloated bodies, animal carcasses, burnt out houses and huts, oil slick, blown up pipelines, flare-ups*” –, Zaq and Rufus started asking themselves if the game was worth the candle. After all, they were not dead sure that they would be back to Port Harcourt in light of the hazards of the journey. In a world where oil companies and militants are slogging it out, the civilians are helplessly caught in the crossfire. The multifaceted ravages of the petroleum industry are captured in the Doctor’s confession to Rufus that “*This place is a dead place, a place for dying*” (90). Thankfully, the ending of the novel vindicates the two journalists’ call to take up the assignment.

I. The human and nonhuman toll exacted by oil exploitation

Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* is, doubtless, a reproach to the oil industry’s devastation of the environment. Indeed, the cost of environmental degradation is two-pronged: human life and nonhuman life are severely affected. Zaq and Rufus encounter something of a psychological trauma in their eagerness to reveal the truth about Isabel, a British woman kidnapped by rebels fighting for environmental justice. Through a grittily pictorial description, Rufus (from whose point of view the story is narrated) shares his experience of a physical and marine landscape utterly disfigured from the combined effects of rash resource exploitation and war. Rufus waxes emotional as he portrays the despondency of villagers forcibly stripped of their land by multinational oil companies and their local sidekicks for merely self-serving ends. A village chief’s rebuttal of oil men and politicians’ “*offer to buy the whole village*” so that “*they could relocate elsewhere and live a rich life*” (38) captures the predicament of people in oil deposits-rich areas. The narrator recounts:

...Chief Malabo had said no, on behalf of the whole village he had said no. This was their ancestral land, this was where their fathers and their fathers’ fathers were buried. They’d been born here, they d’ grown up here, they were happy here, and though they may not be rich, the land had been good to them, they never lacked for anything. (39)

Environmental injustice points to a man-made destruction of the environment and those living in it against a backdrop of undisguised relentless oil exploitation. Villagers living in oil-producing areas have had their lives upended on the altar of the self-serving interests of multinational oil companies and their local sidekicks within government circles. The brutality of oil expectation throw villagers into a harrowing quagmire, leaving them struggling to make sense of their lives. Oil exploitation is Janus-faced. Beneath the veneer of improvement to the lives of the people, multinational companies fleece them while doing untold damage to the natural habitat. Oil drilling oftentimes breeds disillusionment, and, consequently, armed agency as a way out. When Zaq asks Chief Ibiram how he and his fellow village men feel about the settlement of oil companies on their soil, he is astonishingly raw. The narrator reports that,

Once upon a time they lived in paradise, he said, in a small village close to Yellow Island. They lacked for nothing, fishing and hunting and farming and watching their children growing up before them,

happy. The village was close-knit, made up of cousins and uncles and aunts and brothers and sisters, and, though they were happily insulated from the rest of the world by their creeks and rivers and forests, they were not unaware of the changes going on all around them... (38)

Chief Ibiram casts a wistful look back at the past prior to the advent of oil extraction. The praxis of oil exploitation equals that of colonization in moral sanctimony, brazen cultural heritage destruction, wanton moral and physical cruelty, profiteering - you name it. Just as in colonial times, neo-colonial exploitation is race and economy-based. Oil companies are Western-owned, and have an eye for the main chance. In this sense, regard for the ecosystem and those living in it takes a backseat to gross profit-making. This supercilious neo-colonial attitude factors into the pervasiveness of destitution, erasure of cultural heritage and displacement of whole communities from their ancestral land. To get a sense of the cultural violence of oil exploration, consider the fate of the sculpture garden which harbours a good many figures, and which has been destroyed as a result of oil drilling. In a one-on-one dialogue with Rufus, a worshiper wistfully says, "*The sculpture garden is the shrine to which the whole community is dedicated*" (83). The praxis of multinational oil companies bears a racial camouflage, to borrow a phrase from the late African literary giant, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o.

The forcible removal of entire postcolonial communities from their land to make way for oil exploitation creates what is called in environmental psychology 'place attachment injury.' For ease of readability, I'll break down 'place attachment injury' into two distinct entities: place and attachment injury. After that, I'll elaborate a bit upon 'place attachment injury' as it captures the massive suffering of communities living in oil-rich areas of the Niger-Delta. Speaking of place attachment, Setha M. Low and Irvin Altman expand upon it as follows:

The word "attachment" emphasizes affect; the word "setting" focuses on the environmental settings to which people are emotionally and culturally attached. ... Place, our general lexicon, refers to space that has been given meaning through personal, group or cultural processes. (5)

Place attachment factors into a person's sense of security and, above all, of their identity. The emotional or affective bonding of a person to a specific physical setting creates what Harold Prohansky calls 'place identity,' viz. "*those dimensions of self that define the individual's personal identity in relation to the physical environment by means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings, values, goals, preferences, skills and behavioural tendencies relevant to a specific environment*" (155). Place is an enabler of identity expression and affirmation. Understandably, people living in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria feel hard-done by as they are driven out of their land for purely economic motives. Forced displacement in the backwash of oil exploitation or war packs a punch in terms of psychological well-being, exemplified by the phenomenon of place attachment injury. Just as attachment injury refers to an emotional wound stemming from a breach of trust or betrayal during an hour of need, so is place attachment injury a rupture in the bond linking a person to a physical setting.

The human toll of oil extraction is, as said earlier, manifold, and, perhaps more significantly, unbelievably mind-boggling. It is writ large in the description of Rufus who portrays a physical and marine landscape whose former beauty gives way to desolation and chaos. The journalist bears witness to:

a piece of cloth, rolling loge, a dead fowl, a bloated dog belly up with black birds perching on it, their expressionless eyes blinking rapidly, their sharp beaks savagely cutting into the soft decaying cloth. Once we saw a human arm severed at the elbow bobbing away from us, its fingers opening and closing, beckoning. (34)

There is a pattern of utter desolation and disfigured landscape village after village. Villages surrounding the Niger Delta Region are turned into shadows of their former selves. Rufus describes one village as a village of sorts, saying "*It turned out this wasn't a village at all. It looked like a setting for a sci-fi movie: the meagre landscape was covered in pipelines flying in all directions, sprouting from the evil-*

smelling, oil-fecund earth. The pipes criss-crossed and interconnected endlessly all over the eerie field (34). Both human life and nonhuman life are impacted by environmental degradation in the aftermath of oil extraction. Thus German scholar and American literature scholar, Hubert Zapf advocates “*a shared sense of ecosystemic mutuality between human and nonhuman life*” (136).

Deserving elaboration is that corruption, graft and resource exploitation go hand in hand. That is, oil companies are not the sole villains of the piece with regard to the unspeakable suffering induced by oil extraction. Actually, politics have skin in the game. In a synergistic urge politicians of the blackest dye and in cahoots with oil companies, strong-arm local communities living in oil-producing areas into caving in to their demands. Chief Malabo exemplifies the nefarious interrelation of politics and oil drilling. When he turns down on behalf of his whole village an offer by oil companies to buy the village in return for loads of money, he is manhandled with “*his hands tied behind his back as if he were a petty criminal*” (40). Worst of all, he wraps up paying the ultimate price when the concerted efforts of oil executives and politicians fail to make villagers budge. Chief Malabo signed a contract under duress which paved the way for the brazen settlement of the oil companies in the village, with “*a whole army, waving guns and looking like they meant business*” (40). As the narrator recounts:

They had a contract, they said, Chief Malabo signed it in prison before he died, selling them all of his family land, and that was where they'd start drilling, and whoever wanted to join him and sell his land would be paid handsomely, but the longer the people held out, the more the value of their land would fall. (40)

Oil wealth stokes up corruption, bad governance and, more to the point, has the potential for adversely setting back hard-earned democratic gains. Corruption and bribery make powers that be blind to the plight of impoverished communities impacted by unrestrained oil exploitation. A doctor posted in the countryside is so exercised by the horrors of oil extraction that he calls into question his presence on the ground, despondently confessing to Rufus that : “*there's more need for gravediggers than for a doctor*” (93). The Doctor laments that his warnings about the rising level of toxins in drinking water has cut no ice with the government who, according to him, were content to only thank him before dumping the results in some filing cabinet (93). But he takes heart from the NGOs that helped him publish his results in international journals. Speaking of the oil companies, they too were half-hearted about tackling the issue head-on. Instead, in a move calculated to stop the Doctor's well-meaning drive towards environmental justice, they sought to buy him off. The Doctor states,

When I confronted the oil workers, they offered me money and a job. The manager, an Italian guy, wrote me a cheque and said I was now on their payroll. He told me to continue doing what I was doing, but this time I was to come to him only with my results. I thought they'd do something with my results, but they didn't. So, when people started dying, I took samples and recorded the toxin in them, and this time I sent my results to the government. (92-93)

In light of the foregoing, it's no wonder that the phenomenon of ‘resource curse’ is more salient in postcolonial nations than elsewhere across the globe. Apoku Adabor and Ankita Mishra explain that resource curse, aka *paradox of plenty*, “*refers to the inability of many resource-abundance countries to fully benefit from the stock of natural assets or wealth (such as crude oil, natural gas, and other minerals) available freely in the environment*” (1). The phenomenon of resource curse is compounded by the staggering level of corruption in oil-rich countries like Nigeria. The earth-shattering scope of political and financial malfeasance in Nigeria is such that even, James Floode, the oil executive expatriate whose wife is kidnapped by militants fighting for climate justice in the Niger Delta region, cannot help but take up the cudgels on behalf of impacted communities. He unequivocally registers his sympathies with the militants when he says,

There are countless villages going up in smoke daily. Well, this place Junction, went up in smoke because of an accident associated with this vandalism, as you call. But I don't blame them for wanting to vandalize the pipelines that have brought nothing but suffering to their lives. (107)

Destitution, excruciating shortage of food and portable water as well as pollution of the environment are inscribed in the life of the communities living in the Niger-Delta. Western nations' unquenchable lust for accumulation drives the occurrence of contaminated water, oil slick, land despoliation, death-related diseases, and destruction of natural habitat. The fallout from environmental devastation is insidious. That layer of insidiousness is what the South African academic Rob Nixon characterizes as 'slow violence.' He elaborates upon the term as follows:

By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. (2)

Man-made ecological damage is a form of invisible violence the adverse effects of which slowly but stealthily eat away at the fabric of human life and nonhuman life alike. Rob Nixon mentions "*climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, biomagnification, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes*" as constitutive of 'slow violence' (2). The success of any clarion call for environmental justice entails tackling head-on this explosive cocktail. *Oil on Water* displays the backwash effects of the environmental crisis as long-lasting and wide-ranging. Every stratum of the society, every facet of environmental life is literally impacted.

The abundance of oil deposits in Nigeria have paradoxically brought about a lack of prospects for a better future amongst communities living in the Niger Delta. Thus the staggering rate of school dropouts and youth unemployment is distressful for parents, taking a huge mental and physical toll. It takes little to no time for the youths who fall by the wayside to be conscripted into armed militancy. To keep this bleak prospect at bay, parents go the extra mile for their kids so that they will not know the same fate as them. Rufus's father and that of Michael are cases in point. Michael and Tamuno, described in the novel as the old man and his son, are in the words of the narrator "*guiding Zaq and Rufus in these contaminated waters that they depended upon for livelihood, daily throwing in a line and hoping, always hoping, that something would bite*" (36). Desperate to see his son have a future, Michael pleads with the two journalists to take him to Port Harcourt. Understandably, the request caught Rufus and Zaq off guard. When he realized Zaq and Rufus were not amenable to the idea of taking Tamuno to Port Harcourt for logistical challenges, the young boy erupted into tears. His father looks at the journalists with a melting gaze. Out of sympathy, Zaq caves in, saying, "*I will take him.*" When Rufus asked, "*Are you sure?*" Zaq sought to placate his colleague's misgivings: "*I'll find a place for him somehow. And he could be an office boy at the Star*" (37). Thereupon, Zaq turns to the boy and reassures him soothingly: "*Now, you, stop crying. Let's go*" (37). The likes of Michael are the human faces of the ravages of oil exploitation in postcolonial nations. Rufus laments that unemployed youths "*play cards and drink all day, always complaining about the government*" (100). The anger felt by the youth in communities impacted by oil extraction is for real. Rufus recalls seeing that anger in fellows he went to school with, saying, "*some of them were now in the forests with the fighters, some of them had made millions from ransom money, but a lot of them were dead*" (100). Terrifying testimony!

Emphatically, oil production in impoverished communities are a site of innumerable suffering. Disease outbreaks and their attendant deaths are a daily occurrence. They are caught between the rock of high energy demand and the plate of unchecked resource exploitation. In this sense, the Puerto Rican-born American sociologist Diana Hernandez is justified in branding those areas on the receiving end of oil drilling "energy sacrifice zones" which, according to her, "*have been characterized as an unfortunate by-product of high demand for energy coupled with the lack of comprehensive energy policy designed to protect areas that generate the energy sources modern society takes for granted*" (3). The predicament oil production areas is compounded by lack of safety nets and mechanisms geared towards mitigating the

effects of land despoliation. Protection of local needs to anticipate avoidable fatalities take a backseat to grossly nefarious profit-making.

II. Postcolonial ecocriticism: a site of resistance to neo-imperial ecological violence

Postcolonial ecocriticism can be regarded in many regards as an act of agency geared towards pushing back on neo-imperial ecological violence. As stated early, the racism of environmental injustice is writ large in the Western-sanctioned undisguised scramble for oil extraction in postcolonial societies. Multinational oil companies make up a wildly exploitative bunch that seeks to deprive postcolonial nations of their wealth. This supercilious mind-set is challenged in postcolonial ecocritical writing as it reflects historical continuity. What is resistance in the first place? Well, it signals that the injustice you have endured is past bearing and you need do something to effect positive change. Resistance is thus is never born in a vacuum. As Anatheia Portier-Young appositely posits:

Acts of resistance proceed from the intention to limit, oppose, reject, or transform hegemonic situations... as well as systems, strategies, acts of domination. Resistance is effective action. It limits power and influences outcomes, where power is understood as an agent's ability to carry out his will or her will.
(11)

Oil on Water is, doubtless, a reproach to the egregious aftermaths of oil drilling by Western-owned multinational oil companies. The novelty and gravitas of Habila's ecocritical bent lies in his recourse to a mode of journalistic narration that combines raw objectivity and gritty pictorial description to pack a punch. The floor is equally given both sides of the divide for a balanced output. As it happens, Zaq and Rufus are journalists in their own rights who, in the face of overwhelming odds, display awesome courage and resilience as they seek to not only bear witness to the human and environmental toll of oil exploitation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria but also to get at the bottom of the backstory to the kidnapping of a British national. Rufus's journalistic praxis is unerring in that it is anchored on a view of journalism that blends talent, credibility, flair, and readiness. He quotes Zaq as saying: "*The mark of a good journalist is the ability to know a story when it comes, and to be ready for it, with the words and the talent and the daring to go after it*" (73). Although the hazards of the voyage to Irikefe Island were more than they bargained for, they stuck it out in the name of a journalistic ideal that, lo and behold, pays ultimately off.

Resistance is inscribed in Zaq and Rufus's graciously unflinching acceptance of the physical and mental woes associated with their assignment. Undaunted by their imprisonment twice, Zaq and Rufus have cheated death many times during the voyage to Irikefe Island. But they have stuck it out. With jaw-dropping objectivity, Zaq and Rufus push the envelope of resilience and courage to get at the bottom of the story. They see fit to give the floor to both of the belligerents, to wit government soldiers and militants. A commander of the federal forces known as the Major voices his bafflement as to why the two journalists elected to stick their neck out coming to Irikefe, enquiring, "*Why did you come here to a war zone? You could get killed. Are you looking for fame? Is that it? Tell me how you came here*" (98). For all that, they remain unyielding in their well-meaning determination to get out the story. In a surreal scene, Rufus wrongs-foots the Major, saying "*We want to interview them, your prisoners. We want to hear their side of the story*" (98). Though caught unawares by the question, the Major tries to regain his wind with a savvy comeback: "*I'll bring them over here right away and you will listen to them and afterwards you tell me what you think*" (98). Rufus smells a rat. His reply to the Major feels raw but courageous and genuine from a professional perspective: "*No. don't bring them here. If they think you ordered the interview, they'll be guarded, they won't open up. Tonight, lock us up with them, let them think that we are also under suspicion*" (98). Thereupon, the Major, albeit a hard-hearted military man, yields. Rufus's adamant refusal to embark upon a course of action that would fly in the face of his journalistic etiquette speaks volumes about his feistiness cum professional compass.

Postcolonial ecocritical literature is emphatically a literature of resistance to neo-imperial domination. It feels like an anti-colonial struggle, nay a life and death struggle for social and climate justice as well as political freedom from centuries of race-based oppression. Colonial oppression reached fever-pitch, and necessitated resort to violence in many colonized societies to bring to an end. Postcolonial subaltern peoples are undeniably taking a leaf out of anti-colonial nationalist fighters as they strive to push back against neo-colonial domination in any shape or form. Cajetan Iheka emphasizes that violent oppositional resistance is a colonial legacy, saying that, "*Postcolonialism inherited violent resistance, among other things, from the anticolonial struggle, typified by the popular Mau Mau insurgency against the British in Kenya and by the militancy of the African national Congress (ANC) youth wing against apartheid in South Africa*" (85). Resistance against foreign domination is inscribed in African psyche. Postcolonial ecocriticism underscores the interplay between colonial seizures of indigenous lands by cut-throat invaders and postcolonial land despoliation by Western multinational oil companies. From this perspective, there is divorcing environmentalism from ecocriticism. As the Indian scholar Pablo Mukherjee writes:

Surely, any field purporting to theorize the global conditions of colonialism and imperialism cannot but consider the complex interplay of environmental categories such as water, land, energy, habitat, migration with political or cultural categories such as state, society, conflict, literature, theatre, visual arts. Equally, any field purporting to attach interpretative importance to environment must be able to trace the social, historical and material co-ordinates of categories such as forests, rivers, bio-regions and species. (144)

In *Oil on Water*, resistance and the dogged quest for environmental justice comes in form of a bloody rebellion pitting federal soldiers against militants of the Niger Delta region. Needless to say that the civilians die in droves as they are caught in the crossfire. They are left to the tender mercies of both belligerents, and, unsurprisingly, made to face harrowing retribution for supposedly passing on information to their enemies. Villagers' chariness to let in on the militants thwart Zaq and Rufus in their strenuous quest to find the head of the militancy so as to interview him about the kidnapped woman. Witness what a nurse named Gloria who tended to the British woman answered Rufus when he tried to pump her for information about the kidnapped British woman: "*No. I attended to her only once. There were men holding guns in that room. Wearing masks. I was too scared even to look at her properly*" (143). Though wide-eyed with astonishment, Rufus pressed his advantage: "*Then what*" (143). Gloria wrapped up coming clean: "*Well, afterwards one of the men walked me out and told me if I talked about the woman or about the men to anyone, terrible things would happen to the community, and it would be my fault*" (143). Both the militants and federal forces have struck the fear of God into villagers.

As already stated, militancy is espoused by impacted communities as a means of registering their discontent, and ensuring implementation of workable energy policy with an eye towards remedying their predicament. Consequently, they reject kook, line and sinker their characterization as terrorists by the likes of the Major. As Henshaw, a militant commander, admits to Rufus: "*We are the people, we are the Delta, we represent the very earth on which we stand*" (149). The Niger Delta is, to borrow Hernandez's phrase, an energy sacrifice zone left to its own devices. Faced with the stark unwillingness of the government to relieve them of their extremity, impacted communities of the oil extraction rely on armed resistance as the only off-ramp to betterment. Plainly, the Niger Delta is fighting for its own survival. So the fate of the British woman pales into insignificance beside the interest of the people who bear the brunt of environmental abuse through oil extraction. When Rufus asks Henshaw if the British woman is still alive, his reply somewhat captures the ideological bedrock of militant agency:

"Is that all you want from me, to tell you whether some foreign hostage is alive or not? Who is she in the context of the war that's going on there, the hopes and ambitions being created and destroyed? Can't you see the larger picture?" (148)

The larger picture is nothing short of a life and death struggle for survival against neo-ecological imperialism. Building on from Alfred Crosby, Serpil Oppermann views 'ecological imperialism' as "the intentional destruction, through exploitation, extraction and transfer of natural resources of the colonized lands in the interest of scientific and economic progress" (179). It goes without saying that *Oil on Water* is a postcolonial novel. As such, it is a withering critique of colonization and its aftermath, namely land grab and environmental degradation brought about by the petroleum industry. Although African countries achieved statehood many decades back, the legacies of colonization continue to impact every facet of life in formerly colonized societies. For all that, *Oil on Water* can in many regards be looked on as a novel of hope in spite of its excruciating charge of environmental, political, and social commentary. Interestingly, Rufus and Zaq have something to show for their strenuous effort. By a quirk of fate woven into authorial dexterity, Rufus was able to find and interview Isabel. Much as the latter's release is not explicitly described at the end of the story, reading between the lines, it's safe to contend that the kidnapped British woman has won freedom. Rufus's soliloquy on the last but one page of the novel is telling: "I thought of Isabel out there in the forest, waiting. She might not have long to wait. This could all be all over by tomorrow [...] A fortnight hence and she'd be look back and this would all be nothing but a memory" (215). This is a sanguine prophecy.

When all is said and done, suffice it to say that *Oil on Water* holds a mirror to the exacting toll of oil extraction on the human communities, and nonhuman life forms of the Niger Delta region. Through the lens of even-handed journalistic witnessing, and raw imagery thrown in for good measure, Habila brings to light the earth-shattering magnitude of the human and environmental crisis spawned by relentless oil extracting. Over sixty-five years after the demise of colonization, Third World peoples, not least continental Africans, are subjected to new form of dehumanization against a backdrop of environmental degradation. The relevance of postcolonial ecocriticism lies in its construction as an ideological praxis hallmarked by its swingeing indictment of Western anthropocentric bent with its gross disregard for the 'biotic community.' In this sense, it serves as an uplifting theoretical frame that calls out corruption, graft and bribery of African ruling classes as enablers of environmental abuse. The Niger-Delta militancy, for all its human rights abuses through ransom money demands and intimidatory tactics, strikes a blow for freedom and environmental protection.

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