

ETHNIC DISSIDENCE AND ECONOMIC DISPARITY IN NIGER DELTA LITERATURE: HINDSIGHT FROM HELON HABILA'S *OIL ON WATER*

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Abstract

*Historical evidence reveals that prior to the discovery of oil and its subsequent exploration in the early 50s, the oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria was widely known for its relative peace, communal ties, mutual coexistence and minimal altercation among diversified ethnicities cohabitating the region. However, ethnic strife and tribal wars set in, consequent upon the discovery of oil in 1956, which ultimately sowed the growing seeds of distrust and disdain among people that once lived in relative harmony. While these resentments are commonly adjudged as ethnically inclined or tribally induced altercations, this essay argues that they are deeply rooted in economic disaffect among the dominant tribal groups; with each group battling for survival and supremacy. Oftentimes, available literature from the Niger Delta region tends to highlight the phenomena of environmental degradation, resource control and identity crises among others, leaving for the most part, the lingering crisis of tribal wars and inter-ethnic conflicts. Thus, through the appropriation of the novel genre, which provides nuanced information and desired avenue for story telling than any other literary form, this essay attempts to explicate the horrendous experiences of minority tribes in the Niger Delta region, whose environment and humanity have been degraded and botched on accounts of their cultural identities and ethnic affiliations. As literary work of art, the novel, *Oil on Water*, represents oppression, tribal rift and resistance in clear actions thus, highlights an aspect in literary scholarship not previously approached by related studies.*

Key Words: Inter-Ethnic Conflict, Dissidence, Economy, Resource Control, Marginalization

Introduction

Niger Delta experiences have been documented in various repositories such as memoirs, autobiographies, reportages and oral songs among others. However, nothing quite vividly captures the realities of dissidence and deprivation, which subsequently invoke the spirit of violent revolt, like the Niger Delta literature – be it prose, play or poetry. For example, Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*, *The Fate of Vultures and Other Poems* and *Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Crises of the Nigerian State*. In their distinct forms of literary expression, the evocative images of polluted rivers, decimated landscapes and suffering etched on faces of inhabitants who live in the aftermath of an ecological destruction of the Niger Delta region are artistically portrayed for humanistic gaze and global outcry. Those images have become recurrent descriptive motif/theme in most discourses of the Niger Delta literature dating back to the late 1950s when oil was first discovered in commercial quantities at the poverty-stricken village of Oloibiri in present-day Bayelsa State. Tanure Ojaide describes the Niger Delta as the “area of Nigeria where multinational oil corporations have done massive environmental damage through oil spills, blowouts, gas flares and other forms of ecological despoliation” (vi). As the natural oil reservoir for Africa's highest oil-producing nation, the Niger Delta region of Nigeria can hardly be ignored, given its economic position and role in the African nation. By virtue of being naturally endowed with crude oil, also called black gold, the Niger Delta attracts the attention and interests of oil-producing and servicing companies, which both negatively and positively affect the region. Nnimmo Bassey in his foreword to Ike Okonta and Oronto Douglas's *Where Vultures Feast: Shell, Human Rights and Oil* aver that “four decades of oil production and violence enacted on the environment of the oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta have led to major dislocations in the lives of the people” (ix). These major dislocations have quite naturally become motifs of interest to the literary world and in effect generated a corpus of work within an ecocritical field, championed by the works of Tanure Ojaide, Ken Saro-Wiwa, J.P Clerk, Hope Eghagha, to mention but a few. As Charles Feghabo observes, “the predominance or concentration of ecological literature in the Niger Delta region derives from the reality that the region remains one of the most ecologically devastated in the world” (96). Clearly, these scholars and creative artists show, through their art, that the region continues to bear witness to neglect from the multinational oil companies that continue to extract oil and dump wastes that decimate the flora and fauna of

the region, hence the stiff resistance by inhabitants, most of whom are dispossessed adults and marginalized youths.

Against this backdrop, the bulk of literature emanating from Niger Delta region, which by extension is a postcolonial African literature, react in a myriad of ways to colonial incursion, neo-colonial presence, governmental injustice/unfairness, military campaign, lopsided resource control and stereotypical representation of the inhabitants of the region as second class citizens. However, Julius Nyerere had once cried out for resistance when a similar scenario was meted out on his people. He writes *inter alia* "We have been oppressed a great deal, we have been exploited a great deal, and we have been degraded a great deal. It is our weakness that has led to our being oppressed, exploited, disregarded. Now we want a revolution – a revolution which brings to an end our weakness so that we are never again exploited, oppressed and humiliated (Nyerere: 235). While Nyerere's postulation above was directed against colonial imperialists, his wake-up call finds echo and elevation in today's Niger Delta region. This is because the same instrumentality of violent revolt and stiff resistance could be applied to fight neo-colonial incursion of the Niger Delta region. This is achievable through the literary depiction of the economic disparity in the Niger Delta region.

Review of Related Literature on the Text

Oil on Water by Helon Habila is often critiqued using an eco-critical barometer. For instance, in a study conducted by Abubakar Salihu, titled *An Ecocritical Reading of Subjectivity in Helon Habila's Oil on Water and Kaine Agary's Yellow-Yellow*, the critic attempts "to investigate the representation of postcolonial subjectivity and the portrayal of ecological degradation" (Salihu v) in the texts under study. He explores the "far reaching consequences on the human socio-cultural fabrics" paying zero attention to the emancipatory struggles of characters under the weighty burden of economic strangulations. In his view, the two "texts succinctly capture the exploitation and the struggles of oil rich Niger Delta" (vi). In his study, characters are portrayed as undergoing persecution as the heavy price for revolt against the power that be. Such characters are marginalized thus: "resort to violence against the government and the multinationals as an expression of disaffection" (v), hence resist every attempt for further economic exploitation. While Salihu's study provides an invaluable insight into the analysis of *Oil on Water*, it falls short of highlighting the fictional resilience of individual characters in form of an outright revolt or resistance that poses an existential threat to their ways of life, subsequently

improve their status quo. This knowledge gap constitutes the corner stone of the current essay. "The human costs of oil extraction in the Niger Delta, writes Salihu, emerge clearly from the first page of *Oil on Water*" (36). Starting with a dream-like description of the oil accident that still haunts the memory of the protagonists, the reader is immediately confronted with the brutality of oil's ramifications, which find in Boma's disfigured face a powerful image of that pervades all the narrative and proves the trail of injuries left behind by oil. However, besides these injuries and other health issues caused by illegal bunkering, gas flares and oil spill, the most tangible evidence of the negative impact that the oil business has on the Niger Delta inhabitants is violence, perhaps resistance. In this regard, the novel *Oil on Water* "presents a delta which appears like a war zone, where the military is in conflict with the militants who sabotage oil production and kidnap foreigners for ransom. In this war-like situation, Maximilan Feldner argues "there is more need for gravediggers than for doctors" (523).

In addition, Feldner is yet another scholar who in his writing on Helon Habila touches on the "paradigmatic example of the concept of petro-culture, something (the novel) shares with several other novels from different geographical locations" (523). In his study titled *Representing the Neo-colonial Destruction of the Niger Delta: Helon Habila's Oil on Water*, Feldner argues that Habila's novel is literature in pursuit of social damage caused by the oil extraction in Niger delta" (525). While the pursuit of social damage occupies a superficial position in the novel, a deeper exploration reveals legitimate struggle against perpetual injustice, hence resistance literature. The novel is further viewed from an ecological angle where the literary critic (Feldner) suggests that it "vividly displays the destruction of the social structure and ecosystem of the Niger Delta through the neo-colonial actors, who show no concern for human and nature" (525). Although the novel achieves remarkable success in dealing with the task of the day, it "offers no solutions nor suggests political alternatives, and that Habila fails to provide us with some proactive measures... the numerous challenges confronting this poverty-ridden and violence-prone nation" (Feldner 525) of the Niger Delta. The only exceptional case being that of a character simply named Professor, who stands for the militants and claims to be the force fighting against the federal and international exploitation of the region. "The Professor's position in the novel, writes Feldner, "is that the actions of the rebels are not the cause of disruption in the Niger Delta, but a product of them" (521).

Additionally, the next article to be examined is titled *We are the Delta: Nature and Agency in Helon Habila's Oil on Water* by Hand Felicity. The title of the article itself is suggestive of Felicity's concern with the ecocritical underpinnings of the novel. He goes on to argue, perhaps through non-living character profiling of individual actors, that "the victim of barbarity inflicted on the Niger Delta is the very earth from which the crude oil is extracted" (Felicity 107). In his deeper analysis of the novel, the literary critic observes that, "there appear to be three groups in the Niger Delta struggle in *Oil on Water*: There are the soldiers sent by the federal government who keep the oil business running; the armed rebels who fight to protect the environment... and the local villages who find themselves wedged in-between" (107). Although the resilience of militant groups and the naivety of the villagers in the Niger Delta are both acknowledged and downplayed by the literary critic, his unmistakably obsession with the land, as the prime victim of oil exploration comes full blown when he posits that "In *Oil and Water*, narratives of resistance are downplayed as the reader's attention is drawn to the everyday experiences of environmental degradation which, I claim, places the land at centre stage" (Felicity 108). While some readers' attention to the narratives of resistance might be downplayed in the novel, as Felicity would like to argue, our concern in this essay is primarily with such key element of narrative where characters' acts resilience is celebrated as freedom fighters, hence resistance literature.

Moreover, Mara Fiorini's *Petrofiction: Oil and Literature in Oil on Water by Helon Habila and 419* by Will Ferguson is another venture into an explication of the resistance narrative in Habila's *Oil on Water*. His work, unlike the previously reviewed literature which deal majorly with environmental violence deliberately committed on mother earth, focuses on the two main aspects that surface in the novel, name: the human aspect of native communities endangered by this situation, and the environmental aspect of the Niger Delta degradation (Fiorini 5). On the textual structure of the novel, Fiorini adjudges *Oil on Water* chiefly as a literary text built on "a confused narrative structure and a journalistic undertone to mirror the chaotic situation in the Niger Delta" (5). In spite of the artistic presentation of the chaotic situation, the novel equally strives to strike a narrative balance between the ensuing skirmishes on one hand, and an attempt to restore parity among Niger Delta citizens. In this regard, "the novel presents a government that appears to be absent until the moment it needs to exercise military control and abuses of power over a region, which is

considered important only in terms of natural assets and not human lives, who are seen as an obstacle to the profit machine" (Fiorini 37).

In the same vein, the narrative in *Oil on Water* apparently justifies the actions of the rebels by presenting the reasons behind their behaviours and considering one of its protagonists in person of Professor, not as a mad man who shoots people for fun, but as a principled man with an agenda. In this respect, the reader "might read the novel as an espousal of environmental heroism, analysing it, in other words, from the ideological viewpoint of the Professor himself, who claims to symbolize and defend a deep unity between the long-suffering land and people" (Fiorini 36). The critic further observes that "this interpretation might be seen as problematic (especially) in the way it doesn't take seriously the novel's textual uncertainties, beginning with the Professor's implication in the escalating violence" (Fiorini 37).

Furthermore, the novel *Oil on Water* is further appraised as a work of art that constantly revolves around violence, captured in journalistic flavour. With reference to the violent episodes reported by Rufus, readers have noted how "the military and the militants resemble each other to a striking degree, and the novel indicates that it does not make a big difference to the Niger Delta inhabitants whether they are terrorized by the militants or the soldiers" (Fiorini 36). Hence, Habila stresses the fact that humanity in Niger Delta is the actual victims of the unsound situation.

Ethnic Dissidence in *Oil on Water*

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* captures quite evocatively the ecological war that erupts shortly after the discovery of oil in the naturally endowed but economically impoverished Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The novel joins the list of numerous available fictional narratives (such as Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*, Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*) on the theme of petrodollar, perhaps the only difference being its journalistic flair. Seen in this light, one can add that the novel has attracted tidal waves of appraisal from both literary and linguistic points of view, (See Simon, E.D, et al. "Environmental Degradation, Militancy/Kidnapping and Oil Theft in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* and Feldner, Maximilia's "Representing the Neocolonial Destruction of the Niger Delta: Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*". with each analysis tilting towards post independent Nigerian quagmire. This section intends to add to the growing number of literatures on the novel by excavating the often

ignored but deeply embedded resilience of the inhabitants of the Niger Delta region who have been exploited and oppressed for many decades.

The novel is a good example of the socio-economic struggle of a distinct people, whose collective destiny has been sharpened by certain historical antecedents. The novel further digs deep into the Niger Delta identity, searching for political, social and religious reasons for existence and resistance in a post-colonial environment that has been utterly degraded and uprooted. It portrays the region (Niger Delta) as 'a sacred land' with symbolic gesture to both the indigenous people and their unwelcome visitors. For the Niger Delta people, their land occupies a sanctimonious place in their cosmology, which ought to be protected by all means necessary, hence their stiff resistance to neo-colonial incursion by the white oil workers/explorers and their Nigerian political allies. At the base of every single crisis in the novel therefore, is land and its naturally endowed resources which each of the opposing elements lays claim to. While the people of Niger Delta are no doubt the legitimate owners of the land and its resources, their refusal to succumb to external pressure from the white oil explorers' results in the ensuing skirmishes throughout the novel. We read in the opening pages of the text that when the oil explorers visit Chief Malabo's village "they had made an offer to buy the whole village". The narrator goes on to tell us that "there was a lot of money, more money than any of them had ever imagined..." (23). Seen as an early sign of resistance however, "the chief had said no on behalf of the whole village" (24). For Chief Malabo, the land "was their ancestral home, this was where their fathers and their fathers' fathers were buried. They had been born here, they had 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" (P 44).

On a deeper level, the novel searches for solutions to oppressive problems and problems of displacement of the self in the homeland. It explains how oil spillage remains an immediate cause of resistance occasioned by political and social reasons related to the power of colonial and neo colonial periods. Moreover, by highlighting the destructive power of oil extraction in the Niger Delta, *Oil on Water* can be seen as a paradigmatic example of the concept of petroculture, something it shares with several other novels from different geographic locations, including Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* (1987), Linda Hogan's *Mean Spirit* (1991), Charles Red Corn's *A Pipe for February* (2002) and Paolo Bacigalupi's *Ship Breaker* (2010) (Wenzel 158). Petro-culture is located at the intersection of post colonialism and eco-criticism and links such

geographically dispersed places as Nigeria, Alberta, Siberia and Ecuador in the attempt to write the importance and ubiquity of fossil fuels into the cultural and social imaginaries of the global North and South.

Habila's novel certainly "foregrounds the impact of energy on literary form at the periphery" (Szeman 281), but in the logic of petroculture's advocates it can only represent one of the more obvious instances of a work of petrofiction. Not limited to those cultural texts that emphasize the violence and destruction caused by oil and petroleum, petroculture takes into account all the ways culture is affected and influenced by oil, seeking "to connect and compare resource texts from all points, or links, in oil's value chain, from (semi-) periphery to core, (refined) pipeline liquid to global stock liquidity" (Macdonald 300). *Oil on Water* may provide only partial insights into an "aesthetics of oil" that can be "uncovered by comparing the recurring motifs, systemic connections and structures of feeling produced by oil modernity" (291), but its focus on one particular site of extraction effectively reveals the dark underside of the oil business.

Central to the crisis is militancy. Youths who have seen the futility in engaging with both the government and oil companies for a fair distribution of the gains of crude oil sourced from their region take up arms and culture-based resistance to disrupt further mining activities which would impact on the economic gains of the government. Kidnapping of oil workers, oil bunkering and destruction of oil installations are some of the ways they voice their discontent. This is evidenced by some utterances and proclamation of a kidnap kingpin named Professor who says inter alia "By this time tomorrow, one of the major oil depots will be burning...I am responsible. I can tell you the war is just starting. We will make it so hot for the government and oil companies that they will be forced to pull out" (Habila 109).

Oil on Water: An Overview

In *Oil on Water*, the Niger Delta is depicted as a war zone, where the military is in conflict with militants who sabotage oil production and kidnap foreigners for ransom. Readers encounter this situation both through Rufus's perspective and his interviews with the various participants in, and victims of, the conflict in which they get a chance to present their point of view. Two important characters in this respect are the Major, a military leader, and the Professor, one of the rebel leaders. The Major portrays militants like the Professor and his followers as little more than thugs and bullies and blames

them for the situation in the Niger Delta, arguing that “they call themselves freedom fighters, but they are rebels, terrorists, kidnappers” (Habila 96). When Rufus is a prisoner of the militants and gets a chance to interview the Professor, he hears the opposing view. The Professor argues that the rebels “are not the barbarians the government propagandists say we are. We are for the people. Everything we do is for the people, what will we gain if we terrorize them?” (P 209).

In contrast to the Major’s opinion, the Professor’s position is that the actions of the rebels are not the cause of the disruptions in the Niger Delta but a product of them. In this regard, the novel’s narrative confirms the Professor’s standpoint, as it portrays the militants as a direct consequence of the destructive oil production. Recruited from the impoverished inhabitants of the Delta, their actions are both their only viable source of income and an outlet for their frustration and anger. Discussing its natural resources, Okonta and Douglas note that the Niger Delta is one of the world’s richest areas. Apart from its substantial oil and gas deposits, there are extensive forests, abundant wildlife, and fertile agricultural land where rice, sugar-cane, plantain, beans, palm oil, yams, cassava, and timber are cultivated. The Delta is also famous for its fish resources. It has more freshwater fish species than any other coastal system in West Africa. (63)

Yet, as far as its population is concerned, it is also “one of the poorest and most underdeveloped parts of the country” (19). Farming and fishing, the main livelihood for many in the Delta, have been made impossible due to the pollution caused by the oil production. In *Oil on Water*, Rufus notes that their “rivers were already polluted and useless for fishing, and the land grew only gas flares and pipelines” (39). Most other jobs are provided by the oil companies, but are hard to come by. One character in the novel is “actually a university graduate who, like a lot of young men in the Delta, had been forced to take a job far below his qualifications while he waited for that elusive job with an oil company” (183). Kidnapping and oil theft, therefore, are some of the few activities that earn the Delta inhabitants some money.

In addition, there is a sense that the militants represent the continuation of the anti-oil agitations of the 1990s. Faced with brutal oppression by the military government under General Abacha, most visible in the hanging of writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other activists, the anti-oil activists resorted to violent resistance. In the novel, the myths surrounding the Professor allude to this narrative of resistance. He is believed to have worked “for an oil

company, and one day he grew disgusted with the environmental abuse and he became a militant to fight for change" (P 96). He would therefore have been part of the armed groups that, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, sprang up across the Delta, sabotaging pipelines, stealing the oil and kidnapping oil workers (Falola and Oyeniyi 99). The violence in the region is a result of the struggles over the control of Nigeria's oil resources, a fact that is not mentioned in a BBC report that Rufus watches: "Some oil companies had already stopped sending expatriate workers to the region, and were even thinking of shutting down their operations because the cost was becoming higher than they could bear, and this possibility was already causing a tension in the oil market, with prices expected to rise in response" (Habla 106).

The report talks about the effects of the kidnapping on the international oil market and is thus one of the few instances in which the perspective of Rufus's narration is extended beyond his immediate experiences in the Delta. His interview with James Floode is another opportunity for a statement exposing the position of the oil companies. Floode is predictably unsympathetic concerning the situation of the Nigerians. He believes that they are themselves responsible for the poverty and chaos in the country, having wasted its potential through corruption, violence and vandalism. Rufus angrily responds to these charges by emphasizing the perspective of those who actually live in the Delta, and by outlining their reasons for resistance:

I don't blame them for wanting to vandalize the pipelines that have brought nothing but suffering 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. [...] And you think the people are corrupt? No. they are just hungry, and tired (Habla 107–108).

In this passage, Rufus wholeheartedly condemns the destruction of the Niger Delta, the ensuing suffering of its inhabitants and the callous attitude of the oil companies and politicians towards them. Even though Rufus rarely voices his own opinion this explicitly, it is clear that he tends to side with the people in the region, especially with the displaced villagers living in poverty. This is not surprising, considering that the oil production has directly affected Rufus's life. His father was without a job and tried to earn some money peddling stolen petrol. One day, his supply blew up, not only badly burning the face of Rufus's

sister, but also destroying their home and causing the disintegration of his family. Beyond this family tragedy, Rufus might have ended up a militant or a soldier, had he not gone to journalism school believing that journalism was one of the few employment opportunities open to him. Many young men like him joined the militants, having been disillusioned and angered by the government, the lack of prospects and the general situation in the country: "I had seen that kind of anger before in many of my friends, people I went to school with; 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" (Habla 100). Rufus is familiar enough with these men's stories to know that he easily could have been one of them.

Although Rufus might feel a connection with the militants, his narrative does not shy away from the moral complexities of their fight against the military and the oil companies. Indeed, the military and the militants resemble each other to a striking degree, and the novel indicates that it does not make a big difference to the Delta inhabitants whether they are terrorized by the militants or the soldiers. As Leerom Medovoi points out that, the Professor can even be compared to the oil companies, using the same green washing rhetoric to justify the acts of violence his group has committed. Depicting him like "an ecocritical 'professor' who espouses the environmental 'truth' without acknowledging his language's complicity with the existing political ecology of petroviolece" (22), the novel shows "that the discourse of environmental advocacy can become not only a form of hypocrisy but also, at its worst, a screen for killing" (22). The blurring of clear moral lines regarding the militants and the military further contributes to the atmosphere of confusion and disorientation that pervades the novel.

The young men in the Delta have few opportunities, except to join either the rebels or the soldiers – the latter to some extent represented as much as the victims of the circumstances as the former. Even the Major is motivated by a tragedy in his family, his daughter having been raped by her university colleagues. Fighting in the name of order and stability, the military should be a positive force. They do not, however, act in the interests of their fellow Nigerians but in those of neo-colonial transnational companies and corrupt elites who exploit and destroy the livelihood of the region. In addition, the Major discredits the military with his ruthlessness and brutality. According to him, the only language the militants understand is violence and there "are no human rights

for people like them. You jail them and, in a year, they'll be out on the streets. The best thing is to line them up and shoot them" (Habla 97).

The Major's attitude towards the militants is problematic but not completely unjustified. In several instances Rufus experiences the rebels to be as brutal and merciless as the soldiers. If it was violent oppression and the lack of opportunities that caused them to assume their fight, violence and destruction are the only methods at their disposal to resist the devastation of their country and their lives. As a result, the rebels have become a violent force in their own right. The lines of conflict run not just between the military and the militants but are more complex, including hostilities among the various rebel groups. The Professor distinguishes his own unit from other rebel groups, whom he calls "criminal elements looting and killing under the guise of freedom fighting, but we are different. Those kinds of rebels, they are our enemy" (Habla 209). He claims to be fighting for his land, urging Rufus to make public the situation in the Niger Delta: "Write only the truth. Tell them about the flares you see at night, and the oil on the water. And the soldiers forcing us to escalate the violence every day. Tell them how we are hounded daily in our own land. Where do they want us to go, tell me where? Tell them, we are going nowhere. This land belongs to us. That is the truth, remember that" (Habla 210).

While Rufus's narration ultimately leaves open the question of whether the Professor's group should be considered freedom fighters or terrorists, his sympathies undoubtedly lie with the displaced Delta inhabitants, whose perspective is privileged in the novel. Rufus and Zaq spend some time with the community of Chief Ibiam. His uprooted village serves as a typical example for the way many of the Delta communities have suffered from the "oil wars, caught between the militants and the military, and the only way they could avoid being crushed out of existence was to pretend to be deaf and dumb and blind" (Habla 33). Chief Ibiam's village was one of the places where oil was found, and for the drilling rights they were offered "a lot of money, more money than any of them had ever imagined" (38). However, observing the negative consequences of the oil drilling in neighbouring villages, Chief Ibiam understood that the consequence of these short-term riches would be the permanent destruction of their basis of existence, and so he resisted the offers. His community was pushed off its land nevertheless, and since then it has been on the move, "mere wanderers without a home" (Habla 41). Chief Ibiam tells their story as literally a lapse from paradise, an account which enhances the tragedy of their displacement: "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” (38). In the hope of being able to make a living in an urban area, they are edging closer to the city of Port Harcourt, where the community “would be swallowed up, its people dispersed, like people getting off a bus and joining the traffic on the city streets” (178). Oil production in Nigeria therefore also serves as a negative factor for urbanization. Rufus and Zaq come across several abandoned and derelict villages, all resembling each other. They testify to this rural exodus:

“The next village was almost a replica of the last: the same empty squat dwellings, the same ripe and flagrant stench, the barrenness, the oil slick, and the same indefinable sadness in the air, as if a community of ghosts were suspended above the punctured zinc roofs, unwilling to depart, yet powerless to return” (P 9).

Descriptions like this, of places where the oil wells have made life impossible, not only manage to convey a sense of sadness and loss through their literary language. They also make palpable and comprehensible the troubling fact that the Niger Delta has become one of the world’s most threatened human ecosystems.

Rufus therefore learns about the social consequences of the oil extraction in his conversations with the various characters. At the same time, on his trips through the Delta he witnesses first-hand much of the damage to the natural environment. The narrative constantly provides indicators of the state of an ecosystem polluted by oil and destroyed by the unceasing gas flares. For example, Rufus notices the thick smoke the gas flares produce: “I went and sat on the hill to stare at the water and the faraway gas flares that emerged suddenly from pillar-like pipes, holding up their roof of odious black smoke” (Habila 139).

Even more strikingly, the novel captures the sheer pervasiveness of the oil pollution. It contains numerous references to the ways oil has infused the environment, including “the evil-smelling, oil-fecund earth” (Habila 34), “the oil-scorched earth” (175), or the “bubbly film of oil on the wood” of the boat Rufus travels on (73). Remarks such as “the water under us had turned foul and sulphurous” (9) allude to the fatal consequences of the oil pollution which causes sickness and death. Rufus learns that the destruction of the Delta’s wildlife, dead livestock, withered plants and sick humans is a result of the gas

flares and the rising level of toxins in the water. Accordingly, during his time on the boat, Rufus notices “dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fishes bobbed white-bellied between tree roots” (9); he sees “a dead fish on the oil-polluted water” (5). Other strange objects float by, such as “a piece of cloth, a rolling log, a dead fowl, a bloated dog belly up with black birds perching on it” (33), and there are “carcasses of the fish and crabs and water birds that floated on the deserted beaches of these tiny towns and villages and islands every morning, killed by the oil” (175). Considering this display of death, his observation that “the weight of the oil [is] tight like a hangman’s noose round the neck of whatever life form lay underneath” (215) is certainly befitting.

This last quotation indicates that one effect of the imagery in *Oil on Water* is the personification of the landscape. Just as a hangman’s noose lies around the neck of a person about to be hanged, the oil is about to suffocate the Niger Delta. Several images connect the oil-polluted landscape to a sick, dying or dead person, such as the grass “suffocated by a film of oil, each blade covered with blotches like the liver spots on a smoker’s hand” (9), “the stumps of pipes from exhausted wells with their heads capped” (175) and the pipelines “criss-crossing the landscape [...] like diseased veins on the back of an old shrivelled hand” (175). Similarly, the condition of the older journalist Zaq, an alcoholic plagued by a form of dengue fever, reflects the state of the Delta’s ecosystem. When the Doctor tells Rufus that “Your friend, I am sorry to say, is dying” (89), this statement might be extended to refer to the Niger Delta at large.

Conclusion

The essay argued that literary creativity in the Niger Delta region is both irrigated and harvested by the unceasing socio-political and economic turmoil, induced by the rippling effects of colonialism and the resultant attempts by postcolonial subjects to challenge the existing status quo and cultural practices. This revolt/rebellion resulted in all forms of socio-political upheaval in postcolonial states, the height of which is violent resistance and communal clash among the inhabitants of the region. The novel, *Oil on Water*, has foregrounded that resource-control of the Niger Delta region, which is heavily lopsided, remains the most visible motif throughout the narrativity of the text, except in some few instances where cultural up-rootedness of the indigenous peoples is at stake. Consequently, an examination of the text revealed insightful

perspective on the plight of a distinct region akin to the proverbial goose that lays the golden eggs. In the same vein, the situation of postcolonial subjects has not changed much over time thus, the problems of oil spillage, inadequate infrastructure and collapsed educational institutions which can barely meet the needs of the citizens of the nation are still prevalent. Thus, *Oil on Water* advocates for political will and violent resistance as the *sin qua non* for complete liberation in the Niger Delta region. As portrayed by Habila, the social and political situations of the Niger Delta is unstable, hence successive governments in the post-colony are not doing enough.

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