

Environmental Injustice and Neocolonial Subjugation: A Study of Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

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Abstract

Humans and the environment are interconnected, and their reciprocal interplay fosters sustainable development. However, nowadays, due to the great industrial and technological development, a great derangement has occurred. In the fossil fuels world, we are immensely influenced by oil, and it serves as a cornerstone of modern civilisation, framing the societal norms, cultural identities and economic frameworks. The commodification of oil has radically transformed our lives. So, we can say that “Oil is our God...we all worship petroleum.” (*A Crude Awakening: The Oil Crash*). Niger Delta is located in the southern part of Nigeria, and this Delta is full of ecological abundance and a pivotal hub of oil production. Nigeria gained independence in 1960, but even after independence, it was not eligible to taste freedom at its utmost. The relentless march of prosperity and progress harms the ecosystem, endangering flora and fauna and damaging biodiversity. In this paper, I want to show how the oil spills and corporate greed have transformed Niger Delta into a devastating land and its impact upon the inhabitants in Helon Habila's novel *Oil on Water*. It represents the dark realities of neo-colonial resource extraction through American multinational companies and how the creeping force of slow violence has turned the utopian world into a dystopian wasteland.

Keywords:Petrofiction, Petroculture, Ecocide, Neo-colonialism, Slow Violence, Sustainable Development

Introduction

Our contemporary life relies entirely on oil and oil-based products, bringing a new dimension. We are now much more interconnected with crude oil and the production, consumption and transition process. If we look through the lens of energy humanities, we can see that oil will not merely come out as a commodity but as a driving force of the fossil fuel world. Amitav Ghosh (July 11, 1956), is the most prominent Indian writer who first talked about ‘petrofiction’ in his essay "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel". He

reviewed Abdelrahman Munif's masterpiece, a quintet *Cities of Salt*. Here, he significantly points out the replacement of the spice trade by the oil trade, and there is a lack of oil narratives in the world of literature of America, though it has a vital role in our modern life. In contrast, Nigeria has significant works on petrofictions. Helon Habila is a Nigerian novelist. Before becoming a novelist, he was a poet and a journalist, and through the journey of his career, he gathered firsthand experience of governmental suppression and media censorship. He was a student of English language and literature. In his writing, we always find a touch of Nigerian history, its political turmoil mixed with his personal experiences as he grew up in a situation of significant social and political changes. Nigeria experienced the oppressive regimes of military dictatorship when the voices of the writers and journalists were utterly suppressed, and they were arrested and killed. Helon Habila's novel *Oil on Water* is mainly centered on the Niger Delta, a reservoir of oil, a petroleum-rich region, which is also known as 'Oil Rivers'. This Delta region is sometimes called as an example of 'ecocide'. This word consists of two terms- 'eco' means 'environment', and another one is 'cide' means 'killing'. So, 'ecocide' means the continuous destruction of the environment by different kinds of human activities. In Niger Delta, a vast amount of people are living for farming and fishing as it has fertile land and easy access to water. It has transformed into an economic hub, and people are coming for job security in multinational oil companies and for business and trade opportunities. Gradually, this region has become a centre of conflict regarding resource control and corruption. The multinational oil-producing companies are depriving the local companies and their people, which bring an unstable situation. The process of oil production and consumption leads to environmental degradation. This situation inspired the local activists and community leaders to protest against this turmoil. This situation reminds us of Ken Saro Wiwa, a Nigerian poet, novelist, memoirist and essayist. He wrote many books – *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English*, *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy*, *A Month and a Day*, etc. In *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy*, Wiwa gives the picture of political and environmental degradation and its impact on the Ogoni people, a minority group of Nigeria. They were exploited and displaced from their homeland by multinational corporations, leading towards environmental genocide. Ken Saro Wiwa was mainly known for his environmental activities, and as a leader of the Ogoni people, he led the movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP). This movement had a total of nine activists, who were known as the 'Ogoni Nine' including Ken Saro-Wiwa, Daniel Gbooko, Saturday Dobee, Nordu Eawo, Paul Levera, Felix Nuata, Barinem Kiobel, Baribor Bera and John Kpuine. Still, this 'Ogoni Nine' mission was unsuccessful because of governmental repression. In 1995, they were sentenced to death by the Nigerian military government of General Sani Abacha. This situation greatly impacted Helon Habila's life, and that is why, in his writings, we find the portrayal of the actual history of oil production and consumption. In this paper, I want to show the environmental exploitation and the sufferings of the local people and how this leads towards slow violence and the deprivation of ecological justice from the perspective of neocolonial eco-criticism.

Narrative of the Novel

Oil on Water is an eye-opening novel in the context of Nigeria. Here, we can taste an exciting investigation mixed with a mystery that creates suspense in our minds and finally leads to the discovery of a harsh reality. Here we find that two journalists named Rufus, a young journalist continuously learning from his experiences and Zaq, a senior and more experienced one, whom Rufus regards as his mentor, start their journey to search out Isabel Floode, the wife of a British oil engineer, abducted by the militants. Niger Delta is a claustrophobic maze. Rufus knows “how confusing and indistinguishable from one another the interconnected rivers and creeks could be” (Habila 68). He also says that upon “entering an especially narrow channel in the river, our light wooden canoe would be so involved in the dense grey stuff that we couldn’t see each other as we glided silently over the water” (Habila 163). Here, the journey of these two journalists can be compared with the journey of Marlow in Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness*. In both cases, we find the journey towards the heart of darkness, which ends with exploring human suffering and moral corruption. The inhabitants are marginalized socially, politically and economically. Here, Habila points out another important aspect, which is the manipulation of media. As a journalist, he can relate to this. That is why he has portrayed an accurate picture of media representation. Rufus at first thought that through media, the real picture can be enlightened beautifully, giving voice to the marginalized, but later on, he realizes the politics of representation, which indicates the limited freedom of the press. So, the govern mentality is very much present here in order to make the discourses regarding the Niger Delta. At the end of the novel, we find that kidnapping is essential to set up poverty, displacement, and environmental degradation. The novel’s title is symbolic and significant in showing the region's disparity and conflict. If we look at the name of the novel, we find that it consists of two words that are very contradictory to each other. So, oil and water are two different elements, and if we put a few drops of oil on water, we can see that it will float. There is no chance of mixing together; they completely remain separate. So, there is a conflict between them, which indicates the conflict, the turmoil, the fragility of the region of Niger Delta, which destroys the fertile land, the environment and brings a significant change in people’s life.

Neocolonial Subjugation

Jean Paul Sartre, a French philosopher, first coined the term 'neocolonialism', which was first used and popularized by Kwame Nkrumah. Neocolonialism is the idea of indirect oppression, not in a direct way formerly done by the colonial authorities. The exploitation style has changed completely, not with any specific army or police but with multinational companies, corporate sectors, financial institutions, etc. Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972), the former president of Ghana, wrote a book named *Neocolonialism and the Last Stage of Imperialism*, which critiques Africa as it has become completely dependent upon the European or Western countries even after its independence. *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, a collection of essays by Jean Paul Sartre, also critiques colonialism and says that neocolonialism is another form of colonialism. Africa’s socioeconomic culture is very much shaped under the disguise of globalization by posing a challenge to traditional

values, implying that Africa is only politically independent but economically dependent upon Western countries. The novel *Oil on Water* shows us how multinational companies play the role of neo-colonial apparatus by creating an ideology. The same case happens with the journalist, Rufus and Zaq also, as they were unable to bring out the real picture of the Niger Delta. The multinational oil companies continuously betray the ordinary people under the shadow of industrialization and progression. They are always under the 'gaze' of Western people. 'The white man's burden' (Kipling) is constantly haunting them like a ghost. Black color people always feel inferior and incomplete to whites, and for this, there is always a 'lack' within them. This so-called 'lack' is very much constructed or systematically produced by the colonial or neo-colonial mechanism. Niger Delta is extremely rich in oil, but for infrastructural or developmental equipment, it always depends upon foreign companies, like-Shell, Agip, Mobil, Texaco and Chevron etc. The local peoples are losing their habitats and migrating to other places- they have lost their homes, land and identity. So, again, there occurs a 'lack' in their life. So, the local Chief, Ibrahim, ponders upon his beautiful memories and says that "once upon a time they lived in paradise, he said in a small village close to Yellow Island. They lacked for nothing, fishing, hunting, farming, and watching their children grow up before them, happy. The village was close-knit, comprised of cousins, uncles, aunts, brothers, and sisters..." (Habila 38).

Environmental Injustice

In this novel, *Oil on Water*, Habila wants to show nature's impoverishment and to bring out the politics behind this through the character, Rufus. Through his journey, Rufus records all his experiences; he says, "I wrote down all that I had witnessed since we left Irikefe yesterday: the abandoned villages, the hopeless landscape, the gas flares that always burned in the distance" (Habila 24). Rufus says that "rivers were already polluted and useless for fishing, and the land grew only gas flares and pipelines" (Habila 39). Here, we find a conflict between Major, the military leader and the local militants. The Major criticizes the militants like the Professor and says, "They call themselves freedom fighters, but they are rebels, terrorists, kidnappers" (96). This conflict and enmity lead towards petro-violence, creating a dystopia. Glotfelty told in the 'Introduction' to *The Ecocriticism Reader* that "[e]cocriticism has been predominantly a white movement. It will become a multi-ethnic movement when stronger connections are made between the environment and issues of social justice and when a diversity of voices is encouraged to contribute to the discussion." Through this novel, Habila wanted to give us the exact situation or the sufferings of the non-American countries. In the Western or developed nations, they are mainly concerned about the decay of nature, biodiversity, sustainability and how to protect them; here, they romanticize the wilderness, ignoring the colonial issues and the cry of the indigenous people. In Hegelian words, we can say that this is very much a 'linear' model of development, much like a 'teleological' process. It always carries a so-called motto, "back to nature," which we can find in Henry David Thoreau's book *Walden* (1854). In *Silent Spring* (1962) Rachel Carson shows the dangerous effects of pesticides, especially DDT. These pesticides are not only killing the pests but also poisoning the land and water, disrupting the ecosystem. On the other

hand, in developing countries, we can find the exact picture- the fight of the common people for their rights, the global inequality, the oppression or the subjugation of minorities. This is very much ruptured and fragmented, a history of the colored people. Rob Nixon, in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, gives importance upon the poor section of people. According to him, these people have a unique level of history, which we cannot find among the rich or upper middle class. The history of the poor people is not 'homogeneous'. Rather, it is very much 'heterogeneous', consisting of multiple classes, races, religions, genders and ethnicities. In the age of neo-liberalism, everything will be privatized, focusing only on the system of profit. In Niger Delta the multinational oil companies are building the economy by the process of resource extraction without pondering about the sustainability of the environment. This leads to 'slow violence', which is not an instant effect like the Bhopal Gas Tragedy in 1984, but it has a long-lasting effect. Gradually, this slow violence incurs slow, invisible destruction, causing environmental injustice. Vandana Shiva, an Indian-born environmental activist and scholar, is mostly known as an ecofeminist. In her book *Soil Not Oil: Environmental Justice in an Age of Climate Crisis*, she criticizes industrialization and fossil fuel dependency, which destroys biodiversity. She asserts that too much reliance on fossil fuels has fossilized our thinking process and made us blind.

Conclusion

The relentless exploitation of the multinational companies has jeopardized human lives, which results in environmental genocide, creating chaos and conflict between the Nigerian government and the local militants. This situation of topsy-turvy in the region of Niger Delta is described as 'petro-violence' by Michael Watt. Thus, Helon Habila, in his petrofiction *Oil on Water* has presented the actual grim truth of the 'black gold' in Nigeria, especially in the region of Niger Delta, which is known as the petro hub of Africa. So, the petrocultural view is very poignant here, as it shapes society, culture, politics, economy, and the environment. Habila has beautifully presented the neo-colonial impact on human life and the environment under the postcolonial paradigm, conveying that even in a highly devastating situation, resistance and survival are possible, so we have to raise the voice. He wants to eradicate the disparity between what Ramchandra Guha & Joan Martinez-Alier called as the "full stomach and empty belly environmentalism", which means the distinction between the "full stomach" of the Global North and the "empty belly" of the Global South needs to be removed in order to campaign an inclusive and fruitful ecological movement for a sustainable environment.

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