



**WAR FOR THE ENVIRONMENT IN HELON HABILO'S
OIL ON WATER**



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores war for the environment in Helon Habila's Oil on Water. The focus is to show how the advent of oil production has negatively impacted the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria due to unprecedented oil spillage, gas flaring, that pollutes the environment. It expostulates the consequences of human activities that have caused a climatic and environmental crisis that affects the biosphere with its adverse effects on the flora, fauna and landscape. Environmental crisis has resulted to an oil war where the inhabitants of the affected area seek to protect their environment from environmental predators - the government and multinational oil corporations. Oil spillage, gas flaring, sewage, oil theft, and war are identified in the novel as some of the human activities that degrade the environment resulting in mass death, sicknesses, dislocation and violence. Water, which is the people's source of livelihood, has greatly been contaminated

by oil and is no longer useful to the community. The resulting consequence is death, sickness, violence and displacement. However, in order to fight this war for the environment, Helon Habila's text explores the factors that cause this war in order that we become part of the solution.

The ecocentric discourses of Cheryll Glotfelty, Christopher Manes and Graham Huggan, will be used to show how Helon Habila's Oil on Water raises awareness on a global environmental crisis- water, air, and land pollutions, that have rendered the environment in the Niger Delta of Nigeria, harmful to its populace. The text shows how the quest for petrodollars leads to environmental degradation, putting man in conflict with nature and society, thereby, giving rise to a war that is ravaging the Niger Delta of Nigeria and increasing the people's predicament whose, land, water and air are in ruins due to the release of toxins from the oil companies.

KEYWORDS

war, environment, biosphere, pollution, oil spill

RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

From time immemorial, man has connected in one way or the other to his/her surroundings. The biotic and non-biotic variables have had an impact on life form existence as, “healthy ecosystems rely on the complex web of animals, plants, bacteria and fungi- all of which interact, directly or indirect, with each other” (Melissa Denchak par. 6). Harm to any of these organisms creates a chain effect on the environment. Due to urbanization, industrialization and globalization, “the earth’s life support systems are under stress” (Glotfelty xvi), plaguing the world as seen in environmental crises such as pollution, global warming, depletion of the ozone layer, rising sea levels, deforestation, desertification and the extinction of species. Sewage, industrial waste, oil syphoning, gas flares, oil spill and war have degraded the environment and rendered the land, air, and water bodies toxic to humans and the environment. Chemical contamination, sewage, increased temperatures resulting to the death of many aquatic organisms, extinction of species in the flora and fauna, while causing illnesses to human beings such as typhoid, dysentery, respiratory and skin disease are all indicators of the global environmental crisis. Literary discourse has not been indifferent to this scenario. Aspects of the environment like nature, landscape, pastoralism and the frontiers have been handled in diversified ways by literary critics like Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee, Chinua Achebe, Chinwe Okechukwu, Kenjo Jumbam, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o though not as a literary studies institution or movements like the civil rights and women’s liberations in 60s and 70s to raise awareness on environmental concerns. Because the global environmental crisis is headline news on newspapers and television screens, literary discourse has diverted from its “hot topics” (Cheryll Glotfelty xv) like race, class and gender to environmental discourse and advocacy which have become contemporary topics that cannot be undermined in literary studies.

This paper explores environmental pollution on water, air and land, and its adverse effects on the environment as seen in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria in Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*. It reveals that oil forms are an integral part of the Niger Delta Region in Nigeria, but this valuable natural resources with its huge oil revenues do not benefit the residents, who live in abject poverty and unemployment. It has rather brought ruin, pain and untold suffering to the people. The presence of multinational oil companies with the corrupt nature of the government, has given rise to militants, who resist the destruction of their environment by the oil companies. Sule Emmanuel Egya refers to this resistance from the militants to the systematic destruction of the environment and its inhabitants “as a form of militancy which is provoked by a tripartite system of ruination, namely, the multinational oil corporations, the federal soldiers, and the local militias, who call themselves the militants (94). He notes that the oil companies cause the existence of the local militias and federal soldiers, set against each other to fight while the companies continue to release toxins in the air, land and water. At the end, it is the local communities that suffer and die from physical violence and terror unleashed on them by the militants and soldiers and also nonphysical, attritional violence that is worst (Egya 96). Militancy on the environment therefore arises as a need to fight against and confront the agents of destruction. The war therefore, is a form of militancy to liberate the region. It is an eco-war that has gained ground in this area to make the government heed to their demands. It is from this premise that the paper identifies militancy as a form of resistance to environmental ruination. Militancy therefore, is the main thrust of the story which has been well-crafted by Helon Habila to expose environmental degradation in the Irikefe Island, of the Niger Delta of Nigeria. He joins other literary writers like Tah Protus in *Immortal Seed*, Ambanasom Shadrach in *Son of the Native Soil*, J.M. Coetzee in *Elizabeth*

Costello, Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*, to castigate environmental pollution.

This paper examines oil spillage, gas flaring, sewage, oil theft, and war as some human activities that have caused a climatic and environmental crisis in Niger Delta region. It raises consciousness on the consequences of these human activities on the ecosystem, the biosphere and landscape in the Niger Delta Region as demonstrated by Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. The novel therefore, is a representation of what obtains on the Irikefe Island with regards to oil exploitation. Before getting into the analysis, it is necessary to define war and environment, which are the key terms and concepts in this paper.

The term 'environment' comes from the French word 'environ' which means surrounding- that is everything that is around such as humans, plants, animals, water, air, land, soil, light and microorganisms. The environment is the natural world in which people plants and animals live. It is the sum total of all living and non-living elements and their effects which influence human life. The living or biotic elements include plants, forests, fisheries and birds, while the non-living or non-biotic elements include water, sunlight, rocks and air. The environment referred to in my title refers to all that surrounds and interacts with man, both biotic and non-biotic elements. The main features of the environment that man is in connection with in this paper are water, air, forest, and land, which have been degraded due to oil production and war. Environmental degradation on the Irikefe Island has led to violence between the military and the local militia, also known as militants or freedom fighters, who are fighting for the protection of their land.

War in this paper will refer to the armed conflicts between different groups in the Niger Delta area over oil. Oil production in the Niger Delta Region has given rise to an "oil war" (Habila 37) between the federal soldiers and the militants, who are fighting for the protection of their land. Due to poverty, lack of employment, basic social amenities like schools, hospitals and good transport network, protests against oil company pollution of the environment, environmental degradation, kidnapping for ransom, sabotage and theft through oil syphoning have become hallmarks of the Niger Delta Region as depicted in *Oil on Water*. Habila presents militancy as a form of resistance and war for the protection of the environment though their activities as well are harmful to the environment. The militant groups which I refer to as Eco terrorists include, the Black Belts of Justice, the Free Delta Army, and the AK-47 Freedom Fighters (34-35) comprising of youths, criminals, and school dropouts like Professor, a militant kingpin. However, youth restiveness has equally become a major problem in this area. The community bears the brunt of the war as violence, looting and killing under the name of freedom fighting contribute to further degradation of the environment. The Eco centric theoretical perspective will be used to elucidate these facts.

Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as, the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (xviii). It takes an earth-centred approach to view, analyse and critique literature. It examines the way nature is represented in literature in order to raise awareness on environmental concerns in literary discourse which had been relegated in the past. Some postcolonial critics have argued that ecocriticism is Eurocentric by being attached to particular territories. It privileges the environment to the detriments of anthropocentric concerns which characterises postcolonial societies. Robert Spencer postulates that it is not "conscious of a history of colonial domination that has brought about appalling human and environmental exploitation" (33). It is in this light that Graham Huggan canvases for a postcolonial ecocriticism that accommodates the dynamics of postcolonial societies. Cajetan N. Iheka observes that poverty, underemployment and politics of exploitation make it impossible for African people in developing countries to appreciate and

conserve the environment as their western counterparts do (22). Graham Huggan and other postcolonial critics especially those in Africa, clamour for an inclusive perspective which considers historical and socio-cultural realities that characterises the postcolonial society. History and culture influence human relation to nature in postcolonial societies which tie with ecocritical premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it (Clotfelty xix). This is to say culture influences man's relationship to nature as seen in the way the people on the Irikefe Island relate with their environment. They depend on it for fishing, hunting and agriculture. They worship the sun and the moon, and believe in the healing power of the sea and air. Though nature is an integral part of culture, its voice is silence which exposes it to exploitation by man in various ways. Later bodies like seas, rivers, lakes are over exploited for fishing, the forest is being cut down for habitation and farm while sewage and chemical waste from oil production degrade the environment. Christopher Manes corroborates this view when he posits that "nature is silent and dumb in our culture" (15) predisposing it to exploitation. He argues that speaking is not the sole prerogative of humans. In addition to human languages, there is also the language of birds, the wind, earthworms, wolves, waterfalls (15) that should not be ignored. Manes looks at reasons that has submerged nature into the depths of silence and instrumentality. Mircea Eliade advocates we learn the language of nature in order to know the secrets of nature (Manes 16). Nature therefore should be given prominence as a character in literary discourse. Helon Habila's text, *Oil on Water* looks at the world not only from the socio-human perspective but expands the notion of the world to the entire ecosystem based on Barry Commoner's assumption that "everything is connected to everything else" (Clotfelty xix). He draws attention to the human and non-human world, particularly to connections between self, society, and nature, and texts. The theory investigates the ways in which writers represent different environments in literature and how this influences world attitudes to place. This theory is relevant to this paper in that it brings to the limelight some environmental issues that are plaguing the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria like oil spills, gas flares, loss of the mangrove forest, and depletion of fish populations in Helon Habila in *Oil on Water*. It also explores the different perspectives from which Helon Habila examines man's relationship to environmental elements like land, water, air, forest in his text, *Oil on Water*. The novel also looks at the environmental effect of war.

Man and the Environment

Set on the Irefeke Island, Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* lays bare the plight of the people in the Niger Delta Region in Nigeria, in which the activities of multinational oil corporations lead to environmental pollution that affects humans and non-humans. Though the story takes the form of a river journey in which two journalists, Zaq and Rufus's search for a kidnapped white woman, Isabel Floode, the wife of an oil executive, it uncovers the human cost of the oil industries in the Niger Delta. Through Zaq and especially Rufus's eyes, Habila exposes the wreckage perpetrated on the Nigerian natural environment (Agofure 249) by the activities of the extractive industries- the polluted rivers, the gas flares, violence, insecurity and injustice that characterize. Zaq and Rufus are not only reporting the kidnapping, they also investigate the crimes committed by the government through the military, the militants and the oil companies, hence identifying the three agents of environmental degradation in this novel. The first part of this paper will examine man's relation to nature in order to show how nature and culture are interwoven. The second part will examine the human and environmental damage inflicted on postcolonial Nigeria by colonization. It will show how traumatic colonization was to the indigenous people of Nigeria in general and Africa in particular.

Oil on Water reveals how silent and dumb nature is. Its inability to speak permits man to rule and subdue it. Due to its passive nature, humans have authority to control and domination nature the way they want which accounts for the simple and cordial atmosphere of the people to their environment before the coming of the oil company. From Chief Ibrahim's view point, his narrative shows how man was in harmony with his environment and the people were living happily and peacefully in their land:

Once upon a time they lived in paradise. It was a small village close to Yellow Island. They lacked for nothing, fishing and hunting and farming and watching their children grow 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 totally unaware of the changes going on all around them (42).

Chief Ibrahim's narrative is communal. The story is that of his people which he recounts. His diction, "creeks", "rivers", "forests" reveals that the region is endowed with an ecosystem that contains a high concentration of biodiversity which supports flora and fauna that provide habitats for many animals, fishes and birds which man has control over. These geographical features are very important for survival and constitute an essential part of all living things in Yellow Island. They also symbolise a natural form of insulation and sustenance. The community depend on them for a livelihood as fishing, hunting and farming are the main economic activities of the region, which made them live happily and lacked nothing. The river is vital to this community for humans and aquatic creatures for survival. This attests to the fact that the people are connected to nature and their environment. The peaceful coexistence with their environment makes Yellow Island a perfect place for families to live that is why Chief Ibrahim compares it to "paradise" (42).

In line with this Chief Ibrahim's story, Rufus reminisces his childhood days in the village with his sister, Boma, when they spent the whole night by the sea, in front of their house catching crabs; "when I was a boy, Boma and I used to spend the whole night by the water, catching crabs" (28-29). Rufus's point of view is an eye witness account of the sea's usefulness and sustainability to this community. It constantly surprised them with crabs, which they sold to pay fees, "that was how we paid our school fees when our father lost his job" (29). The sea is a symbol of provision and sustenance. Resources from the sea offered them the possibility to have money for fees when their father loses his job. Other inhabitants on this island like Tamuno, the fisherman, and his son, Michael, also depend on the water for a livelihood; "the villagers were fishermen, mostly making their living on the river that poured its water into the sea" (115). This validates the ecocentric view that nature influences the people's way of life and affects their thinking as well. Growing up by the seaside, Rufus is influenced by the environment and advocates for a peaceful co-existence between man and the environment.

Like the creeks, rivers and forests, land is also an integral part in the people's culture with ethical value. Their landscape has spiritual, physical and economic benefits that cannot be undermined. Land is revered because of its cultural importance "this was their ancestral land" (43) hence, they have a moral responsibility towards the land, "the land has been good to them, they never lacked for anything, they were happy here," (43). Their reverence for land resonates to the land ethics of Aldo Leopold who calls for a moral responsibility towards the natural world. According to Leopold, land ethics expand the definition of "community" to include not only human's but all of the other parts of the earth: soils, waters, plants and animals" or what he calls the "land." He identifies "land, water, plants and animals which grow upon it" (420) as other members of the biotic community which should be treated with

love and respect. Leopold's vision reveals that the relationships between people and land are intertwined, hence care of people cannot be separated from care for the land. That is why the shrine, a place of worship for the indigenes was built on the Island (114) after a terrible war that polluted the land and turned the water red. Priests from different shrines got together and decided to build this shrine by the river to cleanse the land from blood and pollution:

when the blood of the dead ran into the rivers, and the water was so saturated with blood that the fishes died, and the dead bodies of warriors floated for miles on the river, until they were snagged on mangrove roots on the banks, or got stuck in the muddy swamps, half in and half out of the water. It was a terrible time. The land was so polluted that even the water in the wells turned red. (115)

The sculpture garden with cultural artifacts or figures was also built to represent, "the ancestors watching over us. They face the east to acknowledge the beauty of the sun rising, for without the sun there would be no life" (128). The above excerpt shows how land is treated in this community with a lot of love and respect. That is why Chief Malabo refused the huge offer from oil companies to buy the whole village, and with the money they could relocate elsewhere and live a rich life. (43). Chief Malabo is a custodian of traditional values and an environmentalist, who is the main face of resistance to petrodollar. As custodian of tradition, no amount of money could be paid to him for their ancestral land to be sold out to foreigners, "Chief Malabo had said no, no on behalf of the whole village he had said no" (43). To protect their land from encroachment and resist the lure of oil money, which was short-lived, an island shrine was established for worshippers with sculptures representing; "the ancestors watching over us" (129-130). The people have a sentimental attachment to their land because it defines their existence. Chief Malabo is symbol of resistance to colonization in Nigeria. He represents those traditional rules of Africa who resisted foreign encroachment by rejecting the lure of oil money from multinational oil companies. Know how destructive colonialism was to the African society, he militates against the implantation of an oil company in their village which brings nothing good but environmental degradation and pollution. His cultural attachment to land influences his character, shapes his identity and affects his decisions on developmental issues in his community which eventually leads to his arrest and assassination by the government. This corroborates the ecocritical view that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Culture influences Chief Malabo's thoughts and decision concerning oil production in their region and his resistance to its implantation depicts his stance on protecting the environment from pollution.

Man's relationship to nature is also seen in the way the people on the island relate to air. Habila depicts the air as having healing powers. Naaman, the Chief Priest of the shrine at Irikefe village, highlights this view when Rufus is worried about Zaq's health and his decision to stay on the Island in spite of his deteriorating health. Rufus' wish for Zaq to see a doctor is opposed by the Chief Priest, who believes the air will heal him; "we have a nurse here and she will attend to you. But perhaps you won't need her. The air alone will heal you. I have seen it happen" (91).

Just like the air, the people also believe in the healing power of the sea as seen in a conversation between Rufus and Gloria, the nurse. The healing power of the sea has given rise to many worshippers on the Island (125-126) like Boma, who process into the sea each day to worship the sun; "for without the sun there would be no live." Boma has been sad and unhappy for a long time due to trauma from an oil accident that deformed her face, leaving her with scars, and a failed marriage to John as a result of the accident. She finds solace in nature at the Irikefe Island, when she goes in search of her brother, Rufus. She joins the worshippers and decides to stay on the Island like Zaq, "I've made up my mind to stay... I like it here. I like the people and I can feel myself relaxing in a way I haven't in a long time.

My spirit feels settled” (238). Rufus, the narrator, who is Boma’s brother, experiences the power of healing from the sea on his sister, “This was a place of healing and soon she will forget John, her scars would recede to the back of her mind and one day she’d look in the mirror and see they were gone. She would be happy here. I was sure” (239). He is happy that the environment has healed his sister to regain happiness, forget about John and her scars; “she looked well. There was a smile on her face. Well, you look healthy, happy. I am happy to see you back in one piece” (237). Boma joins the worshippers, “walking with them in a procession every morning and evening to immerse herself in the sea and sing a hymn to the rising and the setting of the sun” (234-235).

Nature has a strong bearing on the inhabitants of Irikefe Island and constitutes an integral part of their culture as reflected in their religious beliefs above. They worship the sun, the symbol of life, the sea, the land, the air, with shrines and sculptures build on the beach to incarnate these environmental elements that give meaning to their existence. It reveals how man has ethical values for nature, and how nature influences people’s culture and thought till the advent of colonization represented by oil production that caused total disintegration and trauma as will be seen below.

Postcolonial Trauma and Environmental Degradation in *Oil on Water*

Helon Habila’s novel, *Oil on Water* is a postcolonial ecocentric text which reflects some socio-economic realities and environmental hazards that are affecting the rich, oil Niger Delta of Nigeria in particular and the world at large in this era of globalization. The petroleum industry has polluted the environment to the extent that traditional sources of income like fishing and farming is no longer possible. There is resentment that the region does not benefit enough from the oil wealth. Resort to conflicts has been taken as the only way to expressing grievances by the Niger Delta’s minority ethnic groups, in the oil-rich communities in the region, who feel they are being exploited. (Akpan 85). The text reveals that the West and Europe through its multinational oil corporations, who are drumming up globalization exploit natural resources in Nigeria and developing countries in general. They control the economic, cultural, political and social life of Africans through African leaders who, collaborate with the colonizers to exploit the environment. This corroborates Maximilian Feldner’s view that although Nigeria is a formally independent state since 1960, Nigeria is still embedded in unequal neocolonial relationships under the guise of globalization with oil extraction being one of the manifestations of neocolonialism. Habila in the novel examines the impact of colonization via industrialization in postcolonial Africa while exposing some environmental issues that are plaguing the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria like oil spills, loss of the mangrove forest, depletion of fish populations and gas flaring.

The narrative portrays how colonization manifest through capitalism. Ime Ikeddeh in the preface to *Writers in Politics* posits that colonialism and capitalism are identified as twin brothers whose mission is to exploit the material wealth of subject people.” *Oil on Water* expostulates capitalist cupidity for building money empires on the sweat and blood of the colonized. The oil industries in postcolonial Africa are owned and managed by the colonizers, who exploit petroleum products for the interest of the countries. The postcolonial economic structure is revealed as a capitalist one in which the rich extort from the poor presenting capitalism as an extortionary system based on “theft and robbery” (Ngugi 19). Habila demonstrates how oil production in the Niger Delta has brought nothing but suffering to the lives of the inhabitants of the region (103). The people who welcomed “the orange fire that burns day and night” (152) happily, symbolized by the cars, TVs and video players in their front rooms, with promises from the oil companies to send their “kids to Europe and America to become engineers who will return and work as oil executives in Port Harcourt” (42) soon

noticed “the dangers that accompany the quenching flares” (153) symbolized by the cars that had broken, the cheap televisions and DVD players that were all gone (43) as seen in livestock that began to die, plants that withered on their stalks and people dying at an alarming rate (153) from oil leaking into the rivers and wells, killing the fish and poisoning the farmland, the people are told by the oil companies and the government that the pipelines are for their own good though “these people endure the worst conditions of any oil-producing community on earth” (104).

According to N.S Akpan and E.M Akpabio, the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria is the storehouse of Nigeria’s crude oil, which accounts for approximately 90 per cent of the countries revenue, providing more than 90 per cent of total exports. Despite this, the people remain poor, marginalized and restive. They lack basic social amenities of life like water, education, health, security, electricity and good transport network. The government, which is an agent of colonization, is aware of their plight but does nothing to alleviate the people’s predicament while the oil companies takes advantage of administrative silence to pollute the environment, leaving the area in total degradation. The water has been poisoned, there is destruction of the vegetation, agricultural land and good water source by oil spills which occur during petroleum operations. The river which used to be people’s source of livelihood as seen above, has been “polluted and useless for fishing, and the land grew only gas flares and pipelines” (43). Annie Gagiano points out that pollution of the Niger Delta waters and land through environmental degradation is the most obvious theme that the novel depicts. It reveals how human corruption of greed, irresponsibility and wanton violence that precedes the pollution of river waters and land- of which the oil-smudged natural scenery is merely the manifestation (Para 2). in line with Gagiano’s view, the novel depicts gas flares and oil spills as the key environmental issues in the Niger Delta of Nigeria which relate to petroleum and its industry. Though kidnapping seems to be the main theme in the novel, Habila uses Zaq and Rufus, two reporters on the kidnapping trail, as a ploy to seek; “the meaning of the story, which only a lucky few ever discover that” (5-6). The narrative therefore takes the form of a journalistic report not on the kidnapping – “the story,” (5) rather, the meaning of the story – which are facts that are untold or under reported with regards to kidnappings. The text show how far political decision can devastate families and disfigure innocent individuals for life, literally and psychologically and lays bare the real life-tragedy of the Niger Delta, in which petrodollars warps human relationships as surely as leaking crude poisons birds and fish. We will discover why facts unfolds in the manner. Through plot, characterization, style and narrative techniques, Helon Habila uses the multi point of view to paint a bigger picture of environmental pollution in *Oil on Water*. The novel depicts oil spills, gas flares, poor governance, displacement as some of the main problems faced by inhabitants in this environmental polluted area. He exposes the roles played by the agents of destruction who are; the multinational oil corporations, the military and the militants. The environment and society bears the brunt of a wreakless war that renders the land desolate. He lays bare the violence and youth restiveness that characterizes this area and foregrounds the predicament of a people who are caught in a war that ruins land and water, causing massive deaths, displacement, sickness and accidents.

Oil on Water exposes some environmental issues that affect the Niger region. The advent of oil production has negatively impacted the region as the area is in total degradation. The water has been poisoned, there is destruction of the vegetation, agricultural land and good water source by oil spills and gas flares which occur during petroleum operations source. The river which used to be people’s source of livelihood has been “polluted and useless for fishing, and the land grew only gas flares and pipelines” (43). Habila identifies gas flares, oil spillage as the major environmental issues related to petroleum and its industry in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. Environmental pollution is therefore central in *Oil on Water*. Through plot,

characterization, style and narrative techniques, Helon Habila's novel depicts oil spills, gas flares, poor governance, displacement as some of the main problems faced by inhabitants in this environmental polluted area. Though the area had huge oil revenues, it does not benefit the locals who live in poverty and lack the basic necessities of life like water, health, security, education and good transport network.

Oil spillage and gas flares are depicted as the major environment problem caused by colonial exploitation of oil in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. As mentioned above, oil production in the Niger Delta region brought nothing but disillusionment and frustration to the people. Jubilant villages that accepted oil money at the beginning soon realized that oil spills and gas flares that lit up the villages all day and all night soon realized that their rivers and land were already polluted and useless for farming. Oil spillage is a form of oil pollution that affects water quality in the text. Oil released into water bodies destroys wildlife and the ecosystems symbolized by the death of livestock, plants and human (153). Results from samples of drinking water and blood recorded by Dr Dagogo-Mark's lab depict the level of toxins in water and land. Chief Ibrahim confirms these results in a conversation with the fisherman, "they talked about the dwindling stocks of fish in the river, the rising toxicity of the water and how soon they might have to move to a place where the fishing was still fairly good" (18). Spills reduce oxygen supply within the water environment which is responsible for the death of aquatic creatures and vegetation. It has destroyed the mangrove ecosystem in the Niger Delta which was a good habitat for birds and fish as the narrator records; "over the black expressionless water, there were no birds or other water creatures" (11) hence, rendering the landscape and water barren and hopeless (26) by destroying the mangrove ecosystem in the Niger delta which was a good habitat for birds and fish as the narrator records; "over the black expressionless water, there were no birds or other water creatures" (11). Rufus, compares Irikefe Island in the past to the present one, and comes to the conclusion that the river has become harmful to humans and aquatic creatures. He records these scenes of devastation in an eye witness account he gives as he journeys through the river in a canoe, with his guide, the fisherman, and his son, Michael; "we saw dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and silk with oil; dead fish bobbed white-bellied between tree roots" (10). Oil has degraded the environment and turned its banks "brackish" (5). The adjective brackish shows how dangerous the river has become; "sometimes it was snake, twisting and fast and slippery, poisonous. Sometimes it was an oil jute rope...strange objects would float past us: a piece of cloth, a rolling log, a dead fowl, a bloated dog belly-up with black birds perching on it" (37). These images reveal that sewage is also a cause of water pollution. Water is no longer sustainable as Michael, the fisherman's son, ascertains; "no crabs here now. The water is not good" (28). As the narrator journeys further into the river, he sees "a bat flying overhead, a dead fish on the oil polluted water" (6). Rufus' analogy of Irikefe in the past and present reveals how destructive oil spills are to the environment. Water, their source of livelihood has been contaminated by oil thus, it is no longer useful for fishing to the people as it used to be in the past.

Oil Spillage is not only harmful to water bodies and aquatic creatures, but it also poisons farmland and destroys vegetation. Oil has rendered the landscape barren. Instead of the land producing crops, it rather grows gas flares and pipelines:

the meager landscape was covered in pipeline flying in all directions, sprouting from the evil smelling, oil-fecund earth. The pipes crisscrossed and interconnected endlessly all over the field. We walked inland, ducking under or hopping over the giant pipes, our shoes and trousers turning black with oil. Oil rigs (38).

The description above shows the effects of industrialization on land and how destructive oil is to the environment. Good agricultural land has been seized from the inhabitants to plant oil industries without the necessary compensation. Oil pipes crisscross all over the field making it impossible for farming to take place in such areas. Instead of the environment producing crops it is ironical that it grows pipelines as seen above.

The fact that pipelines crisscross and are interconnected all over the field, makes oil siphoning to become a big business carried out mostly by children while contributing to environmental degradation. Rufus' father depends on this to feed his family after he loses his job at the ABZ oil company (67). He buys drums of petrol from little children and sells to cars that come at night with the complicity of the police (69). While the popularity of selling stolen oil increases, the number of deaths and accidents also increase. The narrator tells us that there was an explosion in his father's barn with the oil drums that killed a number of people and destroyed Rufus' family. Boma, his sister's face was disfigured, which led to his father's imprisonment and his mother returned to her parents' village, where she still lives (3). John, Rufus' best friend, lost his father in the explosion. He later married Boma, whose obsession with her scars caused him to leave her and join the militants. Boma's scars, her marriage and John's father's death are indelible marks that symbolize the destructive effects of oil production on oil-production communities. Such explosions which are common in oil productions zone do not only lead to family disintegration but presents a bigger picture of the plight of the masses who suffer permanent damage and are left with scars that haunt them throughout life. Sabotage and theft through oil syphoning have become a major issue in the Niger Delta and contributes to further environmental degradation.

Habila in his narrative also portrays poverty as a problem face by the community that leads to oil syphoning. Though the region is blessed with big oil revenues that does not benefit the residents due to poor governance and services. The community in the text is a fishing one wherein villagers are fishermen. They make their living on the river (115) so, water and aquatic creatures are very vital for their survival as seen above. The inhabitants are poor and live in abject poverty as the narrator describes his guide, Tamuno- the fisherman, and his son, Michael: the boy looked no more than ten years, but growth stunted by poor diet, his hair was reddish and sparse, his arms were bony like his father's. they were both dressed in the same shapeless and faded shirts and trousers, their hands looked rough and callused from seawater. They smelled of fish and seemed as elemental as seaweed (7). The "reddish and sparse hair", "bony arms", "shapeless and fading dresses", "rough hands" and "smell fish" justify their poverty. The fisherman and his son, are symbolic representations of the inhabitants on the Island, who lack the basic necessity of life- food. Poor diet has stunted their growth and make them look older than they are. The narrator describes Gloria, the nurse in like terms. Like the fisherman and her son, poverty, worries and grief have left intimation lines on Gloria's face, "signs of habitual worry, or grief, and they were a few white streaks her hair" (126); which made her look old "I put her age at about thirty" (126).

In a dialogue between Zaq and Tamuno, the fisherman depicts how bleak and precarious the future is for youths whose traditional occupations of fishing and farming are no longer lucrative because of pollution. Youth restiveness has become a hallmark of the region as young people join the militants to make a living through kidnapping and demand for ransom. Like Refus's father, Tamuno, the fisherman, wants his son, Michael to leave the region and get to the city where he can learn a trade and live a better life compared to the one in the village. He urges Zaq and Rufus to take his son, Michael, to Port Harcourt where they can send him to school for his future is bleak in the Niger Region he has no future here "he no get future here... you go send am go school. Wetin he go do here? Nothing. No fish for river, nothing. I fear say soon him go join the militants, and I no want that (39-40). While boys joint

the militia, urbanization and industrialization in the eighties caused young girls especially, to migrate to urban towns in search of better opportunities. In a reminiscence, the narrator takes us to Bar Beach in Lagos in the eighties when young girls went to Lagos to look for opportunities. Most of the lady ended up as prostitutes on Bar beach. The lucky ones ended up pregnant and homeless on the streets, while the unlucky one died, their bodies discovered in the water days later. Others were raped brutalized, strangled and stabbed (119).

Gas flares associated with oil extraction is also an environmental problem in the Niger Delta that Helon Habila exposes in *Oil on Water*. Gas flares release toxins into the atmosphere and damage the air rendering it unsafe for birds and bats. Gloria attests to this; “these islands used to be a big habitat for bats; now only a few dozen remain here and there (127). She points at the faraway sky, towards the oil field- gas flares. They kill them. Not only the bats, other flying creatures as well (127). Gas flare coats the land and community with soot and damages the vegetation as the narrator reveals as he sat on the hill to stare at the water; “the faraway gas flares that emerged suddenly from the pillar like pipes, hold up their roofs of odious black smoke (139). According to Raymond Anyadike, Gas flaring creates thick plumes of smoke across the Niger Delta Region which blacken roof tops and a major cause of acid rain which corrodes homes with zinc-based roofing. It has contaminated the air around these communities and people have no choice but to use water contaminated by acid rainfall and other pollutants to drink and bathe. The community and militants have been calling for an end to gas flaring as one of their major grievances against the oil companies.

Gas flare is also harmful to human health just as it is to livestock. The release of poisonous chemicals into the air and water is detrimental to human health as people in the affected areas suffer from water and air related diseases. The water is infested with bugs and Zaq is suffering from dengue fever, which he contracted from the water; “somewhere in these godforsaken waters, that’s where he must have picked it up. There’re plenty of bugs flourishing here... I suspect his liver is gone already” (150). The Doctor refers to the water as a dead place; “I’ve been in these waters for five years now and I tell you the place is a dead place, a place for dying” (151). Like Gloria, he attributes this devastation to gas flares; “he pointed at the faraway orange sky. – Those damned flares” (151). Through a flashback, the Doctor takes us back to when oil was discovered, two years after his arrival in the village. The people feasted for weeks that they got their orange fire, planted firmly over the water at the edge of the village. Night and day is burnt without them taking note of dangers that accompanied the quenchless flares. Years later, livestock began to die, and the plants began to wither on the stalks. When people started dying, the Doctor took samples of the drinking water and blood samples to his lab, and discovered that the level of toxins in it was rising. Many people fell sick, a lot died from the same disease (153). He tried to raise awareness of the danger lurking in the wells and in the sky above to oil workers and the government. To his greatest dismay, the oil company offered him money and a job to bring his results only to them while the government thanked him and dumped the results in some filing cabinet without any tangible action to improve on the people’s lot. Dr Dagogo-Mark in his narrative to Rufus, exposes the challenges faced by people in these industrial zones. He decries the fact people in these communities live in abject poverty though oil is in large quantity and how corruption sustains this poverty. He portrays how corrupt Nigeria is, where only a few had access to the country’s wealth (103) while the masses die in poverty. James Floode confirms this assertion when he says, “you people could easily be the Japan of Africa, the USA of Africa but the corruption is incredible” (103). The narrator tells us that the people endure the worst conditions of any oil community on earth. The oil companies and the government are aware but because the government does not care, the oil companies too do not care. Nothing is done by these oil companies to improve on the lot of the host communities. The

government too does not care about the well-being of its citizens. The effect of environmental pollution through the activities of the oil companies shows that the future is bleak for youths. Conflicts and restiveness have been taken as the only way to expressing grievances in the oil-rich communities in the region.

Environmental pollution/degradation, poverty and lack of employment have giving rise to armed groups in the region and the major causes of youth restiveness. John, with other unemployed youths “hang out in backstreet bar rooms to placards and drink all day, always complaining of the government...he has been full of anger that pushed him to join the militants” (95). During TV news, youths are shown holding Isabel Foode’s picture and placards in front of an oil company in Port Harcourt, accompanied by a long, rote-like voice-over about poverty in Nigeria, and how corruption sustains that poverty (102). The narrator reasons with them and don’t blame them for vandalizing pipelines and set villages ablaze; “I don’t blame them for wanting some benefit out of 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 good, that they hold great potentials for their country” (103).

Habila presents militancy as a form of resistance and war for the protection of the environment. Chief Malabo, who is an important face of the resistance, together with the villagers refuse to sell their land to oil companies. Under his leadership, villagers armed with bows, arrows, clubs and guns, sent away government officials, oil-company executives, and politicians who try to lure them sell their land to oil companies; “the villages decided to keep them away by sending out their own patrols over the surrounding rivers, in canoes, all armed with bows and arrows and clubs and a few guns” (43). Chief Malabo; “was arrested, his hands tied behind his back as if he were a petty criminal, on charges of supporting the militants and plotting against the federal government and threatening to kidnap foreign oil workers” (44). He was later killed and before his burial; “the oil company move in. They came with a whole army, waving guns and looking like they meant business” (44). They presented a fake contract signed by Chief Balabo while in prison, selling them all his family land. They handsomely paid villagers, who join him to sell their land; “and that was where they’d start drilling...They sold. One by one. The rigs went up, and the gas flares, and the workers came and set up their camp in our midst, we saw our village changed right before our eyes (45). Through vivid description, Chief Ibrahim recounts how oil production gave rise militancy in the region. Their land was not only forcedly seized, but they killed their chief, moved into their land with an army and started drilling, which changed the face of their village, and brought war. Villagers had to move to look for a place where they can live in peace. In response to the narrator’s question, Chief Ibrahim says; “so your question, are we happy here? I say how can we be happy where we are mere wonderers without a home?” (45).

The militant groups whom I refer to as Eco terrorists, though their course maybe justifiable, they commit acts of violence against the population and the environment which they claim to protect. Fighting takes place not far from the pipelines and oil rigs and refineries as threat to government to meet their demands; “ what was certain, though, was that they never strayed too far from the pipelines and oil rigs and refineries, which they constantly threatened to blow up, thereby ensuring for themselves a steady livelihood” (7).The groups in the novel include, the Black Belts of Justice, the Free Delta Army, and the AK-47 Freedom Fighters (34-35) comprising of youths, criminals, school drop outs like Ani Wilson, popularly known as Professor, (157) a militant kingpin, “who used to work for an oil company and one day became he grew disgusted with the environmental abuse and became a militant to fight for change” (156). Though the government refers to them as “rebels”, “terrorists”,

“kidnappers”, instead of “freedom fighters,” (156) one thing stands out loud, youth restiveness which has equally become a major problem in this area. Criminal elements of these groups loot, kill, kidnap for ransom. Salomon, James Floode’s cook with his neighbour Bassey and a police officer Jamabo belong to this criminal gang. They organise the kidnapping of Isabel Floode to get back at her husband, James Floode, who impregnates Salomon’s girlfriend, Koko. To Salomon, the kidnapping is a “technical way of collecting payment for all the pains these people cause me, a refund for all my investment in Koko” (220). After all, the ransom money was not coming out of Floode’s pocket; “the oil company always pays the ransom” (221). According to Bassey, ransom money “comes from our oil, so we would be getting back what was ours in the first place” (220). The militant groups like the Professor’s and Henshaw’s are for the people as Professor says; “we are not barbarians as the government propagandists say we are. We are for the people. Everything we do is for the people, what will we gain if we terrorise them? (232). Professors declaration attests to the fact that they are freedom fighters, who have the interest of the people at heart though he acknowledges that there are criminal gangs; I am aware that there are criminal elements looting and killing under the guise of freedom fighting, but we are different. Those kind of rebels, they are our enemies (232). That is why I am letting you go, so you can write the truth:

Write only the truth. Tell them about flares you see at night, and the oil on the water. And the soldiers forcing us escalate the violence every day. Tell them how were are hounded daily in our 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. (232).

Those are powerful declarations from professor that gives meaning to the story or reasons for the war and kidnapping. Acknowledging the role of journalistic reports in society, he exhorts Rufus, to write only the truth in order to inform and raise awareness on environmental degradation in this region. He exposes the causes of the oil war and justifies the title of the novel, *Oil on Water*. To corroborate professor’s view, Henshaw, a militant in military custody, also exposes the larger picture of the context of the war going on. Like Professor, he gives justifications for the war with the government. He affirms his stand in strong terms; “we are the people, we are the Delta, we represent the very earth on which we stand” (163). Professor makes his stand clear; “I will not stop fighting till I achieve my goal. I tell you the war is just starting. We will make it hot for the government and the oil company that they will be forced to pull out. By this time tomorrow, one of the major oil deposits will be burning. I want you to write about it” (231). Their point of view resonates to that of Chief Malabo, who is also an important face of the resistance. Oil here is presented as a collective heritage which everyone has to benefit. Instead of it benefiting the people it leads to a war that destroys the environment.

Whatever justifications of the oil war, the community is caught between the militants and the military, and bears the brunt of the war (37). Animals are killed; “they shot at goats and dogs and chickens just like that” (224). There are arbitrary arrests, violence, looting, killing, kidnapping under the name of freedom fighting contribute to further degradation of the environment. Karibi, an important man in the village has been arrested by the military for fraternising with the militants, (13/15) two reporters, Max Tekena, Peter Olisah and a Filipino hostage were shot by militants as the Filipino contractor tried to escape, (16, 54) Rufus, the narrator, Zak, the fisherman and his son, are also arrested on suspicion for being militants. On their knees, the Major pours petrol on them; “you can’t stand the smell of oil? Isn’t it what you fight for, kill for? Go on, enjoy. By the time I’m through with you, you’ll hate the smell of it, you won’t take money that comes from oil, you won’t get in a car because it runs on petrol. You’ll hate the very name petrol” (61). The Major threatens to shoot Rufus if he insists on their innocence; You insist! I can shoot you right now and throw you into the swamps and that’s it. Do you know what is going out there? There is a war going on! People are being

shot, oil companies are being bombed” (64). Expatriates and residents are kidnapped for ransom, “a seventy-year-old woman and a three-year-old girl were kidnapped” (31) while Isabel Floode, the wife to a British petroleum engineer’s kidnapping is the main event that leads to the development of the plot.

Villages are abandoned, the landscape is hopeless with corpses littered everywhere. The war leads to displacement as people have abandoned their villages. The narrator describes a bleak and frightening atmosphere on the Island to show the level of devastation of the war on the environment. He reveals the horror of war that leaves the village in a total state of ruination “the village looked as if a deadly epidemic had swept through it” (8-9). As the narrator moves from compound to compound, he notices that the compounds are empty, “with wide-open windows askew on broken hinges, while overhead the roofs had big holes through which sun light fell”. In one of the compounds, he finds chicken pens with about ten chickens inside, all dead and decomposing; “with maggots trafficking beneath the feather” (9). As they moved further to the nest compound, the situation wasn’t different; “cooking pots stood open and empty on cold hearths, nest to them stood water pots filled with water on whose surface larvae thickly flourished” (9). As they move to the next village. It 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 suspected above the punctured zinc roofs, unwilling to depart. At the village center, he finds the communal well. Eager for a drink, he bents under the well’s blackness, “but a rank smell wafted from its hot depth and slapped my face... human lay and decomposing down there, its stench mixed with that unmistakable smell of oil (9). Through vivid description, the narrators expose the horror of war on the environment.

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