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Voices from the Delta: Exploring oil, Environmental degradation and Climate change in Helon Habila's Oil on Water

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Abstract

Climate change has severely disrupted the livelihoods of communities that rely directly on natural ecosystems, particularly in developing nations that lack adequate mechanisms to manage environmental and social risks. The Niger Delta region of Nigeria stands as a critical example, where intensive oil exploitation has caused widespread environmental degradation, ecological imbalance, and socio-economic distress. This paper examines the interconnected relationship between oil extraction, environmental degradation, and climate change as portrayed in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. Employing a literary and ecocritical framework informed by postcolonial and neo-colonial perspectives, the study explores how multinational oil interests perpetuate environmental injustice while marginalizing local populations. Habila's narrative reveals the devastating consequences of oil-driven capitalism, including polluted rivers, contaminated land, disrupted ecosystems, and the erosion of indigenous identities and traditions. These ecological crises intensify climate vulnerability and undermine the region's capacity to sustain life. By analyzing *Oil on Water*, this research highlights literature's role in documenting environmental suffering and exposing the socio-political structures that enable ecological exploitation. The paper argues that the novel serves as a powerful critique of neo-colonial practices and unchecked resource extraction, emphasizing their contribution to climate change in the Niger Delta. Ultimately, this study sheds light on the urgent need for environmental accountability and sustainable practices, while foregrounding the voices of communities whose lives and environments continue to bear the cost of global oil dependency.

Keywords: Niger Delta, Oil Company, exploitation, environment, climate change.

INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta presents a profound paradox: a region defined by the immense wealth of "black gold" yet besieged by the "slow violence" of ecological decay. Helon Habila's 2010 novel, Oil on Water, captures this harrowing reality, positioning itself as a seminal work of "petrofiction"—a genre that critically interrogates the socio-environmental costs of fossil fuel extraction. Moving beyond the conventions of a journalistic thriller, Habila provides a visceral testimony of a landscape "burdened with the weight of oil pollution" (Heidelberg p.77). By charting the journey of journalists Rufus and Zaq through the labyrinthine, oil-slicked waterways, the narrative exposes how the collusion between multinational corporations and state apparatuses has transformed a life-sustaining ecosystem into a "hydropolitical dystopia" (Bhagavan p.112).

Theoretically, this study situates the novel within the framework of Neocolonialism, a concept defined by Kwame Nkrumah as the stage where a state is "in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty" while its "economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside" (Nkrumah ix). This definition underscores the complexities of Nigeria's development agenda. The industrial advancement of the Global North has come at a staggering price for the Global South, as the demand for crude oil remains a primary driver of energy production and capital accumulation. While the historical relationship between Nigeria and Britain was initially defined by the direct export of raw materials and forest resources, the focus has shifted to a contemporary paradigm where external powers maintain control over Africa's economy through subtle, systemic mechanisms. This research explores the "exploitation-development" contrast, wherein the prosperity of the British emporium is viewed as having been built, metaphorically and economically, by the resources and "blood of Nigeria." By analyzing Habila's narrative, this study seeks to answer how neocolonialism manifests in contemporary Nigeria and how accurately the novel demonstrates the hypocrisy of Western environmental and economic rhetoric. Furthermore, this study investigates the root causes of extreme climate change and localized environmental destruction in the Niger Delta, arguing that the ecological crisis depicted in Oil on Water is an inevitable byproduct of neocolonial resource extraction.

The extensive documentation of environmental degradation caused by multinational oil corporations in Nigeria's Niger Delta has significantly amplified the discourse surrounding the "resource curse." This body of evidence highlights the region's precarious ecological state and the escalating threat that climate change poses to both the environment and local livelihoods (Smith 45). Despite Nigeria's status as the sixth-largest oil-producing nation—a position that suggests substantial potential wealth—the country paradoxically suffers from widespread poverty and a fragile economy. These systemic issues are compounded by severe air, land, and water pollution resulting from decades of exploitative practices by oil companies, often conducted in collusion with the state apparatus (Nwosu p.112).

Nigerian scholars and intellectuals have consistently engaged with this nexus of oil exploitation and climate change. Among these voices, Helon Habila's novel, Oil on Water, provides a potent literary capturing of the consequential ecological and social devastation. While ostensibly framed around a kidnapping investigation, the novel's deeper focus is the vicious "ecological war" waged against the region for the sake of oil extraction, powerfully articulating the resulting exploitation faced by the people and the environment (Habila p.156). Consequently, Habila's work serves as a crucial "voice from the Delta," lending literary weight to the lived experiences of those directly impacted by oil spills, pervasive environmental damage, and the existential threat of climate change (Eze p.201).

NEOCOLONIALISM AND NIGER DELTA

European and American nations remain the primary stakeholders in Nigeria's commodity-driven business community, particularly within the crude oil sector. Despite achieving independence in 1960, Nigeria remains entangled in direct political and economic relationships of subordination and dependence on the metropolitan world. Post-independence, the nation failed to establish a truly autonomous national economy, largely due to the corruption of governmental authorities who functioned as "commission agents of the big commercial houses and mining companies that departing British still controlled, while also moving to capture political power in order to use it as an instrument to secure more economic benefits for themselves" (Okonta and Douglas p.28).

In the contemporary Nigerian context, neocolonialism is most visible through the strategic use of foreign

debt and the subsequent erosion of national sovereignty by international financial bodies. The economic downturns of the 1970s and 1980s—precipitated by a collapse in global oil prices and a weakening agricultural sector—forced Nigeria into a state of heavy loan dependency. This vulnerability allowed the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (WTO) to impose neoliberal economic frameworks upon the nation. Chief among these interventions were Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), which mandated rigorous austerity, the privatization of state assets, and the deregulation of domestic markets to accommodate international commerce (Lazarus p.8–9). Rather than fostering sustainable growth, these policies are often characterized as having triggered a "lost" era of development, leading to a state of "de facto recolonization" (Zeleza p.35–36; Nugent p.327). As governmental capacity was systematically weakened by these mandates, non-governmental organizations stepped in to fill the vacuum, further entrenching foreign influence over Nigeria's internal governance.

These systemic vulnerabilities attracted influential multinational oil corporations, most notably Royal Dutch Shell, which has maintained a presence in Nigeria for several decades. It is widely argued that Shell has "quietly and unobtrusively worked its way to the epicentre of power over years" (Okonta and Douglas p.58). By leveraging powerful relationships with local politicians and military authorities, such corporations achieve a mutual interest in controlling the Niger Delta region and its vast oil deposits, effectively bypassing the needs of the local populace in favor of global capital.

In the context of the Niger Delta, neocolonial reality is manifested through the dominance of multinational oil giants which continue to embed Nigeria in "unequal power relationships under the guise of globalization" (Feldner p.214). This economic subservience facilitates what Stephanie Newell describes as a "continuing subservience to European and North American governments and corporations," a state wherein the local environment is habitually sacrificed at the altar of foreign capital (Newell p.92). Consequently, Nigeria's contemporary dependence on foreign nations constitutes a new, more pervasive form of imperialism. As Kwame Nkrumah famously argued, neocolonialism represents:

…the worst form of imperialism. For those who practice it, it means power without responsibility and for those who suffer from it; it means exploitation without redress... a stage in the development of imperialism… more insidious, complex and dangerous than the old colonialism. It not only prevents its victims from developing the economic potential for their own use, but it controls the political life of the country, and supports the indigenous bourgeoisie in perpetuating the oppression and exploitation of the masses. (qtd. in Alapiki p.48)

To bridge the gap between resource extraction and climate change, this study further employs Postcolonial Ecocriticism, drawing on Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence"—environmental destruction that occurs gradually, across vast timescales, and typically out of sight (Nixon p.2). By examining these "voices from the Delta," this paper argues that Habila utilizes the imagery of *Oil on Water* not merely as a literal description of pollution, but as a potent metaphor for the moral and systemic corruption inherent in the modern neocolonial Anthropocene.

The novel deeply criticizes the social and ecological devastation wrought by oil exploitation, specifically examining the neocolonial power wielded by multinational corporations. As Lawrence Buell points out, "environmental justice for marginalized communities connects it with a second emergent initiative, postcolonial environmentalism" (Buell p.98). Habila's narrative expresses a profound concern for future generations, highlighting how the current exploitation of nature threatens human survival as climatic conditions worsen. The discovery of crude oil in commercial quantities has dramatically escalated environmental health risks—ranging from water and air pollution to oil spills, deforestation, and land

degradation. Because the majority of oil wells are managed by foreign entities, there is a systemic lack of accountability toward the land and its inhabitants. These corporations exercise indirect control over the nation by forming alliances with the federal government, which prioritizes "petro-dollars" over ecological or social welfare. In this "hydropolitical dystopia," the marginalized communities of the Delta remain voiceless, bearing the disproportionate burden of an "ecological war" designed to fuel global markets while impoverishing the local landscape.

NEOCOLONISM AND CLIMATE CHANGE IN OIL ON WATER

In *Oil on Water*, Helon Habila utilizes his protagonists, Rufus and Zaq, as eyewitnesses to the systematic dismantling of the Niger Delta's ecosystem. Although the plot is ostensibly centered on the investigation of the kidnapping of Isabel Floode—the wife of a British petroleum engineer—the journey serves as a structural device to expose the profound impact of oil exploration. Habila's narrative suggests that the presence of multinational oil companies is the primary catalyst for both localized environmental decay and broader climatic shifts. The Delta's climate is portrayed as being fundamentally altered by exploitation, sufferings, violence and everyday pollution.

Habila's vivid imagery reinforces this socio-political critique from the outset. The novel's opening scenes describe a river coated with oil, its surface shimmering with "rainbows of poison" (Habila p.3). This striking metaphor evokes the toxic beauty of oil pollution, highlighting the contradiction between the resource's global monetary value and its localized destructive force. Once a life-sustaining artery, the river is transformed into a site of death, symbolizing an environmental catastrophe where the worst sufferer is the natural world. This depiction aligns with data from the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics and environmental watchdogs, which note that between 1976 and 2001, there were over 6,800 recorded oil spills in the region, totaling approximately three million barrels of oil (Nwilo and Badejo p.45).

The novel further details the systemic neglect that perpetuates this harm, depicting villages near oil facilities as "ghost towns" (Habila p.56). The air is described as thick with soot and the stench of crude oil, a visceral reminder of the industry's unrelenting presence. Habila captures the desolation of these abandoned spaces: "The village looked as if a deadly epidemic had swept through it…. Behind one of the houses we found a chicken pen with about ten chickens inside, all dead and decomposing" (Habila p.8). The proximity of oil pipelines to these centres of death indicates a high level of corporate supervision coupled with profound negligence. This mirrors the real-world displacement of communities like the Ogoni people, where gas flaring—which contributes significantly to greenhouse gas emissions—has rendered vast tracts of land uninhabitable.

This displacement is not merely accidental but a product of a new colonial order. The experience of Chief Malabo's community illustrates how oil companies force indigenous populations to relinquish their ancestral lands once oil is discovered. Despite the land and its resources belonging to the people of the Delta, they remain unable to claim ownership, as the federal government often collaborates with foreign entities to secure petro-dollar profits. Kwame Nkrumah exposes this transition from naked colonialism to the subtle mechanisms of neocolonialism, stating:

Without a qualm it dispenses with its flags and claims that it is 'giving' independence to its former subjects, to be followed by 'aid' for their development. Under cover of such phrases however, it devises innumerable ways to accomplish objectives formerly achieved by naked colonialism. (Nkrumah xx)

Under this framework, Nigeria remains "independent in theory" while being trapped by international dominance. Habila critiques these multinational corporations as entities indifferent to the "evil-smelling,

oil-fecund earth" they create (Habila p.215). The pervasive presence of pipelines and rigs serves as a visual reminder of corporate greed, where unregulated extraction ensures that local communities bear the brunt of both economic disenfranchisement and an escalating climate crisis.

The socio-political landscape of the Niger Delta in *Oil on Water* is best understood through the lens of Frantz Fanon's analysis of systemic oppression. In The Wretched of the Earth, Fanon describes the nature of neocolonialism by stating:

It is obvious here that the agents of government speak the language of pure force. The intermediary does not lighten the oppression, nor seek to hide the domination; he shows them up and puts them into practice with the clear conscience of an upholder of the peace; yet he is the bringer of violence into the home and into the mind of the native. (Fanon, p.29)

Fanon's words highlight the extent of violence, oppression, and exploitation directed by authoritative forces. In the novel, this "pure force" is manifested through the collusion between the Nigerian state and multinational corporations. By setting the populace under control—a basic process of the neocolonial approach—the nation is denied its rights to freedom and elementary necessities, transforming the Delta into a site of state-sponsored extraction and ecological sacrifice.

Habila illustrates that oil exploration does not merely alter the climatic condition; it fundamentally deconstructs the communities of the Delta. Historically, the region was one of the world's most ecologically diverse "spots," characterized by "massive forests, plentiful wildlife and fertile agricultural lands." However, oil pollution has decimated the entire food chain. Rufus's reminiscence of his youth, where fish were abundant, creates a sharp contrast with the present-day reality of Irikefe Island. Today, villagers "return with empty nets," highlighting that environmental degradation is inseparable from the "erosion of cultural and communal ties." In a poignant scene, an elderly villager laments: "We used to fish here, tell stories by the riverbank, but now it's all gone—our fish, our stories, our lives" (Habila, p.73). The river, once a site of sustenance, becomes a symbol of alienation and despair.

Many of these villages rely on agriculture and fishing for survival and cultural preservation. However, regular oil spills have rendered farmlands unproductive and waterways contaminated, severely affecting food production and economic stability. Contaminated water supplies have raised the risk of respiratory ailments, skin infections, and cancer. The mismanagement of the oil has brought severe consequence to the entire Delta region. It broke the sustainability of the entire ecosystem. Moreover, losing mangroves increases coastal populations' vulnerability to flooding and land loss, jeopardizing their livelihoods. As conventional income sources decline, many citizens are forced to relocate for better possibilities, resulting in rising urban poverty and social instability. The ongoing environmental disaster in the Niger Delta emphasizes the urgent need for stricter regulatory enforcement, corporate accountability, and long-term restoration initiatives to alleviate both ecological and human suffering. In the novel, Habila through the mouthpiece of Rufus tell about the extinction of flora and fauna, Niger Delta used to be a great habitat for bats, but due to oil pollution and the impact of gas flares has reduced its rate to a great extent And not only the bats, other creatures were also disappearing from the ecosystem..

Habila employs sensory imagery to immerse the reader in the "hydropolitical dystopia" of the Delta. Rufus experiences the physical reality of pollution when he peers into a communal well: "the blackness of the water – 'a rank smell wafted from its hot depths and slapped my face'" (Habila, p.9). This immersion reflects the broader socioeconomic impact on the Delta's almost 30 million residents belonging to over 40 ethnic groups. This pervasive degradation inflicts a psychological toll, described by one character as "a wound that will never heal" (Habila, p.94). This underscores Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence,"

where environmental destruction occurs gradually and out of sight, accumulating over time to devastate marginalized communities.

The environmental disaster in the Delta has triggered a crisis in nutritional status. The contamination of water and land has led to widespread food insecurity. According to Kingsley et al., "eating vegetables cultivated in open fields close to industrial facilities poses serious health risks," as these staples absorb toxins from the soil (Kingsley, p.14). The degradation of farmlands, loss of biodiversity, and extensive pollution of land and waterways primarily due to the operations of transnational oil corporations have contributed not only to ecological collapse but also to food insecurity, livelihood disruption, and socio-political unrest (Watts and Ibaba, 2011; Ogele, 2021; Josiah and Akpuh, 2022). This degradation has rendered many traditional livelihoods unviable, creating a feedback loop wherein climate-induced environmental stressors and corporate-induced destruction mutually reinforce local vulnerabilities (Ezegwu, 2014; Nguyễn et al., 2023)

Various researches carried on the effects of climate change in Africa established that by year 2050, closed to 75 million 250 thousand individuals are anticipated to be exposed to increased water stress because of climate change (IPCC, 2007). IPCC further stated that, agricultural activities, including food access, in numerous African nations and districts is projected to be seriously undermined by climate irregularity and change, and regions reasonable for farming, the seasons dimension for planting of crops, and yield potential, especially along the edges of semi-arid and arid-area territories, are expected to diminish.

Habila's critique centers on the complicity of multinational corporations and state actors. A character cynically encapsulates this dynamic: "They take the oil, leave the poison, and call it progress" (Habila, p.112). The character of Doctor Dagogo provides a historical perspective on this "slow violence." He recalls how the community initially hailed the discovery of oil as "the fire of Pentecost," a beacon of development. However, hope quickly turned to lethality as toxins in the drinking water rose to "twice the safe level" within a single year (Habila, 92). When Dagogo protested, he was met with the classic neocolonial tactic: the offer of money and a job to buy his silence, prioritizing oil profits over human life.

The narrative impetus behind *Oil on Water* is deeply rooted in Helon Habila's recognition of climate change as a primary driver of contemporary African instability. In a personal disclosure regarding his creative motivations, Habila emphasizes that the escalating global phenomenon of migration and refugee movements is inextricably linked to "climate change and loss of livelihood resulting from that". Within the Nigerian context, Habila argues that these environmental shifts manifest as "severe floods and desertification at unprecedented levels," forcing a radical reconfiguration of human geography and resource competition. Habila specifically identifies the "incessant clashes between nomadic herdsmen" and sedentary farmers as empirical evidence of this ecological pressure, as the loss of northern grazing grounds pushes populations southward into increasingly volatile contact. Furthermore, he posits a direct link between environmental scarcity and regional insurgency, noting that the "Boko Haram conflict in the northeast can be linked to the shrinking of Lake Chad", Since the 1960s, Lake Chad—a vital hub for fishing, irrigation, and transportation—has desiccated by approximately 90 percent.

The Nigerian government's failure to implement "coherent policies" to address these emergent crises reflects a state still primarily oriented toward the interests of external capital. The state's paralysis suggests that its political and economic priorities are directed toward maintaining "petro-dollar" stability for multinational stakeholders rather than ensuring the ecological security of its own citizens. This absence of policy effectively functions as a neocolonial tool, where the environmental "commons"—such as Lake Chad and the Delta's waterways—are allowed to deteriorate as long as the extraction of raw materials

continues unabated. This situation exemplifies the "slow violence" of climate change. Unlike the immediate violence of war, the shrinking of Lake Chad is a gradual, attritional catastrophe that disproportionately affects marginalized communities whose "voices" are seldom heard in policy-making circles. By linking the Boko Haram conflict and herdsmen clashes to ecological collapse, Habila's work aligns with the postcolonial ecocritical project of exposing how environmental degradation is never merely "natural," but is often the result of historical exploitation and contemporary systemic neglect. For greater research depth, it is worth noting that the desiccation of Lake Chad has displaced approximately 2.5 million people, creating an "environmental refugee" crisis that serves as a recruiting ground for extremist groups, thereby proving that ecological health is the prerequisite for national security (UNEP).

CONCLUSION

The field of oil and its challenges to the environmental has been recognized, now the revolutionaries and researchers are working in. It is necessary for the people to read, learn and rethink over their managements, reliability and- most importantly to recognize - where our world is leading- development or destruction.

The above account of the nature of neocolonialism and its various scopes barely explains the concepts of subjugation and a seeming imposition of a hegemonic economic, political, and social demand, mostly in the semblance of trade relations or developmental aid grants by imperialists. His implies how postcolonial African states have apparently failed to adapt themselves to the issues of self- preservation. Infant, neocolonialism is considered a new form of colonial exploitation and control over the newly independent states.

The paradox of the Niger Delta, as navigated through the oil-slicked waterways of Helon Habila's Oil on Water, serves as a definitive case study in the tension between global industrial development and regional ecological destruction. This research has demonstrated that the "black gold" of the Delta is not merely a resource, but a catalyst for a "hydropolitical dystopia" where the pursuit of energy sustains a new, more insidious form of colonial control. As revolutionaries and researchers alike grapple with these challenges, it becomes imperative for the global community to rethink current management strategies and recognize the harrowing direction in which the world is heading.

The theoretical framework of Neocolonialism remains central to this critique. As this study has explored, the nature of neocolonialism goes beyond mere economic influence; it is a system of "subjugation and a seeming imposition of a hegemonic economic, political, and social demand" (Okonta and Douglas 28). Masquerading as trade relations or developmental aid, this structure reveals the failure of postcolonial states to secure the "self-preservation" of their own environments and citizens. Nigeria's dependence on foreign capital and its subsequent policy paralysis in the face of environmental collapse—from the oil spills of the south to the shrinking of Lake Chad in the north—reinforces the reality of neocolonialism as a modern engine of exploitation.

Ultimately, Oil on Water functions as a critical text within the environmental humanities by weaving together personal and collective struggles. Through the "slow violence" observed by Rufus and Zaq, Habila illustrates how the exploitation of natural resources is inextricably linked to "social inequality and cultural disintegration" (Nixon 2). The novel offers a scathing indictment of global capitalism, exposing the complicity of multinational corporations and state actors who "take the oil, leave the poison, and call it progress" (Habila 112).

By positioning the Niger Delta's crisis within the broader discourse of African environmental literature, this study underscores the power of narrative to foster ecological awareness. Literature like Habila's does

more than document catastrophe; it serves as a powerful tool for fostering ecological awareness and inspiring systemic change. As the world confronts the escalating threats of climate change and resource depletion, the voices from the Delta urge a re-examination of our ethical responsibilities. The wounds that will never heal in Habila's landscape are a call for a future grounded in justice, accountability, and a radical departure from the exploitative structures of the neocolonial Anthropocene.

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