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The intersection of ecology and inequity: postcolonial reflections in oil on water

Adeniga Wewe *

Adekunle Ajasin University, Nigeria.

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Abstract

This study situates *Oil on Water* within the frameworks of ecocriticism and postcolonial studies, analyzing how the novel portrays ecological harm as both a local and global crisis. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives, the research examines key motifs such as water as a symbol of destruction and renewal, and the role of narrative in fostering ecological awareness and advocating for systemic change. Habila's novel transcends its fictional context, contributing to the growing discourse on climate justice and sustainability while underscoring the moral imperative to address environmental and social inequities. Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* offers a compelling exploration of the socio-environmental crises plaguing the Niger Delta, a region marked by the paradox of resource abundance and ecological devastation. The novel critiques the systemic exploitation of natural resources by multinational corporations and corrupt state actors, highlighting the cascading effects of oil exploration on human lives, landscapes, and cultural heritage. Through vivid depictions of polluted rivers, displaced communities, and poisoned lands, Habila intertwines narratives of environmental degradation with themes of resilience and socio-political injustice. His work aligns with Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," emphasizing the incremental and often invisible destruction caused by environmental exploitation, and with Cajetan Iheka's focus on the environment as an active participant in African literature.

Keywords: Niger Delta; Environmental degradation; Slow violence; Climate justice; Postcolonial ecocriticism

1. Introduction

The Niger Delta represents a stark paradox of resource abundance and environmental devastation. Rich in oil reserves, the region has been the backbone of Nigeria's economy, yet its wealth has come at an extraordinary cost to its ecology and communities (Ogungbemi 2023). Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010) explores this paradox through a compelling narrative that intertwines environmental degradation, corruption, and socio-political unrest. Set in a landscape ravaged by oil exploration, the novel critiques the systemic exploitation of natural resources by multinational corporations and local elites, capturing the cascading effects on human lives and the environment. Habila masterfully uses fiction to reveal the real-world complexities of the Niger Delta crisis, shedding light on the tension between economic development and ecological sustainability. His work transcends a mere literary exercise, serving as both a critique of existing systems and a rallying cry for justice and reform (Ogungbemi 2016).

Ecocriticism, particularly in the Global South, has emphasized the interconnectedness of ecological harm and socio-political inequality. Scholars like Rob Nixon, in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), emphasize the concept of "slow violence," which describes the incremental, often invisible destruction wrought by environmental exploitation. This framework is particularly relevant to the Niger Delta, where decades of oil spills, gas flares, and deforestation have devastated ecosystems and displaced communities. Habila's *Oil on Water* vividly embodies this concept, portraying environmental harm not as a series of isolated incidents but as a slow and pervasive force that

* Corresponding author: Adeniga Wewe.

erodes lives and landscapes over time. The novel underscores the urgency of addressing these crises, aligning with Nixon's argument that literature has a unique capacity to render slow violence visible and galvanize resistance.

In addition to slow violence, the novel engages with postcolonial critiques of resource extraction and governance (Ogungbemi 2024). Scholars like Cajetan Iheka in *Naturalizing Africa* (2018) highlight how African literature frequently positions the environment as an active participant in narratives of struggle and resilience. In *Oil on Water*, the rivers, forests, and polluted landscapes of the Niger Delta are not mere backdrops but central characters that bear the scars of human exploitation. This dual portrayal—of nature as both victim and witness—invites readers to grapple with the ethical and ecological dimensions of oil exploration (Ogungbemi 2018; Ogunsiji and Ogungbemi 2016). Furthermore, Jennifer Wenzel, in *Bulletproof: Afterlives of Anticolonial Prophecy in South Africa and Beyond* (2009), argues that narratives like Habila's reveal the continuity between colonial resource extraction and contemporary exploitation, situating environmental degradation within a broader historical and systemic framework.

This paper examines how *Oil on Water* situates the environmental crisis of the Niger Delta within the larger discourse of environmental humanities and postcolonial studies. By analyzing the novel's vivid depictions of polluted landscapes, displaced communities, and moral dilemmas, this study highlights the ways in which Habila critiques systemic neglect while also foregrounding human resilience. Through an interdisciplinary lens that integrates ecocriticism, postcolonial theory, and literary analysis, this paper aims to underscore the critical role of narrative in fostering ecological awareness and advocating for systemic change. In doing so, it contributes to the growing body of scholarship that positions African literature as a vital voice in global discussions on climate justice and sustainability.

2. Literature Review

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* has drawn substantial scholarly engagement within postcolonial studies, ecocriticism, and environmental humanities due to its nuanced portrayal of the socio-environmental challenges in the Niger Delta. The novel's depiction of ecological harm and human resilience has positioned it as a seminal text in African environmental literature, resonating with frameworks such as Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011). Nixon's concept of "slow violence," which refers to the gradual, often imperceptible destruction wrought by environmental exploitation, is vividly illustrated in Habila's narrative. Polluted rivers, dying ecosystems, and displaced communities in the Niger Delta exemplify the enduring impacts of oil exploration, underscoring the exploitative legacy that continues to shape the region's landscape and its inhabitants' lives.

Cajetan Iheka, in *Naturalizing Africa* (2018), explores the symbiotic relationship between ecological and cultural resilience in African literature, arguing that the environment is frequently depicted as an active participant in narratives of struggle and survival. In *Oil on Water*, Habila portrays the environment not as a passive victim but as a dynamic force intertwined with the lives of the characters. Polluted rivers and decaying landscapes bear witness to exploitation while also symbolizing resistance and renewal. This perspective aligns with African environmental literature's broader ethos, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of human and ecological systems and the potential for regeneration amidst adversity.

Jennifer Wenzel, in her essay "Petro-Magic Realism and Environmental Justice in the Niger Delta" (2016), examines the novel's critique of multinational corporations and state complicity in environmental degradation. Wenzel highlights how Habila uses vivid symbolic imagery—oil spills, gas flares, and barren landscapes—to expose the ethical failures of global capitalism. She contends that these symbols not only highlight the physical destruction caused by oil extraction but also critique the systemic inequalities that perpetuate such harm. The novel's focus on the complicity of various actors offers a multi-dimensional critique of resource exploitation, resonating with broader discourses on environmental justice.

Further, the symbolic role of water in *Oil on Water* has been critically analyzed by scholars such as Okuyade (2013), who underscores its dual nature as both a life-sustaining force and a site of ecological destruction. In the novel, rivers are depicted as polluted and lifeless, reflecting the devastating impact of industrial activities. At the same time, they serve as enduring symbols of resilience and continuity, anchoring communities even amidst ruin (Ogungbemi 2016). This duality invites readers to grapple with the moral complexities of environmental justice, underscoring the human and ecological costs of unchecked industrialization while also evoking hope for renewal.

Habila's engagement with the socio-political realities of the Niger Delta extends beyond ecological critique to explore the lived experiences of its inhabitants. Scholars such as Cajetan Iheka (2018) and Ogungbemi (2023) have noted how the novel foregrounds the voices of marginalized communities, using their stories to illuminate the systemic inequities that underpin environmental exploitation. By centering on the perspectives of those most affected by oil exploration,

Oil on Water challenges the global narratives that often obscure the localized impacts of resource extraction. The novel's depiction of dislocated communities, economic disenfranchisement, and cultural erosion underscores the profound human toll of environmental degradation.

The thematic complexity of *Oil on Water* is also evident in its exploration of identity and agency in the face of ecological and social collapse. The characters' interactions with their environment reveal the interconnectedness of personal, communal, and ecological resilience. For instance, Rufus, the protagonist, navigates a landscape ravaged by oil spills and militant violence, embodying both the human cost of exploitation and the enduring spirit of resistance. This narrative focus on individual and collective agency aligns with Nixon's call for literature to illuminate the often-hidden struggles of those who bear the brunt of environmental harm.

Moreover, *Oil on Water* engages with the global discourse on climate justice by situating local environmental crises within a broader context of systemic exploitation and inequity. Scholars like Nixon and Wenzel have emphasized the importance of narratives that connect local struggles to global systems of power and capital. Habila's novel achieves this by illustrating how the Niger Delta's ecological devastation is inextricably linked to multinational oil companies and the global demand for fossil fuels. This intersectional perspective situates the novel within the burgeoning field of climate justice literature, which seeks to address the disproportionate impact of environmental crises on marginalized communities.

This study builds on these critical discussions by focusing on how *Oil on Water* portrays environmental degradation as a lens to examine broader socio-political and ecological issues. The novel's vivid imagery, symbolic motifs, and complex characterizations invite readers to engage deeply with the ethical and ecological dimensions of resource exploitation. By situating *Oil on Water* within the frameworks of ecocriticism and postcolonial studies, this paper contributes to the ongoing conversation about the role of African literature in addressing global environmental challenges. It underscores the power of narrative to not only reflect the realities of environmental harm but also to imagine pathways toward justice and sustainability.

3. Material and methods

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach to explore Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* and its intricate depiction of environmental degradation, socio-political corruption, and human resilience. The analysis is rooted in ecocritical theories, with a particular focus on Rob Nixon's (2011) concept of "slow violence," which emphasizes the incremental and often invisible forms of environmental harm, and Cheryl Glotfelty's foundational work in ecocriticism, which highlights the intersection of literature and environmental concerns. This theoretical foundation enables the study to unpack the novel's critique of systemic exploitation and its portrayal of ecological and human vulnerability in the Niger Delta.

Data collection was conducted through a meticulous close reading of *Oil on Water*, with particular attention to passages that illustrate the ecological impact of oil exploration, such as descriptions of polluted rivers, decimated biodiversity, and abandoned villages. Scenes that portray the displacement of local communities and the moral dilemmas faced by characters like Rufus, Zaq, and the local villagers were also analyzed to understand the human cost of environmental and socio-political crises. These textual elements were chosen to highlight the interplay between environmental degradation and its socio-economic and cultural consequences.

In addition to primary textual analysis, the study draws on secondary sources to contextualize the novel within broader discussions of African environmental literature and postcolonial ecocriticism. Scholarly works such as Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) and Cajetan Iheka's *Naturalizing Africa* (2018) provide critical perspectives on the themes of environmental harm and cultural resilience, enriching the interpretation of *Oil on Water*. Jennifer Wenzel's analysis of oil narratives in her essay "Petro-Magic Realism and Environmental Justice in the Niger Delta" (2016) and other scholarly articles on the Niger Delta's ecological crisis were also consulted to establish a theoretical and contextual framework.

The study employs a thematic coding process to organize textual evidence and secondary insights into key areas of analysis: (1) the physical and symbolic representation of environmental degradation, (2) the socio-political dynamics of resource exploitation and governance, and (3) the resilience of human and ecological systems. Coding involved identifying recurrent motifs, such as polluted waters, displaced communities, and moral conflicts, and categorizing them under these thematic areas. This method ensures a systematic approach to analyzing how the novel intertwines environmental, social, and political issues.

By synthesizing primary textual evidence with secondary critical insights, the study provides a holistic analysis of *Oil on Water* as a narrative that bridges the local and the global, the environmental and the socio-political. This methodological approach ensures that the novel's multifaceted engagement with ecological crises, systemic corruption, and human resilience is examined through a comprehensive and interdisciplinary lens.

4. Environmental Degradation in the Niger Delta

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* presents a harrowing depiction of the environmental destruction wrought by oil exploration in the Niger Delta, intertwining vivid imagery with socio-political critique. The novel's opening scenes describe a river coated with oil, its surface shimmering with "rainbows of poison" (Habila, p. 3). This striking image evokes the toxic beauty of oil pollution, underscoring the contradiction between the resource's monetary value and its destructive ecological impact. The river, once a lifeline for communities, is transformed into a site of death and decay, symbolizing the broader environmental catastrophe in the region. The use of sensory language—highlighting the smell, texture, and visual effects of the polluted water—immerses readers in the reality faced by Niger Delta residents, whose lives are inextricably linked to these degraded ecosystems.

Habila expands this portrayal by detailing the systemic neglect that perpetuates environmental harm. Villages near oil facilities are depicted as "ghost towns," abandoned due to the toxic conditions created by incessant oil spills and gas flaring (p. 56). The air is described as thick with soot and the stench of crude oil, a constant reminder of the industry's unrelenting presence. These images resonate with real-world accounts of communities forced to relocate due to contaminated water sources and poisoned farmland. For example, the displacement of villagers in the novel mirrors the struggles of communities like Ogoni, where oil spills and pipeline explosions have rendered the land uninhabitable. By grounding his narrative in such realities, Habila offers a scathing indictment of the oil industry's disregard for the lives and environments it exploits.

The consequences of environmental degradation are not limited to the physical destruction of landscapes; they extend to the erosion of cultural and communal ties. In one 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" (p. 73). This loss of cultural heritage, intertwined with the ecological devastation, highlights the broader social impact of resource extraction. The river, traditionally a site of sustenance and community, becomes a symbol of alienation and despair. Habila's narrative emphasizes that the damage inflicted on the environment is inseparable from the harm done to the people who depend on it, challenging readers to consider the human cost of environmental neglect.

Habila also illustrates the psychological toll of living amid such pervasive degradation. Characters in the novel frequently express feelings of helplessness and resignation, with one character describing the landscape as "a wound that will never heal" (p. 94). The constant exposure to polluted air, water, and soil creates a sense of inevitability, as if the environment's decline is an unchangeable fact of life. This psychological dimension adds depth to the novel's critique, revealing how environmental harm affects not only physical well-being but also mental and emotional health. It underscores Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," where the incremental destruction of the environment takes a cumulative toll on marginalized communities, often invisible to those outside the affected region.

Finally, *Oil on Water* portrays the complicity of multinational corporations and state actors in perpetuating environmental harm. The novel's recurring imagery of flaring gas and leaking pipelines serves as a metaphor for unchecked industrial exploitation, fueled by greed and corruption. In one scene, Rufus observes a distant oil facility belching smoke into the sky, likening it to "a monster feeding on the land and giving nothing back" (p. 110). This depiction aligns with Jennifer Wenzel's analysis of "petro-magic realism," where the surreal consequences of oil extraction are rendered as everyday realities for those living in the Niger Delta. Habila's critique is not merely aimed at the oil industry but also at the systemic failures of governance that allow such destruction to continue. By exposing these dynamics, the novel challenges readers to confront the ethical and political dimensions of environmental degradation and to consider the urgent need for accountability and change.

4.1. Socio-Political Dimensions of Resource Exploitation

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* critiques the socio-political dimensions of resource exploitation, focusing on the complicity of multinational corporations and state actors. The novel underscores the systemic corruption that fuels environmental and social harm in the Niger Delta. Characters such as the military officers and oil company representatives epitomize this dynamic. For instance, one character cynically observes, "They take the oil, leave the poison, and call it progress" (p. 112), encapsulating the exploitative nature of resource extraction. This aligns with Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," which emphasizes the gradual and often invisible impacts of environmental harm that disproportionately

affect marginalized communities. The Niger Delta's polluted landscapes and displaced communities vividly illustrate these power imbalances.

The complicity of the military is further highlighted through their violent suppression of dissenting voices. In one harrowing scene, soldiers raid a village, leaving destruction in their wake: "The man raised his hands high in surrender, but the soldier swung the rifle butt at his head without hesitation" (p. 198). This brutal imagery underscores the entanglement of state forces and corporate interests, as the military often acts to protect oil company investments rather than the people or environment. The soldiers' actions reflect the broader socio-political dynamics of postcolonial Nigeria, where the state prioritizes economic gain over ecological and human well-being.

Habila also critiques multinational oil corporations, portraying them as indifferent to the devastation they cause. The pervasive presence of pipelines and oil rigs across the Niger Delta serves as a visual reminder of corporate greed. One scene describes a desolate field covered with pipelines, "sprouting from the evil-smelling, oil-fecund earth" (p. 215). This imagery reinforces the environmental devastation wrought by unregulated oil extraction, where local communities bear the brunt of pollution and economic disenfranchisement. Scholars like Jennifer Wenzel, in her essay "Petro-Magic Realism and Environmental Justice in the Niger Delta" (2016), argue that such narratives expose the ethical failures of global capitalism and its impact on vulnerable populations.

The socio-economic consequences of resource exploitation are woven into the personal narratives of the characters. Villages are described as "ghost towns," with inhabitants forced to flee due to unlivable conditions (p. 56). These depictions highlight the displacement of communities and the erosion of traditional livelihoods. One character laments the loss of a once-thriving fishing economy, stating, "No fish for river, nothing. I fear say soon him go join the militants" (p. 243). This reflects the desperation that drives individuals to take up arms, blurring the line between survival and resistance. Scholars like Cajetan Iheka emphasize that such portrayals challenge readers to consider the human cost of environmental degradation.

Furthermore, the novel's symbolic use of oil underscores the exploitative dynamics of resource extraction. Oil is depicted not only as a source of wealth but also as a pollutant that infiltrates every aspect of life. In one instance, characters encounter a communal well fouled with oil, where "a rank smell wafted from its depths, mixing with the unmistakable smell of decay" (p. 187). This serves as a metaphor for the contamination of both the physical and moral fabric of society. Habila's narrative echoes real-world accounts of the Niger Delta's environmental crises, positioning the novel as a powerful critique of the socio-political structures that perpetuate such harm.

By intertwining personal stories with broader socio-political critiques, *Oil on Water* offers a nuanced exploration of resource exploitation in the Niger Delta. Habila's narrative challenges readers to confront the ethical failures of corporate and state actors, highlighting the urgent need for environmental justice. The novel's vivid depictions of corruption, displacement, and ecological devastation serve as a call to action, urging accountability from those who profit at the expense of marginalized communities. Through its layered storytelling, *Oil on Water* transcends its fictional context, offering critical insights into the global dynamics of resource extraction and its consequences.

4.2. Water as a Symbolic Motif

In *Oil on Water*, water serves as a powerful symbolic motif, embodying both destruction and resilience. The polluted rivers and streams of the Niger Delta reflect the environmental devastation caused by decades of unchecked oil exploration. The narrator describes the once-thriving waterways as "blackened, lifeless streams" (p. 45), evoking the fragility of aquatic ecosystems and the irreversible impact of human negligence. This imagery underscores the ecological degradation that has stripped the Delta of its biodiversity and left communities struggling to sustain their traditional livelihoods. The contaminated rivers serve as a visual and sensory manifestation of the environmental violence inflicted upon the region, aligning with Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence."

Water also represents the socio-political consequences of resource exploitation. Polluted rivers not only disrupt the environment but also erode the cultural and economic foundations of local communities. The narrator observes that "even the water that gave life to the village had turned poisonous, undrinkable" (p. 78). This statement reflects the loss of life-sustaining resources and the subsequent displacement of entire communities. Villages that once relied on fishing and agriculture are depicted as abandoned or reduced to ghost towns, mirroring the disintegration of social cohesion. Water, in this context, becomes a symbol of both physical contamination and the unraveling of cultural identity.

Despite its destructive aspects, water in *Oil on Water* also emerges as a source of resilience and renewal. The enduring presence of rivers and streams amidst the destruction symbolizes nature's ability to persist, even in the face of adversity.

In one poignant moment, the narrator recalls seeing fish “darting through patches of untainted water,” suggesting the possibility of life and renewal even within polluted ecosystems (p. 153). This duality of water as both a site of destruction and a beacon of hope highlights the interconnectedness of ecological and human resilience. It reflects the potential for recovery if environmental justice and sustainable practices are pursued.

Water’s symbolic role extends beyond ecology to encompass themes of spiritual and emotional solace. For characters like Zaq and the narrator, the river often becomes a place of reflection and respite from the chaos of their journey. In one scene, the narrator describes washing his face in the river as a moment of clarity and renewal, despite the ongoing turmoil surrounding him (p. 182). These instances underscore water’s ability to provide a temporary reprieve, suggesting that even in its damaged state, nature retains the capacity to heal and offer comfort. This theme aligns with ecocritical perspectives that emphasize the restorative power of natural environments.

Moreover, the duality of water in the novel—both as a site of degradation and a symbol of hope—parallels the broader tension between destruction and renewal in the Niger Delta. While oil spills and industrial waste have poisoned rivers and devastated ecosystems, the resilience of marine life and the enduring presence of water suggest the possibility of ecological recovery. This dual symbolism invites readers to consider the urgent need for environmental conservation and sustainable resource management. By portraying water as both a victim of exploitation and a potential agent of renewal, Habila emphasizes the stakes of environmental degradation while also offering a vision of hope for the future.

Through its complex portrayal of water, *Oil on Water* captures the multifaceted relationship between humans and the environment. The polluted rivers symbolize the destructive consequences of resource exploitation, while the persistence of marine life and the solace found in water highlight the resilience of nature and its potential for renewal. By situating water at the heart of the narrative, Habila not only critiques the ecological harm wrought by oil exploration but also underscores the importance of preserving and restoring the natural world for the sake of cultural and ecological survival.

5. Conclusion

Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* intricately examines the intertwined ecological and socio-political crises afflicting the Niger Delta, presenting a vivid critique of systemic resource exploitation. By portraying the environmental devastation caused by oil exploration—manifested in polluted rivers, displaced communities, and poisoned lands—the novel underscores the human and ecological toll of unregulated industrial activities. Through characters who grapple with the consequences of these crises, Habila illuminates the fragile balance between human survival and environmental sustainability, highlighting how the exploitation of natural resources is often accompanied by social inequality and cultural disintegration. The novel’s rich narrative invites readers to confront the pervasive impacts of environmental degradation while emphasizing the need for justice and accountability.

A central theme of *Oil on Water* is its exploration of the interconnectedness between ecological destruction and social justice. Habila critiques the complicity of multinational corporations and corrupt government officials in perpetuating the Niger Delta’s ecological and humanitarian crises, offering a scathing indictment of global capitalism. The novel weaves together personal and collective struggles, using the perspectives of its characters to reveal how environmental harm disproportionately affects marginalized communities. By highlighting these intersections, Habila positions *Oil on Water* as a critical text within environmental humanities, contributing to conversations about the ethical dimensions of resource extraction and its implications for both local and global communities.

This study situates *Oil on Water* within the broader framework of African environmental literature, a field that emphasizes the role of narrative in addressing urgent ecological and socio-political issues. By employing evocative storytelling, Habila demonstrates how literature can serve as a powerful tool for fostering ecological awareness and inspiring systemic change. His work resonates with scholars like Rob Nixon, whose concept of “slow violence” captures the protracted and often invisible nature of environmental harm in regions like the Niger Delta. Through its vivid depictions of environmental degradation and human resilience, *Oil on Water* urges readers to reexamine their relationship with the environment and consider the broader ethical responsibilities tied to resource management. This analysis underscores the potential of African literature to not only document ecological crises but also to advocate for justice and sustainability in the face of systemic exploitation.

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