

NEOCOLONIALISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION IN HELON HABILA'S NOVEL *OIL ON WATER*

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to highlight the ecological concerns of the Nigerian novelist Helon Habila in his 2010 eco-fiction novel Oil on Water, in which he has brought to light the devastating effects of oil exploration and extraction activities by the multinational oil corporations on environment and society in the oil rich Niger Delta region. The novel creates eco-consciousness and advocates for environmental conservation, sustainable development, and environmental justice. It documents the experience of two journalists, Rufus and Zaq, who try to rescue a kidnapped European wife in the oil landscape of Niger Delta. The novel records the plight of the native people of the Niger Delta who live in abject poverty and pollution and are victims of unsustainability, environmental injustice and slow violence. The environmental degradation and exploitation of this region by neocolonial capitalist forces have given birth to militia and militancy in the region. Hence, this paper will explore and analyze the issues related to environmental degradation raised in this novel in the light of ecocriticism and neocolonialism.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Environment, Pollution, Neocolonialism, Oil, Militancy, Environmental Justice.

Introduction

Ecocriticism is a new branch in literacy theory and cultural studies which came in to light in 1990s. William Rueckart was the first who used the term 'ecocriticism' in his essay entitled "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (1978) where his intent was to focus on the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature. Cheryll Glotfelty in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996) defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." Hence, ecocritics examine the works of art on the basis of the presentation of man-nature relationship.

Glotfelty has stated that eco-consciousness among people is ecocriticism's most important task as it raises the conscious level of people that man's existence on earth is heavily dependent on the sustainability of the environment. Neo-colonialism has adversely affected the natural environments of developing and underdeveloped countries of Africa and Asia. The term neo-colonialism was coined by the French philosopher Jean- Paul Sartre in 1956. It was first used by Kwame Nkrumah, a Ghanaian politician, in the context of African countries undergoing decolonization in the 1960s.

Matthew G. Stanard in his book *European Overseas Empire, 1879-1999: A Short History* (2018) defines neocolonialism as the continuation or reimposition of imperialist rule by a state, usually a former colonial power, over another nominally independent state, usually a former colony. In this paper, primary source to be analysed from ecocritical and neocolonial perspectives is Helon Habila's eco-fiction *Oil on Water*. Helon Habila is a Nigerian writer who won Caine Prize in 2001 for his *Love Poems* and Commonwealth Writers Prize, Africa category in 2013 for his novel *Waiting for an Angel*.

In the novel *Oil on Water*, Habila presents main characters Rufus and Zaq, the journalists to showcase how the global oil economy in the form of neo-colonialism causes environmental and social disaster in the Niger Delta. Niger Delta is the delta of the Niger River on the Gulf of Guinea in Nigeria. It is spread within nine coastal southern Nigerian states namely Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers.

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In the novel, a young journalist, Rufus, travels into the Niger Delta along with a veteran reporter Zaq. They search for a kidnapped white woman, Isabel Floode, who finds herself made bargaining chip in the war between the govt. of Nigeria and its people. The fight is over oil which is a valuable resource in high demand. Nigerian Government and military help the oil industry, the multinational oil corporations in their oil exploration and oil extraction activities while militant forces of indigenous people want to liberate their land from these exploitative activities, so they launched a war against these forces to save their environment. The militants fight against the environmental degradation in the region brought about by the oil companies. For this purpose they do not hesitate to indulge in violence and the erstwhile peaceful delta region now becomes unsafe and violence-ridden. When Rufus and Zaq go deeper in to waters of the Niger Delta to find out the kidnapped white woman, they meet many powerful persons of military and militants. They also watch the village people who are caught in the middle of deadly war between military and militants and remain in constant danger. Zaq struggles with alcoholism and an infection which cause his internal organs to shut down one by one and he meets his death. Meanwhile, Rufus keeps moving forward despite the risks and dangers. At last it is found that Isabel, and her driver, Salomon, have concocted the kidnapping as a revenge plot against Isabel's husband James as he had impregnated Solomon's fiancée Koko. The kidnapping quickly got out of hand, and Isabel shuffled back and forth between militant groups which caused chaos on the island of Irikefe, the centre of the conflict. At last Rufus found out Isabel. He discovered the truth behind her disappearance, while trying to stay alive in the middle of the conflict.

Neocolonialism in Oil on Water

After World War II, the colonial powers became weaker due to their long involvement in wars and their colonies gradually became politically independent nations due to freedom movements. The developed nations, former colonial powers again began to interfere in the politics of these poor nations and thus began the new form of colonialism – which we now call as neo-colonialism. Thus neo-colonialism refers to the continuous dependence of former colonies on foreign developed countries. Neocolonialism is a further development of capitalism. It enables nations and corporations which are capitalist powers to dominate poor and subject nations by means of international capitalism instead of direct rule.

Dependency theory of neo-colonialism states that the human and natural resources of a subject nation are extracted by the economic neo-colonialism for the benefit of the economy of the wealthy country. This theory also proposes that the global economic system comprises wealthy countries at the centre and poor countries at the periphery: and under development of the periphery is a direct result of development in the centre. Globalization, closer integration into the world market, investment in poor countries through multinational corporations are visible forms of neo-colonialism. Critics of neo-colonialism argue that investment by multinational corporations in subject nations and underdeveloped countries enriches few and causes environmental, ecological and humanitarian damage to their populations. They have a strong opinion that neocolonialism results in unsustainable development and perpetual underdevelopment. Stephanie Newell in his book *West African Literatures* (2006) writes that Nigeria remains in continuing subservience to European and North American governments and corporations. Lois Tyson in her book *Critical Theory Today* writes about neocolonialism:

Neocolonialist corporate enterprise is supported, when the need arises, by puppet regimes (local rulers paid by a corporation to support its interest) and by covert military intervention.

(Tyson, 425)

Ike Okonta and Oronto Douglas in their book *Where Vultures Feast: Shell, Human Rights and Oil in the Niger Delta* (2001) write that Nigeria's elites became commission agent of the big commercial houses and mining companies that the British still controlled, wishing to capture political power in order to use it as an instrument to secure more economic benefit for themselves. This situation resulted in the presence of powerful multinational corporations such as Royal Dutch Shell which has been active in Nigeria for many decades.

The increasingly unchecked oil extraction activities have contributed to the exploitation and impoverishments of the Niger Delta causing environmental destruction. It has given rise to protest and agitation, which the governments have sought to suppress. The most prominent victim in the 1990s was writer and activist Ken Sarowiwa. He was executed for his involvement in campaigns against the degradation of his native land. Since then, the Niger Delta has turned into an uncontrollable area destabilized by armed gangs performing acts of sabotage, kidnapping and oil theft. Habila's

preoccupations with political, economic and social issues in Nigeria is especially visible in *Oil on Water* where he shows the direct consequences of neo-colonialism when he describes the degraded environment of Niger Delta region caused by oil exploration and extraction activities by multinational oil corporations. By making his protagonist Rufus, a journalist who travels through the Niger Delta, he is able to present a comprehensive picture of the situation there as experienced by its inhabitants. In the kidnapping case that draws Rufus in the Delta, the main attention is drawn to Niger Delta, and the ways its social fabric is torn apart by conflict while its landscape is drawn in oil. In the novel, Habila has made an attempt to show how neocolonialism has caused severe environmental degradation as well as militancy and violence in the Niger Delta.

Environmental Degradation and exploitation of the Niger- Delta Region in the Novel

The title of the novel *Oil on Water* captures succinctly and pictorially, the ugly situation of pollution and degradation of the Niger Delta region as the author tries to engrave on our mind, the image of oil, thick black oil that coats and settles defiantly over a once crystal and life- giving water. Habila has tried to show in the novel that though the Niger Deltans have not always been rich, but they were peaceful and prosperous farmers and fisherman. The chief Ibram narrates to Zaq and Rufus, the historical realities of these people as-

Once upon a time they lived in paradise. It was a small village close to Yellow Island. They lacked nothing, fishing and hunting and farming and watching their children growing up before them, happy.

(Habila, 42)

Rufus' nostalgia points to the fact that man derives lot of benefits from nature as it supports him the attainment of his goals. Habila explores the horrific activities by oil corporations which have adversely affected the ecosystem. Several pages of the novel present the scenes and descriptions of environmental destruction. Rufus describes and reveals highly contaminated rivers and lands. Habila depicts the erstwhile sources of livelihood which were pure and easily available but now have become toxic due to oil extraction activities and toxic wastes. Habila truthfully draws a picture of the environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region caused by the oil corporations. The following passage from the novel illustrates the effect of pollution caused by the oil companies on flora and fauna.

..we saw dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fish bobbed white- bellied between tree- roots. The next village was almost a replica of the last: the same empty squat dwelling, the same ripe and flagrant stench, the barrenness, the oil slick, and the same indefinable sadness in the air, as if a community of ghosts were suspended above the punctured zinc roofs, unwilling to depart, yet powerless to return.

(Habila, 10)

Here Habila presents the polluted landscape of the Niger Delta, which is bleak and barren, haunted by ghosts rather than a source of life. The presence of oil companies have caused serious damage to the ecosystem and environment of the Niger Delta. The novel is replete with many instances of pollution- land, air and water which have adversely affected and caused serious harm to the life in Niger- Delta. This is when Rufus, the journalist, reveals how rivers and lands have been contaminated beyond measures-

The water took on various forms as we glided on it. Sometimes, it was a snake, twisting and fast and slippery, poisonous... Their rivers were already polluted and useless for fishing, and the land grew only gas flares and pipelines.

(Habila, 37,43)

The oil corporations in the Niger Delta suppressed any truth or voice that dared to decry the activities and tell the people the truth about the consequences of oil exploration in the region. This is proved by Dr. Dagogo's statement that his researches were suppressed to the benefit of the oil companies as against the likes and environment of the people. Dr. Dagogo narrates thus:

..a year later, when the livestock began to die and the plants began to wither on their stalks, I took samples of the drinking water and in my lab I measured the level of toxins in it: it was rising, steadily. In one year it had grown to almost twice the safe level... When I confronted the oil workers, they offered me money and a job. The manager, an Italian guy, wrote me a cheque and said I was now on their payroll. He

told me to continue doing what I was doing, but this time I was to come only to him with my results. I thought they would do something with my results but they didn't. So, when people started dying, I took blood samples and recorded the toxins in them, and this time I sent my results to the government. They thanked me and dumped the results in some filing cabinet.

(Habla, 153)

The novel 'Oil on Water' shows that Habila is aware of the ecological implications of man's tendencies and activities to exploit natural resources as he depicts the dire consequences and effects of man's reckless exploitation of natural environment. The novel exhibits Habila's ecological concerns, and it raises eco-consciousness among readers which according to Cheryl Glotfelty is ecocriticism's most important task.

Militancy: A Voice of Environmental Justice in the Novel

Environmental injustice is the cause of violence in the Delta region. Juliana Maantay in her recent paper entitled "Mapping Environmental Injustices : Pitfalls and Potential of Geographic Information Systems in Assessing Environmental Health and Equity" (2002) writes that environmental injustice can be defined as the "disproportionate exposure of communities of colour and the poor to pollution, and its concomitant effects on health and environment, as well as the unequal environmental protection and environmental quality provided through laws, regulations, governmental programs, enforcement and policies". Niger Delta is the residential area of indigenous poor Ogoni people who are communities of colour, therefore are exposed to pollution along with its adverse effects on health and environment. They are victims of 'slow violence'. Slow violence is a term used by Rob Nixon in his 2011 book *Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the Poor*. Nixon defined 'slow violence' as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight , a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all". Environmental degradation, pollution and climate change are results of slow violence. In Habila's *Oil on Water* it is shown that environmental degradation, pollution, poverty, environmental injustice, lack of social amenities as well as insensitivity of the Federal government of Nigeria and multinational oil companies are the major causes of youth restiveness and violence in the Niger Delta region which is visible in military and militants conflicts, killings, kidnapping, vandalization of oil pipe lines, fire accidents etc. The youth in Niger Delta region have turned militants because they want to draw attention to their degraded environment. In Habila's novel 'Oil on Water' we come across many militant groups such as Black Belt of Justice, the free Delta Army, The AK – 47 freedom fighters etc. The central theme of 'Oil on Water' is woven around the kidnap of Mrs. Isabel Floode, the wife of a British petroleum engineer. Habila links the kidnapping activities to poverty, lack of good jobs, corruption and disillusionment. The self- styled professor (Anil Wilson) who is a militant, tells Rufus:

We are not barbarians the government propagandists say we are. We are for the people. Everything we do is for the people, what will we gain if we terrorize them?...Write only the truth. Tell them about the flares you see at night, and the oil on the water. And the soldiers forcing up to escalate the violence every day. Tell them how we 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, remember that.

(Habla 232)

Obviously, the vandalization of pipelines for oil theft, oil- spills, burn- off and blowouts rendered this region disturbed and turbulent. An oil explosion sacked Boma's village and left one side of her face completely disfigured. All these incidents are testimony to the degraded environment of this turbulent poverty- hit and violence- ridden region of Niger Delta.

Conclusion

Helon Habila in his novel, *Oil on Water*, very truthfully and realistically presents picture of the exploitation and devastation of Niger Delta by neo-colonial forces in the guise of multinational oil corporations. The oil extraction activities by these oil companies have wreaked havoc on physical and social environment.

Habila writes about various kinds of pollutions- land, air and water; discusses the damage of the ecosystem in the Niger- Delta and shows his concerns about the loss of traditional means of livelihood such as fishing and farming. The presence of these multinationals has caused not only environmental

degradation but poverty, unemployment, diseases, displacement, unsustainability, and environmental injustice are other resultant problems, which have given birth to militancy and militia in the region as a resistance and protest against these multinational oil companies,

The constant military and militant conflict, killings, kidnappings, vandalization of pipelines, fire accidents, explosions, proliferation of weapons etc. have augmented violence in the erstwhile paradisiac Niger Delta. 'Oil on Water' is a perfect literary work in the light of ecocriticism as it depicts truthfully the degradation of the physical environment of Niger Delta; it discusses the current environmental problems; it raises the environmental issues such as ecocide, unsustainability, environmental racism, environmental justice and slow violence. Novel creates eco-consciousness among the readers which is an important task of ecocriticism. Habila stresses the close man- nature relationship when he describes the community of sun and nature worshippers in Irikefe Island. The goal of these worshippers is to live in communion with nature. This island seems not to be polluted by the pipelines and gas flares yet. When Zaq falls seriously ill, the priest in Irikefe island suggests thus "We have a nurse and she will attend you here. But perhaps you won't need her. The air alone will heal you. I have seen it happen." (Habla 84) Rufus's sister Boma who had her face completely disfigured after an oil explosion, was never presented as happy. She later joined the community of these worshippers of sun and nature and experienced the healing powers and positive effects of nature. She eventually became a worshipper herself. Habila himself was a journalist and he gives a factual and realistic detail of Niger Delta through the protagonist, Rufus, who is also a journalist. Habila believes in the role of journalism to address the contemporary environmental issues. He emerges as a literary environmental activist. The novel advocates for environmental conservation, sustainable development and environmental justice.

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