



Environmental Injustice in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2011)

Dr. Heba-t-Allah Badr M. Abd El-Wahab

Assistant Professor, College of Language and Communication
Humanities Department-Arab Academy for Science, Technology
& Maritime Transport-AASTMT – Smart Village-Giza –Egypt
Corresponding Author: heba_badr.aast@yahoo.com

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Abstract

The aim of this research paper is to investigate the representations of environmental injustice in Helon Habila's novel, *Oil on Water* (2011). In fact, the study is an ecocritical exploration of the intersection between the neocolonial manipulation of the Niger-Delta region in Nigeria and its environmental devastation. It also investigates how neocolonialism is the worst kind of imperialism, capturing the dilemma of the people of the oil-rich Niger-Delta region, through the exploitation of both the multinational oil corporations and their own government. Furthermore, the paper examines the drastic ecological, economic and sociopolitical consequences of neocolonial destruction of the environment in the Niger-Delta region. In his novel *Oil on Water*, Habila skillfully delineates the struggle of the Nigerian people against these injustices and their modes of resistance to neocolonial control and manipulation of the natural resources of the area.

Keywords: *Environmental injustice – Helon Habila – Oil on Water - neocolonialism – Niger-Delta - ecological degradation.*



About the Author:

Dr Heba-t-Allah Badr Abd El-Wahab is an Assistant Professor of American Literature. She graduated from the Dept. of English Language and Literature – Faculty of Arts – Ain Shams University. She got her MA and Ph.D. Degrees in American Literature from the Dept. of English Language and Literature – Faculty of Arts – Helwan University. She majored in American Drama. She is specialized in teaching courses of Drama, Literary criticism, language skills and ESP. Currently, she is the Head of the Humanities Dept. at the College of Language and Communication (CLC) – Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport (AASTMT) - Smart Village Branch.



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Introduction:

Being formerly colonized like most African territories, Nigeria has got its independence since 1960, but it still has direct political and economic relationships of subordination and dependence to the metropolitan world. According to Newell, Nigeria remains “in continuing subservience to European

and North American governments and corporations” (2006:4), where as a postcolony, “the colonial order (institutions, regimes of accumulation and regulation, forms of governance, patterns of thought and understanding) continues to exert a powerful – even, in some instances, defining – influence beyond the formal transfer of power” (Lazarus 2013: 327).

After its independence, Nigeria failed to establish an independent national economy due to the corruption of its governmental authorities. They became:

commission agents of the big commercial houses and mining companies that the 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 2001:28).

These circumstances attracted influential multinational oil corporations, like Royal Dutch Shell, that have been working in Nigeria for several decades till the present time. It is believed that Shell has “quietly and unobtrusively worked its way to the epicentre of power over the years” (58), taking advantage of their powerful relationships with local politicians and the military authorities in order to achieve their mutual interest for control over the Niger-Delta region and its oil deposits.

After the independence of most African countries, African populations started to realize that their countries were being endangered to a new form of colonialism, conducted by their former colonialists and some other developed nations. In his book *Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism*, Kwame Nkrumah, former president of Ghana (1960-66), gives an extensive account of neocolonialism. It emphasizes the necessity to realize that colonialism has yet to be abolished in Africa. In fact, it has evolved into what he calls neocolonialism. Nkrumah believes that:

In place of colonialism, as the main instrument of imperialism, we have today neo-colonialism ... [which] like colonialism, is an attempt to export the social conflicts of the capitalist countries...The result of neo-colonialism is that foreign capital is used for the Exploitation of Labour rather than for the development of the less developed parts of the world. Investment, under neo-colonialism, increases, rather than

decreases, the gap between the rich and the poor countries of the world. The struggle against neo-colonialism is not aimed at excluding the capital of the developed world from operating in less developed countries. It is also dubious in consideration of the name given being strongly related to the concept of colonialism itself. It is aimed at preventing the financial power of the developed countries being used in such a way as to impoverish the less developed. (1996: XI-XX)

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. This implies how postcolonial African states have apparently failed to adapt themselves to the issues of self-preservation. In fact, neocolonialism is considered a new form of colonial exploitation and control over the newly independent African countries, and other African countries with delicate economies.

In his book, Nkrumah exposes the strategies that the West employs in its move from colonialism to neocolonialism. He states:

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 (1996: XX).

These tactics justify the situation under which a country is continually confined by the chains of neocolonialism while being only independent in theory, and yet being trapped externally by international dominance, so that it is actually directed politically and economically from the outside.

As for the relationship between neocolonialism and imperialism, Nkrumah believes that neocolonialism is the worst and most intensified form of imperialism. It guarantees power, for those who practice it, without any form of responsibility and limitless manipulation for those who suffer from it. He explains that neocolonialist exploitation is applied in the political, religious, ideological, economic, and cultural spheres of society (1996:XI).

Furthermore, in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon describes the nature of neocolonialism by stating that:

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. (1961:29)

Fanon's words highlight the extent of violence, oppression and exploitation that has been directed by the forces of the authority's control on the people. In fact, setting the people of a country under control is the basic process underlying the neocolonial approach. Hence, this nation is subjugated to a government or controlling authority, being denied its rights to freedom and elementary necessities.

The preservation of Mother Nature has become a crucial mission of every individual at the present time. Recently, natural catastrophes have not only forced the human society to reflect on the vital importance of nature for human survival but have also warned the world that any human action against nature will lead to the ultimate ruin of humanity at large. A preoccupation with the natural environment emerged during the second half of the twentieth century as a result of environmental challenges and threat such as global warming, pollution and climate change. Consequently, at the present time, the study of the natural environment has formed an integral part of various academic spheres. Researchers have recently begun to study the impact of environmentally engaged literature on its readers. Scholars have found that ecological fiction can make readers more concerned about animal and plant welfare, climate change, in addition to raising awareness of various forms of environmental injustice.

The focus given to nature in literature is perceived in the literary canon as 'ecocriticism'. While ecocriticism had its rise as a discipline during the 1990s, Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the founders of the field, defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment" (xviii). It explores the interconnection between the literary text and the larger physical world. Ecocriticism is actually the study of the illustrations of nature in literary works and the relationship between literature and the environment. As a matter

of fact, one of the reasons behind the emergence of ecocriticism is the growing global environmental calamities. Ecocriticism aims to show how the work of fiction writers concerned about environmental issues can play some crucial part in solving tangible and persistent ecological anxieties.

Glotfelty adds that ecocriticism mainly “seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness responses to environmental crisis” (xviii). Helon Habila (1967-) is a contemporary Nigerian poet and novelist, whose writings have won many awards, including the Caine Prize in 2001. Habila's novel, *Oil on Water*, is one of the insightful literary works that delve deep into the core of the plight of oil exploitation in the Niger-Delta region, delineating foreign interference and neocolonial intervention into Nigerian sovereignty, which consistently influences the whole nation. Therefore, Newell argues that Habila's writings are perceived as a literary chronicle, revealing “the complex ways in which colonial history continues to shadow daily life in West Africa without fully dominating or dictating it” (2006: 4).

Oil on Water illustrates clearly the effects of environmental destruction on the lives of its characters. Therefore, the environmental issue is aptly interwoven in Habila's novel, attaining what Lawrence Bull believes that:

[T]he environmental turn in literary studies has been more issue – driven than method or paradigm – driven is one reason why catchy but totalizing rubric of “ecocriticism” is less indicative than environmental criticism or literary–environmental studies...and all the more so now that environmental criticism's working conception of “environment” has broadened in recent years from “natural” to include also the urban, the interweave of “built” and “natural” dimensions in every locale, and the interpretation of the local by the global (2005:11–12)

In Habila's *Oil on Water*, the issue of oil drilling is discussed from a sociopolitical perspective not only from a purely natural one. So it is proper to classify it as a novel that employs the perspective of second-wave ecocriticism that studies environmental issues in literature through a sociopolitical framework. Bull argues: “Second-wave ecocritics tended to focus on urban spaces and environmental justice. He argues that the second-wave is “sociocentric” while the first-wave is ecocentric” (2005:94). Hence, the issue of oil drilling is displayed

from the different perspectives of various characters in the novel. For instance, the oil drilling dilemma is represented from the different viewpoints of the reporters, the local people, the government, the militants and the oil companies. In fact, the second-wave of ecocriticism owes more to social ecology. Therefore, people's reaction towards this problematic issue is greatly essential because as Bull confirms: "like racism, environmental crisis is a broadly cultural issue not the poetry of a single discipline" (2005:1). In fact, this novel exposes the underestimation of the importance of preserving the natural environment and its catastrophic consequences.

The aim of this research paper is to investigate the representations of environmental injustice in Habila's novel *Oil on Water* (2011). In fact, the study is an ecocritical exploration of the intersection between the neocolonial manipulation of the Niger-Delta region in Nigeria and its environmental devastation. It examines the drastic ecological, economic and sociopolitical consequences of neocolonial destruction of the environment in the Niger-Delta region. In his novel, Habila skillfully delineates the struggle of Nigerian people against these injustices and their modes of resistance to neocolonial control and manipulation of the natural resources of the area.

The choice of Habila's novel *Oil on Water* is deliberate as it extensively depicts these environmental injustices throughout the interactions among the major characters, the environment, the multinational oil companies and the government. It is worth noting that the Niger-Delta region is considered one of the world's richest spots. In addition to its widespread oil deposits, there are massive forests, plentiful wildlife, and fertile agricultural lands where all kinds of crops are cultivated. The Niger-Delta region is also well-known for its abundant fish resources. In fact, *Oil on Water* aptly captures the horrific consequences of oil drilling on both the environment and the people of the Niger-Delta land, investigating the environmental status before and after oil drilling that has received international attention after these conflicts were portrayed in numerous literary works.

Analysis:

Habila's *Oil on Water* takes place in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria where crude oil drilling is steered for both national and international purposes. *Oil on*

Water may offer only partial insights into an “aesthetics of oil” that can be “uncovered by comparing the recurring motifs, systemic connections and structures of feeling produced by oil modernity” (Macdonald 2017:291), but its emphasis on one specific location of extraction efficiently discloses the dark side of the oil business. As a matter of fact, the ‘curse of oil’ is grounded in ecological imperialism as Michael Perelman clearly states:

The origins of the curse of oil do not lie in the physical properties of petroleum but rather in the social structure of the world A rich natural resource base makes a poor country, especially a relatively powerless one, an inviting target—both politically and militarily—for dominant nations. In the case of oil, the powerful nations will not risk letting such a valuable resource fall under the control of an independent government, especially one that might pursue policies that do not coincide with the economic interests of the great transnational corporations. So, governments that display excessive independence soon find themselves overthrown, even if their successors will foster an environment of corruption and political instability. (2003:199-202)

In Irikefe Island, the narrator, Rufus, is a fresh journalist traveling with Zaq, an older journalist, to meet the militants who kidnapped a white English woman and wife of an oil engineer, Isabella Floode, to prove that she is still alive before a ransom is paid to set her free. During this mission, they come across numerous villages that become victims to ecological disasters and environmental contamination that result from oil drilling. The whole atmosphere is polluted. The Niger-Delta land is almost intolerable to engage in agricultural or fishing activities. In *Oil on Water*, the leader in Irikefe island, Chief Malabo, is presented as a hero. He struggled with the exploiters and he died as a martyr. After Chief Malabo's death, Chief Ibiram describes how the oil firms forcefully come in and before long: “The rigs went up, and the gas flares, and the workers came and set up camps in our midst, we saw our village change, right before our eyes” (Habila 2011:41).

Rufus further relates how the residents of the surviving villages find themselves facing a challenging ecological crisis and an imminent danger of both poisoning and starvation. This is due to oil spilling in the lands and rivers of the

Niger-Delta, triggering an endless chain of malicious actions. The oil companies release deadly pollutants which, consequently, kill off fish stocks and contaminate the soil. After listening to a radio program, Rufus says: "I imagined they were speaking of 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" (Habila 2011:16).

Throughout their frightening and unbearable journey in the polluted waters, while searching for the kidnapped British woman, the two journalists encounter dreadful things. Rufus narrates:

The foul smell of the swamps replaced the musky, energizing river smell, and at such times we'd become aware of the clear sky above as if for the first time. But the swamps and the mist always returned, and strange objects will float pass us: a piece of cloth, a rolling log, a dead fowl, a bloated dog belly-up with black birds perching on it, their expressionless eyes blinking rapidly, their sharp beaks savagely cutting into the soft decaying flesh. (Habila 2011:3)

Poverty, disease and famine are the first direct consequences of the practices of neocolonialism that lead to environmental injustices and ecological devastation of the Niger-Delta region. Abject poverty is an alarming condition that affects most characters in the novel under study. Before the discovery of oil in the area, people used to live peacefully, devoid of want. Their land was fertile and their rivers were clean and they were able to cultivate basic crops and vegetables. When the oil firms started oil drilling, their lives began to undergo some changes. Farmers felt the consequences of those changes when the oil leaks had a negative effect on the fertility of the soil. In fact, oil spills lead to the increase of poisonousness of the rivers, which in turn, affects farming lands causing a severe shortage in agricultural production and river fish levels. Similarly, fatal diseases, carrying germs and viruses, flourish throughout the contaminated water and soil. The societies of the Niger-Delta region have no access to fresh water or food and the medical services provided are inadequate. Consequently, famine and hunger spread in the whole region. As they are left unattended, hundreds of local people fall ill and die. In *Oil on Water*, the devastation of the surrounding environment

is rather disturbing. The gas flickers, oil spilling and broken pipelines released demise everywhere in the abandoned villages. Rufus notes:

We followed a bend in the river and in front of us we saw dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fish bobbed white-bellied between tree roots...we were as soundless as a ghost ship, the roar of our motor muffled by the saturated air. Over the black, expressionless water there were no birds or fish or other water creatures- we were alone (Habila 2011:8-9).

As a matter of fact, the Niger-Delta disaster is just a miniature of the real scope of this dilemma. This crisis is a universal phenomenon and instantly needs a direct and ultimate resolution. Worster comments:

We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more, it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them (1993:27).

In fact, global environmental desolation motivates ecocritics to support more the rights of preserving the natural ecosystem. If the environment becomes susceptible, it follows that the whole ecosystem is threatened. Entire nations have deceased by famine and disease. Irresponsible human interaction with the environment is the foremost reason behind this plight of environmental injustice.

Contrasting the horrifying present with the idyllic past, in *Oil on Water*, the narrator recalls his past pre-oil life. He used to hunt crabs with his sister and lived in harmony with the surrounding natural environment. The sea was outside their door, frequently bringing hopeful surprises and suggesting new possibilities to their lives. When the crabs were caught, they sold them in the market or to restaurants in Port Harcourt and they paid their school fees with the money, but “no crabs here now. The water is not good” (Habila: 26). Similarly, Rufus’ account of how life was in the past contrasts with the severe conditions of loss and estrangement that the villagers suffer from at the present due to the deterioration of their natural environment:

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 growing 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 (Habila 2011:38).

In the past, families were united and enjoyed the natural environment around them like creeks, rivers and the forests. Unfortunately, the nirvana they once lived in is reduced to narratives and allusions of a cherished and badly missed past. In fact, the local people are now displaced and forced to move away from their homes.

Officials of the oil corporations, with agents from the government, use numerous forms of deception and harsh strategies to subjugate and control the villagers, forcing them out of their ancestral households. One of these tricks is offering foreign scholarships to the children of the Niger-Delta local people. This trick fools many villagers into accepting the deceiving offer of the oil firms to sell their lands in order to give their children the opportunity to study abroad and return to become executives in the oil companies in the future. In *Oil on Water*, the narrator notes: "Some of the neighbors were even bragging that the oil companies had offered to send their kids to Europe and America to become engineers so that one day they could return and work as oil executives in Port Harcourt" (Habila 2011:39). Eventually, all these lies turn out to be fake promises.

In addition, uneducated local inhabitants were tempted to work for the oil companies as casual workers so as to earn considerable incomes. That gave them a deceitful sense of superiority and they started to abandon most of their native culture and conventional professions. When some oil workers, including Rufus' father, were substituted by experts, their homes and families suffered severely. Rufus' father did not want his son to face the same fate and he decided to send him to the city to be educated so as to get a job. In fact, Rufus reacted positively to his father's guidance and got himself a profession, but the future remains uncertain. Rufus narrates:

The plan is my father's; he has lost his job, just like half the town. They all worked for the *ABZ Oil Company*, and now the people, once awash

in oil money, watch in astonishment as the streets daily fill up with fleeing families, some returning to their hometowns and villages, some going on to Port Harcourt in the hope of picking up something in the big city...Get a trade, my father said, get something you can do with your hands, and this will never happen to you (Habla 2011:62).

Similarly, the old man, Tamuno, who has volunteered to be the guide of the two reporters during their journey to look for the kidnapped British woman, begs them to adopt his son, Michael, so as to rescue him from the same fate. The old man is ready to give up his son to strangers because he believes that there is no future for the next generations in this troubled region, plighted with social decadence and ecological destruction. He implores them in his special dialect saying: "But see, wetin he go do here? Nothing. No fish for river, nothing. I fear say soon him go join the militants, and I no wan that. Na good boy" (Habla 2011:36). The old man believes that if the reporters reject adopting his son and taking him to the city of Port Harcourt where he can get a chance for life, his future will be doomed and, hence, the only choice left for the boy is to join the militants.

It is thus clear that discarding one's native culture for an alternative occupation and style of living proved to be only a delusion for the locals. The oil companies assert that what they offered the people of the Niger-Delta - employment and foreign education - would promise them a superior life, but that did not occur. Unfortunately, the harm has happened: The old traditional way of life is over and it cannot be restored back because of the horrific ecological damage of the rivers, creeks and farm lands. As a result, the local people end up wandering aimlessly in their own motherland. They become slaves of an intruding imported culture which they don't recognize and mistakenly acclaimed over their own. This leads to the ultimate result of the displacement of the locals from their ancestral homes.

The ecological situation forces the villagers to encounter displacement from their ancestral homes. This predicament ultimately befalls these people resulting in their migration to other settlements. In this narrative, displacement is the second and most destructive negative consequence of postcolonialism, and hence, neocolonialism. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, place and displacement are a chief concern of postcolonial fiction. It is clear that the

postcolonial crisis of identity is revived; the concern for the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place (2000:8). In addition, Salih believes that displacement is not the sheer transfer of people from one place, region, country, or continent to another. It actually represents various communal phenomena, with wide range of economic, political, and environmental implications, originating from complicating issues. Most evacuated people are humble, homeless, oppressed or victims of war, with little or no revenue, occupation, or survival opportunities in the regions from which they were evacuated, usually by conditions beyond their control (1999:37). In *Oil on Water*, the displacement of the villagers from their ancestral homes is attained through violence initiated by the oil multinational companies which compromised with collaborators including local politicians, corrupt government and the military.

Moving and settling in another village led to conflict between original settlers and the moving villagers, and at the same time, oil engineers continue to explore extensively for oil in the streams and villages. In *Oil on Water*: “The oil company boats were patrolling, sometimes openly sending their men to the village to take samples of soil and water” (Habila 2011:40). In Habila’s opinion, the oil explorers’ provoking action of sending their workers into villages, digging everywhere and taking samples was a stirring catalyst, triggering limitless resistance on the part of the villagers. As a result, this cycle of strife becomes endless, with the complications of the oil leaking into soil and water and disturbing the surrounding communities. These harsh circumstances are responsible for the birth of militia groups in the Niger-Delta region. These gangs have, in turn, spread chaos, confusion and turmoil far and wide. What is worse is the loss of sanctity for human life as these communities “had borne the brunt of the oil wars, caught between the militants and the military” (Habila 2011:34). In fact, the existence of the militia groups is the third negative consequence of the practices of neocolonialism and, hence, imperialism.

The rise of these militia groups requires more military forces in order to search for them from one village to the other. In one of their pursuits, the soldiers abuse the village people and arrest a suspect, Karibi, the village Blacksmith, whom they believe to be the militants’ spy. In *Oil on Water*, Rufus says:

They are here! The soldiers are here! They came out of sheds and houses and passages, wielding whips and guns occasionally firing into the air to create more chaos ... over ten soldiers surrounded the smithy, facing the silent, defiant men. One of the soldiers, a sergeant stepped into the shed and pointed his rifle at Karibi - you, come with us (Habila 2011:12).

It is thus clear that the military tactic is to introduce terror and anxiety over the frightened villagers so as to guarantee entire physical and psychological control over them.

In his book *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Albert Memmi argues that there are only two outlets for colonial subjugation; assimilation or revolt (1974:52). Revolt is the fourth crucial negative consequence of neocolonialism. The subjugated people of Niger-Delta region, in the novel under study, are represented as being confined under the military command and their only relief from torment is to resist control and resort to revolt. Their revolt is directed at any form of domination, whether it is political, economic or religious. In his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon states that a subaltern revolt that ends in violence and public strife against the government is largely sociopolitical and economic. It is not simply a revolt with hostility for violence's sake, rather the violence here is cathartic - a violence which remedies the disempowered of their inferiority (2008:35). In *Oil on Water*, the local people of the Niger-Delta revolt against their adversaries: both the government with its representatives and the oil companies. They resist neocolonial control in numerous ways that are to be fully traced extensively throughout the study.

It is worth noting that the three pillars of government: local, state, and federal that establish the Nigerian system are not portrayed in Habila's novel as having responsibility towards the locals. The military, which is part of the federal system and whose responsibility is to sustain internal and external peace and stability in the region, fails desperately in its obligations. Instead of resolving the struggle between the militia and the oil firms, the military becomes another agent of oppression and violence to the villagers. Fanon postulates a treatise on violence and how it operates on people saying: "The intermediary does not lighten the oppression, nor seek to guide the dominations" (*Black*: 2008:29).

In a dehumanizing scene that is highly indicative of the military's disdain for human existence and rights, Habila delineates the miserable conditions of some captives in the military camp through the eyes of his narrator Rufus who states:

Most of the men were lying on the floor, some with faces turned toward the wall. I didn't know how long they had been the Major's prisoners, or what other punishment they had endured in addition to the petrol-drenching, but they all looked exhausted and dispirited (Habila 2011:152).

The local people despise the military as it abuses the residents whom they imagine involved in the damaging of oil gears and pipelines and in transmitting information to the militia. The militants, on the other hand, are distrustful of the villagers whom they believe are taking sides with the military. Being trapped amidst this turmoil has brought about unbearable misery to the wretched and displaced people of the Niger-Delta region.

Believing that they are oppressed and marginalized by their opponents and being politically and economically manipulated, these militants are funded by politicians with certain agendas in order to attain particular objectives. Consequently, this usually happens at the expense of the local people and the surrounding environment. They consider themselves freedom fighters and they become tremendously violent and uncontrollable. In *Oil on Water*, the militia always stays in retreats and hides their camps. 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" (Habila 2011:6).

While interviewing Henshaw, one of the leaders of the militia groups, by the journalists Zaq and Rufus, he replies:

Is that all you want from me, to tell you whether some foreign hostage is alive or not? Who is she in the context of the hopes and ambitions being created and destroyed? Can't you see the larger picture? (Habila 2011:154).

To Henshaw, the journalists are only concerned about the safety of a sheer stranger and not about the severe damage that the culture she embodies has done to his people. They are unaware of the disaster taking place in front of their eyes - the extinction of a nation and its lands. In fact, kidnapping, on the part of the militants, is only a tactic to grab the attention of their oppressors. It gives them an outlet to express their grievances and the predicament of their people.

When both reporters further ask Henshaw if his militia group has a specific tag, he answers: “We are the people, we are the delta, and we represent the very earth on which we stand...Sit tight. Wait. This land is ours, after all” (Habila 2011:154-6). This statement is highly significant, reflecting the spirit of resistance against occupation and dominance by an unwelcomed external vanquisher, with the help and support of a neocolonial government. To the militia groups, the land and its resources are lawfully belonging to them. They see their land as an Eden full of dreams and aspirations and they want it back. Hence, they will do their best to redeem what is theirs.

Similarly, in *Oil on Water*, Ani or the Professor's group of militants is persistent. They will not retreat until the military gets out of the area. The Professor's determination is registered by Habila as follows:

I am a soldier, I know how to fight and will never stop fighting till I achieve my goal. By this time tomorrow, one of the major oil depots will be burning. I want you to write about it, tell them I am responsible. I can't tell you more than that, but I can tell you the war is just starting. We will make it so hot for the government and the oil companies that they will be forced to pull out (Habila 2011:220).

The military is forced to retreat in defeat and the oil companies have no alternative but to discontinue digging and drilling oil, leaving behind many oil installations. Accordingly, this group of militants seems to be the actual sovereignty fighters - the ones who tried to free their land and people from forceful neocolonialism and imperial manipulation. However, Medovoi pinpoints that the actions of the Professor's group is quite similar to that of the oil companies, utilizing the exact rhetoric to justify their acts of violence. Representing him as “an ecocritical ‘professor’ who espouses the environmental ‘truth’ without acknowledging his

language's complicity with the existing political ecology of petroviolence" (2014:22), the novel demonstrates "that the remediative discourse of environmental advocacy can become not only a form of hypocrisy but also, at its worst, a screen for killing" (2014:22). Accordingly, the blurring of distinctive moral norms with reference to both the militants and the military further adds to the atmosphere of perplexity and confusion which permeates the novel.

As a matter of fact, the Niger-Delta people practice various modes of resistance in Habila's novel. Eco-activism is actually the first direct mode of resisting neocolonial control over the Niger-Delta region that leads to its ecological devastation. Eco-activism is a form of commitment in social and /or political campaigns with the purpose of preventing any environmental injustice. In *Oil on Water*, eco-activism is represented by the character of Dr. Mark Dagogo. He obstinately warns the village people against the hazards of the toxic contaminants in their surrounding environment, highlighting their threats to both man and nature. The oil officials try to bribe Dr. Dagogo so as to keep him quiet. He is a well-educated, health conscious and sympathetic man. His endeavors to save the villagers of the Niger-Delta are remarkable. Dr. Dagogo states:

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. More people died and I sent my results to NGOs and international organizations, which published them in international journals and urged the government to do something about the flares, but nothing happened. More people fell sick, a lot died. (Habila 2011:145)

These lines indicate how dedicated the medical doctors to the dying local people from fatal diseases, but they find no support from the health sector or the government. Similarly, the United Nations, the World Health Organization, United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund and other international entities did not come to aid these societies as they are delegated to do. Unfortunately, the population of the Niger-Delta are abandoned and deserted on their own to suffer and die of starvation and illness.

Reconstructing native culture is the second crucial mode of resisting neocolonial control over the local people. In fact, native culture offers people an

identity and a sense of belonging but the locals of the Niger-Delta are deprived of this right. The colonizer always believes that his culture is superior and he will take advantage of any means to overpower the colonized culture in order to assert his supremacy. Cultural beliefs and their growth have thoroughly been diminished: First, by a colonizing authority with its belief systems and culture and later by the oil businesses aided by their political agents, government and the military. However, In *Oil on Water*, representations of resistance and reconstruction of native culture are still practiced. Karibi, the village blacksmith is a significant example. In his novel, Habila aptly describes him: "In the center, squatting before a blazing hearth stocked with metal, was a young man who looked up at us briefly before returning to his chore" (Habila 2011:10). Karibi appears momentarily in the text but his role occupies a very noteworthy position in his community. He has a humble hut in the village where he practices his craft and trains his apprentices. In fact, blacksmithing is an ancient ancestral expertise in Africa, with countless myths and legends attached to it. Oral literature has skillfully chronicled blacksmithing and its significance in society is extensively recognized. Similarly, the old man and his son is another example of the reconstruction of native culture. They embody a teacher and a student in an informal setting. The young boy is always near his father, learning how to paddle a canoe and fish. This is the typical practice of conserving culture and communicating values and experience to the next generations through informal instruction.

Storytelling is a significant procedure of informal instruction used to transmit cultural legacy to the following generations. In *Oil on Water* Rufus says:

I could hear voices of children and women. The women were standing in an open shed around a hearth, probably smoking fish... I opened the first door on my right and saw a group of children, about five of them, all about the same age, seated around an old woman; she was telling them a story (Habila 2011:24).

In fact, elders pass on their collective belief system - myths, legends, heroism - into the minds of the young offspring through storytelling. The impact of the place and the worth of gender roles are vital for the survival of the village. Girls are taught how to smoke fish, take care of the house and sell supplies in the

marketplace while boys go to the river with their fathers to catch fish. This casual way of instructing their values are captured in the following: “Most of the houses were empty, the men out fishing and the women smoking fish in the shed I’d seen earlier” (Habila 2011:25).

The substantial attachment of the locals of the Niger-Delta region to their native righteous beliefs is the third influential mode of resistance of the neocolonial impact over them. The local people are portrayed as mystically attached to the shrine and fulfill the orders of their priest Naman. The shrine is filled with sculptures more than a hundred years old and in spite of the advent of both colonialism and Christianity, the villagers remain strong adherents to their native religion: “The worshippers, that’s what we call ourselves. Some of these figures go back almost a hundred years to the founding of the shrine. The sculpture garden is the shrine to which this whole Island is dedicated” (Habila 2011:85). Therefore, the people of Irikefe Island are widely recognized and admired by the inhabitants of the surrounding villages; “The villages were all connected to the shrine by religion and the chief priest had authority over the whole settlement” (Habila 2011:108). Moreover, the worshippers have faith in the notion that if people conserve and esteem the earth and its atmosphere, it possesses healing powers capable of curing limitless ailments. When Zaq falls ill, the priest tells him: “We have a nurse here and she will attend to you. But perhaps you will not need her. The air alone will heal you. I have seen it happen” (Habila 2011:86).

In fact, the constant reconciliation of the residents of Irikefe island with nature is the forth and final mode of resisting the neocolonial effect on their natural environment. They have their own conception of mother earth. The worshippers believe the earth to be a mother who cares about the welfare of her own children. In order to accomplish her duties efficiently, however, this mother should be given her due rights and esteem. To the people of Irikefe, the spirits of the earth are representatives of both good and ill omens. Those who sin against mother earth cannot live in peace. Bloodshed, mischief and contamination are considered delinquencies against mother earth. The priest states: “Of course, we believe in spirits, good and bad. The bad ones are the ones who have sinned against mother earth and cannot find rest in her womb. They roam the earth, restless, looking for redemption” (Habila 2011:107).

There are specific constraints in the African native culture that if violated and not compensated for, will bring about catastrophes such as famine and sickness over the community. According to native beliefs, any transgression committed against mother earth should be atoned for by an act of purification within the commonly accepted rituals of the worshippers. In *Oil on Water*, when Zaq and Rufus dig up a grave which they assumed to be the tomb of the kidnapped English woman, the worshippers are extremely annoyed. Naman, the priest, warns them saying:

You have committed a grave ill. By going to the burial ground and digging up a grave last night, you have desecrated the place, and now - well... our head priest died this morning. And now we cannot bury her because your activity last night has disrupted the balance of things. A purification ceremony has been carried out (Habila 2011:164 -5).

While observing the native righteous beliefs of the worshippers, it is obvious that the African societies contribute to the notion of ecological conservation long before the advent of colonialism. In fact, African societies respect nature. They lived a peaceful life in the past. This is the reason why they are burdened with the obligation of restoring the lost peace of the earth and preserving nature and its consecrations. The priest asserts: "We are a holy community, a peaceful people. Our only purpose here is to bring a healing, to restore and conserve" (Habila 2011:130).

Many critics believe that Habila's *Oil on Water* echoes Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* because it also revolves around a journey by boat into the centre of Africa, taking the protagonist into the heart of moral darkness brought to Africa through the European presence. Gagiano adds that:

Habila's novel can be seen as responding to chronologically layered evocations of African conditions and that Achebe (whose recent death led one anew to recognise the magnitude of the literary steps he took to counter the simplistic conceptions of African conditions and societies put out by others) is more important here to Habila than Conrad is. Habila's novel could be read as an examination of the *post-colonial*

disintegration or the “falling apart” of African societies – which in some ways is still proceeding (2020:1).

Furthuremore, Feldner gives a recapitulation of Habila's work saying:

This collection of accounts results in a multifaceted and intricate picture of the situation in the Delta, as seen from the perspective of a variety of characters. The narrative therefore captures the effects and the victims of the oil extraction, but due to Rufus's limited perspective, which allows him to record only the situation on the ground, the root causes are beyond his scope. He cannot take into account the actions, methods and strategies of the oil companies, or adopt a more distanced point of view of Nigeria's entanglements in international neocolonial relationships. As a result, the novel does not offer an analysis of the processes and structures of neocolonialism but is testament to its effects and consequences (2018:520).

As a result, it is quite obvious that Habila's *Oil on Water* belongs to the tradition of Nigerian literature that is socially conscious, bearing “witness to Nigerian social experience” (Griswold 2000:3).

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this paper examines the representations of environmental injustice in Habila's novel *Oil on Water* (2011), tracing the struggle of the Niger-Delta inhabitants against these injustices. In the novel under study, Habila aptly reveals the intersection between neocolonial manipulation of the Niger-Delta area in Nigeria and its environmental devastation. The study also investigates the catastrophic ecological, economic and sociopolitical consequences of neocolonial manipulation of the environment in the Niger- Delta region. They involve poverty, disease, famine, displacement, the rise of the militants and finally revolt. In addition, modes of resistance to neocolonial control and exploitation of the natural resources of the region are thoroughly examined. They include practicing eco-activism, reconstructing native culture, reconciliation with nature in addition to respecting native righteous beliefs.

The study also verifies how neocolonialism is the worst kind of imperialism, exposing the plight of the people of the oil-rich Niger-Delta region in Nigeria through the exploitation of both the multinational oil corporations and their own government. This proves that neocolonial control may remain to be an integral part of Africa's sociopolitical, cultural, and economic existence. Accordingly, African people will always wonder if neocolonialism will ever be abolished and if Africa will ever be really decolonized.

It is debatable that Habila's novel provides neither solutions nor practical alternatives to the endless predicaments confronting the Niger-Delta locals. However, Habila is among numerous Nigerian novelists who show great concern to social transformation through literature. In fact, his novel *Oil on Water* is a pursuit for both ecological and social justice as it is regarded as a visible testimony for environmental destruction and social degradation caused by the neocolonial practices of oil drilling in the Niger-Delta region in Nigeria.

All in all, Habila's *Oil on Water* is highly acclaimed as one of the best illustrations for this ecocritical subgenre of Nigerian fiction, in addition to its remarkable literary quality and challenging sophistication. It provides an insight into the dilemma of the people of the Niger-Delta, raising an ecological awareness in the reader. It also suggests that there is a recurring necessity to preserve nature and it is a universal responsibility that falls on all human beings for the welfare of the next generations. In fact, Habila's *Oil on Water* is actually a call for global attention against all environmental injustices that are taking place in the Niger-Delta region in Nigeria. Therefore, serious measures should be taken towards this universal predicament so as to endorse a return to healthy and balanced ecosystems.

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الظلم البيئي في رواية هيلون هابيللا "نفت على ماء"

المستخلص:

تهدف الورقة البحثية الى التحقيق في تمثيلات الظلم البيئي في رواية هيلون هابيللا "نفت على ماء" (٢٠١١). في الواقع إن الدراسة هي استكشافا بيئيا للصلة بين الدمار البيئي والتلاعب الاستعماري الجديد لمنطقة دلتا النيجر في نيجيريا. كما تبحث الدراسة في كيفية أن الاستعمار الجديد هو أسوأ أنواع الإمبريالية ، حيث يلتقط معضلة شعب منطقة دلتا النيجر الغنية بالنفط من خلال استغلال كل من شركات النفط متعددة الجنسيات وحكومتهم. علاوة على ذلك ، تبحث الورقة البحثية في العواقب البيئية والسياسية و الاقتصادية و الاجتماعية الوخيمة للتدمير الاستعماري الجديد للبيئة في منطقة دلتا النيجر ، حيث يصور هابيللا في روايته بمهارة نضال الشعب النيجيري ضد هذه المظالم وأساليب مقاومته للسيطرة الاستعمارية الجديدة والتلاعب بالموارد الطبيعية للمنطقة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الظلم البيئي – هيلون هابيللا - نفت على ماء - الاستعمار الجديد – دلتا النيجر - التدهور البيئي