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## Rape of a Nation: An Eco-critical Reading of Helon Habila's Oil on Water

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### ABSTRACT

A number of literary and linguistic researches have been carried out on post-independent Nigerian quagmire. The concerns of some of these studies range from investigating many of the topical issues that have come to define the country, particularly with regard to the issues of bad governance and socio-economic oppression, to the roles played by the masses in aggravating the nation's predicaments. However, not many critics and scholars have paid the deserved attention to the ecological concerns of Nigerian novelists. This paper, therefore, examines Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* as a testament to the environmental mindfulness of Nigerian novelists. The choice of *Oil on Water* is informed by the fact that there is a dearth of serious scholarly research on the novel. Using the sociological approach and adopting a content analysis method, this study finds out that Habila is not oblivious of the ecological implications of man's exploitative tendencies on earth's resources as he makes bare the grim effects of Man's reckless actions on the environment, the society and other living things, thereby rousing the consciousness of his readers as a way of forcing them to contribute their quota towards making the earth a safe place to live in, free from further gratuitous exploitations by a few to the disadvantage of many. It is, nevertheless, found out that the author fails to suggest pragmatic solutions to the staggering challenges confronting the oil-polluted and violence-ridden nation of Niger Delta.

**Keywords:** Degradation, Earth resources, Environment, Exploitation, Society.

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### 1. Introduction

Nigeria till date remains one of the oil producing nations that still depend largely on crude oil for their sustainability and developmental projects. Until recently, just before the price of crude oil began to plummet at the global market, all efforts at making the various governments of the day consider diversifying the nation's economy (as a way of creating alternative channels of generating revenues for the country) often received insignificant (re-) considerations. Of course, before independence, Nigeria

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depended mostly on agriculture, exporting raw materials like cocoa, cashew, groundnuts, palm oil, and many more.

However, following the discovery of oil in Oloibiri, River State, Nigeria, in 1958 (Adeyanju, 2004: 217) and the eventual oil boom of the 1970s and early 80s, there was a paradigm shift in the nation's economy from agriculture to crude oil, thereby 'tying the nation's fate to the fortunes of a single commodity: oil' (Larkin, 1997: 108). Though extractive activities in the country, including oil exploration, have led to rapid industrialization and urban development, which have brought so much gain to the country (Dawodu, 2011: 3), the impacts of the change from agriculture to crude oil as the nation's mainstay, as now evident, are arguably catastrophic. This is because, apart from the fact that the nation lives at the mercies of constant increase in the price of crude oil, agriculture is no longer attractive to a teeming population of Nigerian unemployed youths; and, worse still, oil pollution crisis has become part of the country's historical trajectory.

Indeed, the Nigerian physical environment has suffered untold hardships due to wanton exploitations of nature's resources and oil pollution, particularly in the coastal areas, the pipeline ways, the road networks, swamp and mangrove farmlands, among others. Writing on oil pollution in Nigeria, Adeyanju (2004: 217) states:

... the creeks and coastal areas are noted for oil pollution hazard resulting from exploration, transportation, fresh water areas are polluted through waste disposal generated from oil and industrial affluent (sic). Also, the pipeline way and road network are polluted during transportation of petroleum products as well as crude.

Gas flaring which is a consequence of petroleum production is another identifiable source of pollution to the Nigerian physical environment as it contributes significantly to the atmospheric level of carbon dioxide, which is a major component of greenhouse gases that cause global warming phenomenon. Unfortunately too, the oil producing areas of Niger Delta are the worst hit by gas flaring with untold impacts on agriculture, food security, public health, and fundamental human rights. Aghalino has pointed out three major effects of oil exploration on the oil-mineral producing communities: firstly, it leads to environmental pollution; secondly, it destroys the ecosystem and ways of life of the people; and lastly, it further impoverishes the oil-producing communities (Cited in Dawodu, 2011: 3).

Suffice to say that the Nigerian government, at different times, has put in place institutional machineries and has made (and amended) laws in a bid to ensure a cleaner environment for its citizens and ensure proper compensations in case of infringements, all in line with global practices. Two of such established institutions are the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA) (now ministry), and the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC). Among the various laws put in place by the government include Environmental Impact Assessment Decree No 86, 1992; Oil Pipeline Act (1990); Oil in Navigable Water Act (LFN, 1990); Petroleum (Drilling and Production) Regulation in pursuant to the Petroleum Act of 1969, and many others (Adeyanju 2004: 221-222).

Regrettably, majority of the laws and policies relating to pollution in Nigeria have failed, almost irredeemably, in curbing the threats that necessitated their existence in the first place. Adeyanju (2004: 224) has given a number of reasons for this: the unwillingness on the part of the government to enforce the provision of the law against violators, most of which are multinational oil companies; lack of will power on the part of Government institutions mandated to ensure regulation and prosecution of environmental polluters; and the loopholes and ways of escape for polluters in the various existing laws relating to oil pollution. We have also found out that many of the existing laws and policies are too old, hence they are unable to meet the present challenges confronting the nation's environment.

The resultant effects of the failure of the government, the multinational oil companies and the concerned agencies are evident in the problems of desertification, oil pollution, and land degradation still facing the Niger Delta nation. The attendant problems, of course, have brewed escalating crises in the region. This has compelled the government to embark on community development projects and capacity building initiatives so as to curb incessant militancy that the Niger Delta youths have embraced in demanding some reparation and a restoration of their endangered communities. Given that the sustainability of the physical environment is a global issue as it affects all human activities, a lot of scholars and researchers all over the world, particularly those in the sciences, have been involved in

intellectual and empirical inquiries aimed at finding ways of limiting man's exploitative tendencies on the environment due to their effects on the overall wellbeing of the present and the future generations.

Surprisingly, Literature has not always been seen as an important tool in this regard. However, recent scholarship has shown that quite a number of writers have always tucked in ecological concerns in their writings, as part of their engagements, while many others have made them the central focus of their narratives. Unlike in the past (if at all), African writers can no longer be said to be found wanting in this noble endeavour, and as such supports *Slaymaker's* (2007: 690) prediction that the green revolution will spread to and through communities of readers and writers of African literature, "ecoing" the booming interest (in eco-criticism just like) in other parts of the world. In Nigeria, for example, writers like Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Helon Habila, Sophia Obi-Apoko and Ogochukwu Promise have demonstrated that they are not oblivious of the ecological implications of man's exploitative tendencies on earth's resources, proving in the process that the issue of environment and its preservation are not an exclusive preserve of the Whites or those in the sciences.

Also, critical works on Nigerian writing with an overriding focus on the environment have begun to emerge. Ugwu's 'Ecological Degradation in Selected Niger Delta Novels (2014) brings to the front burner the issue of wanton environmental devastation in the Niger Delta region. Using Nengi-Ilagba's *Condolences*, Abagba's *The Children of Oloibiri*, Okpewho's *Tides* and Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* to foreground the worsening environmental hazards in the region, Ugwu analyses the attendant consequences of man's misuse of his natural endowments, and, therefore, recommends adoption of ecological friendly methods and practices while exploiting natural resources, as well as the need to exercise care and responsibility while doing so. In 'Ecopoetics and Contemporary Nigerian Poetry: A Study of Nnimmo Bassey's *We Thought it was Oil but it was Blood*' (2011), Aliyu analyses Bassey's collection to further accentuate the global clamour for a careful handling of the environment in view of emerging environmental challenges. Aliyu avers that humane exploitation of the environment and readiness on the part of government to combat ecological damage are possible solutions to unavoidable violence in the affected region.

Again, Dawodu, in 'Eco-critical Reading of Selected Poems of Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide'(2011), explores how Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide have used their poetry to interrogate the socio-cultural and political dilemma of the Nigerian nation in regard to the issue of environmental degradation. His interrogation makes him conclude that there is a growing consciousness in the literary arts regarding environmental degradation in the Third World countries like Nigeria, and that the poets, under study, have exploited images, models and paradigms found in their locale to comment on the sustainability of their environment. Owhofasa in 'The Woman, the Earth and the Environment in Recent African Novels' (2011) is more explicit in her description of environmental degradation and women's efforts in environmental preservation. Her study of Vincent Egbuson's *Love my Planet*, Maathai Wangari's *Unbowed* and Lisa Fugard's *Skinnners Drift* affirms that efforts of women in this regard have yielded some desired results. She, thus, indicates the need for the discouragement of all activities that can result in environmental degradation, even as she calls for appreciation and encouragement of eco-literature.

Similarly, Nwagbara in 'Poetics of Resistance: Ecocritical Reading of Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Home Songs* and *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems*' (2010) analyses Ojaide's poems as illustrations of eco-critical literature geared toward exposing, reconstructing and negating the realities of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. He submits that Ojaide attempts to use his poetry, not only to resist further environmental despoliation of the Niger Delta region, but to also reclaim the history of the people therein.

It is, therefore, in recognition of these previous engagements that efforts are made in this paper to examine Helon Habila's novel, *Oil on Water*, using the sociological approach and adopting a content analysis method. This paper will, in section two, analyze Ecocriticism as its theoretical base; section three will examine method of data analysis adopted by the author for the paper; section four will focus on Habila's position on the level of environmental crises in the Niger Delta region and its effects on its inhabitants. The paper concludes in section five with suggestions on the way forward for the would-be (Nigerian) writer.

## 2. Theoretical framework: Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism has been considered most appropriate for the purpose of our engagement in this paper. The term, *ecocriticism*, had its inauguration in the environmentalist movement of the late 1960s and the 1970s and has been called different names, including *ecopoetics*, *green cultural studies*, *literary ecology*, and *environmental literary criticism*, among others. William Rueckert is believed to have possibly coined the term *ecocriticism* in his 1978 essay titled 'Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism' (Johnson, 2009: 7; Dobie, 2012: 238). As a recent critical perspective to reading and studying works (old and new), *ecocriticism*, according to Glotfelty (1996: xx), deals with 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.' In Johnson's (2009: 7) contribution, 'ecocriticism has emerged as a field of literary study that addresses how humans relate to non-human nature or the environment in literature.'

Since the time of Rueckert's 1978 essay, *eco-criticism* has gained recognition as one of the fresh ways of explaining nature and the function(s) of art. Glotfelty (1996: xx) draws attention to the importance of works that are *ecocritical* in nature when she states:

Regardless of what name it (*ecocriticism*) goes by, most *ecocritical* work shares a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems. 'We are there. Either we change our ways or we face global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow species in our headlong race to apocalypse.'

The need for the investigation of the relationship between the natural world and humans in literature is, thus, central to *ecocriticism*. The purpose is to raise the conscious level of people that man's existence on earth is heavily dependent on the sustainability of the environment. In fact, Glotfelty has stated that this consciousness raising is *ecocriticism's* most important task (Cited in Dobie, 2012: 239).

Following the emergence and burgeoning of *ecocriticism* as a critical and theoretical discourse, *ecocriticism* has had quite a number of followers, including Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, Greg Garrard, Timothy Morton, Karla Armbruster, Joni Adamson, Harold Fromm, and Ursula Heise who have written/edited volumes of books on it. Loretta Johnson has particularly written a bibliographic essay titled *Greening the Library: The Fundamentals and Future of Ecocriticism* (2009). The essay examines the concept of *Ecocriticism*, foregrounding, among other things, important texts and manifestos, *ecocritical* studies in traditional fields of Literature, environmental justice and related fields, precursors to *ecocriticism*, nature writers and the literature on them.

Dobie (2012: 242-247) has drawn attention to Glotfelty's three analogous patterns, which *ecocritics* have found useful in their engagement. First is an examination of how nature is represented in literature, thereby raising public awareness of attitudes toward the natural world. Among the questions often asked in this respect are: does the setting function simply as a background, or does it play an active role in the narrative? How is nature affected by human beings in the text, and vice versa? How responsible are the human beings for the environment? Does the text direct the reader's interest to nature or raise the reader's awareness of the natural world and his or connection to it? What questions does the text raise about human interactions with nature?

Again, an attempt to rediscover and reconsider the genre of nature writing with the intent of making it more visible constitutes the second pattern. Questions asked here include: why is this text not widely known or not well known for its depiction of nature? What insights about the natural world does this text (or writer) have to offer? What is it that has been overlooked in traditional readings that can enrich public awareness of humankind's impact on the natural world? How is the new reading of the work now possible because of development in ecological research? Does the work deal with environmental issues that are addressed in the study of history, philosophy, psychology, art or ethics? What is the stance of the narrator toward nature and why should readers be aware of it?

The third pattern, which draws upon history, philosophy and science, deals with examining *ecocritical* issues and questions, including: are the values expressed in a given literary work consistent with ecological wisdom? Do men write differently about nature more than women do? How has the concept of wilderness changed over time? What role does science or natural history play in a text? What bearing might the science of ecology have on literary studies?

Considering our preoccupation in this paper, we have purposively adopted the first pattern which deals with how nature is represented in the text. In doing this, we have decided to add one of the germane questions often asked under the third pattern, that is: are the values expressed in a given literary work consistent with ecological wisdom? In recognition of the afore-mentioned, the paper hopes to provide answers to such questions as: how has the author portrayed the state of the affected region before oil pollution became an anthem, and what role does nature play in the lives of the people? How has he captured the negative effects of extractive activities and environmental pollution on nature and even man himself? Does the author succeed in bringing the issue of environmental degradation to the front burner and correcting attitudes that are inimical to the survival of the physical environment? All these and many more shall form the focus of our discourse in this novel.

### **3. Methodology**

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* has been purposively selected for our analysis in this paper. The choice of the novel is informed by the fact that there is a dearth of serious academic research, in the magnitude intended in this paper, on it, especially from the eco-critical perspective. Using the sociological approach and adopting a content analysis method, therefore, this study intends to interrogate the author's preoccupation with environmental issues in the novel, particularly how man's actions and/or inactions have greatly affected the survival of a nation that has been left devalued, violated and plundered, which has influenced the usage and relevance of *rape* as a word that succinctly captures the reality of an African nation in a state of ruins.

### **4. Oil on water: A cry for the restoration of the endangered earth**

Helon Habila remains one of the important voices to have emerged from the African continent in recent time. Till date, he has published three novels, each of which has garnered (or been shortlisted for) an award: *Waiting for an Angel* (2002) (Winner of the Commonwealth Prize for Best First Novel, Africa Section, 2003); *Measuring Time* (2007) (Winner of Virginia Library Foundation's Fiction, 2008); and *Oil on Water* (2011) (Shortlisted for Orion Environmental Book Award, 2012; Pen/Opera Book Award 2012; Best Novel Commonwealth Writers Prize African Region 2011). Some of his short stories have equally won some awards, including but not limited to 'Love Poems' (Winner of Caine Prize, 2001), and 'The Hotel Malogo' (Winner of the Emily Balch Prize (2008). Habila, in his writings, has been interrogating myriads of problems plaguing Nigeria, particularly with respect to the issues of bad leadership, corruption, poverty, reckless nature of the military regime, poor infrastructures, and many more. However, a considerable departure from the norm is evident in *Oil on Water* as Habila weaves a complicated plot that explores some of his concerns in his previous publications mixed with the happenings in the poverty-ridden and violence-prone nation of Niger Delta.

Specifically, the novel tells the experiences of two journalists, Rufus and Zaq, sent by James Floode- a white petroleum Engineer working with one of the oil companies in the Niger Delta region- to find out, interview and confirm whether or not his kidnapped British wife, Isabel, is still alive so that he can pay the ransom demanded by her militant-abductors. However, as it later turns out, Isabel's abduction is nothing but a mere event in the context of the larger picture of the war that is ravaging the Niger Delta region as Habila foregrounds the plights and perils of a people whose land and water have been left in ruins, culminating in mass deaths, dislocation, sicknesses, avoidable accidents, serious violence and many more. Rufus, the narrator of events in the novel, throws light on the disturbing contamination and degradation of the Niger Delta nation due to oil spillage and gas flaring. He, in fact, paints a dark picture of a nation trapped in irredeemable ruins, showing the roles played by the military, the government (and its officials), the transnational companies and the militants on one hand; while also showing the grim effects of the reckless actions and inactions of these forces on the environment, the society (man), and other living things (animals, fishes, etc), on the other hand.

Perhaps, as a way of making the reader have an in-depth comprehension of his pity for the unsympathetic actions of human beings towards nature, Habila presents us the pristine state of the Niger Delta physical environment, foregrounding the benefits accrued to man in the process. He, in this context, celebrates nature and foregrounds the ecological wisdom in ensuring that the earth is not damaged in any way. The air, for instance, is presented as having healing powers to cure all manners of

diseases. This is evident in the speech of Naaman, the Chief Priest of the shrine at Irikefe village. When Rufus expresses a misgiving regarding Zaq's decision to stay back at the shrine in spite of his failing health, Namaan interjects: 'We have a nurse here and she will attend to you (Zaq). But perhaps you won't need her. The air alone will heal you. I have seen it happen' (86).

Again, during the conversation that ensues between Rufus and Gloria, Gloria emphasises the healing powers of the uncontaminated sea, which, as a consequence, has drawn the attention of many worshippers. In fact, the Irikefe villagers believe so much in the powers of nature that they worship the sun. Rufus' sister, Boma, also finds comforts in nature. Following her ordeals in life and in marriage, she decides to stay with other worshippers at the shrine in Irikefe. Although Rufus, at first, has some reservation, he acknowledges the changes in Boma, which she confirms:

*Boma was with the group of women at the hearth.... She was laughing as she bustled about.... She looked really happy.... She had joined the worshippers, walking with them in a procession every morning and every evening to immerse herself in the sea and sing a hymn to the rising and the setting of the sun.... I (Boma) 've made up my mind to stay.... I like it here, I like the people and I can feel myself relaxing in a way I haven't in a long time. My spirit feels settled (172, 223, 226-227).*

Habila's depiction of the healing powers of the air and the sea, as well as how people worship nature (the sun) in this context is very revealing. Apart from proving that protecting our environment is protecting our lives, it seems he is implicitly pointing attention to how industrialization is gradually destroying our world, particularly with the daily emission of poisonous gasses into the atmosphere resulting in air pollution; and also the release of harmful waste substances into the seas, leading to destruction of much beauty and extermination countless fellow species. That people worship the sun signifies the reverence that people have for it- their love, admiration and belief in nature. To the people, nature is meant to be hallowed, not desecrated.

Besides, Habila establishes the strong interdependence existing between man and nature, demonstrating how it, together with all the living things therein, sustains and helps man in achieving his numerous goals. For the Niger Delta people who are fishermen, they mostly make 'their living on the river that poured its water into the sea' (108). Rufus' reminiscence of his childhood at Chief Ibiram's house is apposite here:

*... my childhood (was) in a village... the sea was just outside our door, constantly bringing surprises, suggesting a certain possibility to our lives. Boma (his sister) and I used to spend the whole night by the water, catching crabs, armed with sticks and basket.... We usually sold our catch to the market women, but sometimes, to make more money, we took the ferry to Port Harcourt to sell to the restaurants by the waterfront. That was how we paid our school fees... (26).*

Rufus's nostalgia is, by implication, a pointer to the fact that man derives a lot of benefits from nature as it supports him in the attainment of his goals. Habila, however, explores the horrific actions of man which have adversely affected the eco-system, resulting in terrible consequences for all. This is evident in several pages of the novel where Rufus reveals how rivers and lands (that used to be the sources of sustenance for the local people) have been contaminated beyond measure. The erstwhile sources of livelihood have now become poisonous due to oil spills and toxic waste contamination:

*Midriver the water was clear and mobile, but towards the banks it turned brackish and still... a bat flying overhead, a dead fish on the oil-polluted water.... We drifted almost aimlessly on the opaque misty water. The water took on various forms.... 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 (3, 4, 34, 40).*

Rufus draws a sharp contrast between the present state of the physical environment of the community and the one known to him in the past, noting how unrewarding the villagers' efforts at seas are as they merely succeed in catching 'a handful of thin wiggling fish'(25). Gloria later adds her voice, stating that many islands around her used to be a big habitat for bats, but now have a few dozen due to the gas flares that kill them (120). At every direction now, one sees '...dead birds draped over tree

branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fish bobbed white-bellied between tree roots.... The patch of grass growing by the water was suffocated by a film of oil...' (8-9).

The realisation of the extent of the damage caused by the pollution of the environment through the activities of the oil companies, makes the old man that serves as a guide to Rufus and Zaq plead that they should take his son back with them to Port Harcourt as a way of securing his future and not to waste away, joining the militants: 'He no get good future here... 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' (36)

Apart from revealing the terrible effects of environmental degradation on the survivals of animals, fishes, birds, grass, rivers and creeks, Habila poignantly reveals some of the dire consequences of the activities of the oil companies on the host communities. These include: sicknesses, unwarranted loss of lives, severe accidents, poverty, lack of means of self-sustenance, extermination of communities, loss of faith and moral piety, hopelessness, displacements of people, broken homes/marriages, and lack of unity, among others. For instance, Doctor Dagogo-Mark, in one of his discussions with Rufus, concisely captures the health hazards faced by local people, lamenting how he daily helplessly watches the hapless villagers succumb to different forms of diseases which ultimately result in termination of lives:

I've been in these waters five years now and I tell you this place is a dead place.... The villagers... got... quenchless flare... then... the livestock began to die and the plants ... wither on their stalks.... I took samples of the drinking water and in my lab I measured the level of toxins in it... In one year it had grown almost twice the safe level.... So... people started dying... More people died.... More fell sick, a lot died.... Almost overnight I watched the whole village disappear.... A man suddenly comes down with a mild headache, becomes feverish... develops rashes... a vital organ shuts down... those whom disease doesn't kill... violence does (142, 144-146).

Sadly, Doctor Dagogo-Mark's attempts at calling the attention of the concerned multinational oil companies to the harmful effects of their activities elicit no positive action, neither does the government consider his results a worthwhile endeavour. Instead, the government 'dumped the results' of his tests in 'some filing cabinet' (145), choosing to look the other way even when some NGOs and international organisations eventually published the tests. The tragedy of losing different potentials that would have done the nation proud is, perhaps, best summed up in the eventual death of Zaq- a journalist of high repute- who falls a victim of one of the numerous diseases ravaging the oil-producing communities.

Habila's reference to the attitudes of the government and the multinational oil companies is a damning indictment of the type of government the nation is cursed to have. Of course, the government's action could be 'excused' on the ground that the nation depends largely on crude oil, and so, it would be unreasonable to point accusing fingers at the mouths that feed them. But should such posture be maintained when fully aware of the calamitous consequences of the actions of these oil companies on the people? Again, the fact that the oil companies are more interested in shutting Doctor Dagogo-Mark's mouth through bribe and job offer (than taking proactive steps to ameliorate the living conditions of the affected communities) certainly reveals lack of moral piety on their part.

Boma's miserable life again reflects the agonising state of many villagers as she suffers a severe permanent damage on one side of her face due to an oil explosion that sacked her village. She later loses her marriage as her unemployed husband, John, becomes disillusioned, full 'of anger that often' pushes 'one to blaspheme, or to rob a bank, or to join the militants' (89). This reality is very important as it reveals that, apart from the fact that some of those who have turned militants in the Niger Delta region are forced by a vision to save their environment from further gratuitous degradation, many are compelled by lack of necessities of life occasioned by the deplorable state of their land. Thus, they engage in despicable activities like oil bunkering, pipe-line vandalism, and kidnapping, among others. The tragic thing here is that the vibrant youths that should have served as future leaders are drawn to the theatre of war with the government-backed transnational companies, leading to their inhuman tortures and eventual extermination in the hands of angry military men who consider them expendable commodities, not worthy to lay claim to their rights as humans. Responding to Rufus' question as to whether or not militants captured by Major and his men will be tried in court, Major asserts:

You journalists, with your fancy ideas about human rights and justice... all nonsense. There are no human rights for people like him (them). You jail them and in a year they'll be out on the streets. The best thing is to line them up and shoot them (149).

The state of Rufus' father, later revealed in the novel, is a testament to the degeneration of souls that many villagers have experienced. Soon, after losing his job with the ABZ Oil Company, Rufus' father throws away all his religious beliefs in an attempt to keep body and soul together. He now freely engages in oil theft, bribes the policemen so as to remain in business, drinks and, of course, smokes heavily. Rufus, in fact, notes: '...I saw how much my father had changed. He had turned his back on his religion, and now smoked and drank *ogogoro* almost nonstop' (65). This fact registers the moral implications of oil activities in the Niger Delta region, indirectly calling on all concerned individuals to swing into action so as to preserve every sense of dignity remaining in man.

The displacement of people and the mistrust built in them remain another consequence of oil activities in the Niger Delta nation. For instance, due to the enticing offers by the oil companies (often assisted by government representatives), many communities sell out their lands to the oil companies, while those who refuse are conspired against and then charged with terrible acts that often result in their deaths- like the case of Chief Malabo. The villagers later bear the brunt of their action as they now daily flee to where they consider a safer zone. While not oblivious of the necessity for the people to move to a safe environment, particularly as he leads his own town people out of their ancestral land, the reality of their condition makes Chief Ibiram to be pessimistic, his eyes cloudy. Rufus captures Chief Ibiram's mood in this manner:

Gradually the community was drifting toward the big city, and sooner or later it would be swallowed up, its people dispersed, like people getting off a bus and joining the traffic on the city streets (186).

Chief Ibiram could not hide his disillusionments at the turn of events, wondering when, why and how his people have missed it. His description of his village is, no doubt, intended to elicit sympathy from the reader:

Once upon a time they lived in paradise.... They lacked for nothing, fishing and hunting and farming and watching their children growing up before them, happy. The village was close-knit..... (but now) the close, unified community was divided... tempted... with a lot of money, more than any of them had ever imagined....(38 - 39).

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has made an attempt to consider the Nigerian state, with a special focus on its over-dependence on oil and the attendant negative consequences, especially the effects of oil spillage and gas flaring on the ecosystem, the seas, the lands, and the inhabitants of the oil-producing nation of Niger Delta. Using ecocriticism as its theoretical framework, the paper has examined Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* as an eco-literature, foregrounding pertinent issues the novel raises. Some of them include: the beauty, powers and wonders inherent in nature; displacements of people; lack of means of self-sustenance; sicknesses; pipe-line vandalism; severe accidents; unwarranted loss of lives; broken homes/marriages; hopelessness; extermination of communities; oil bunkering; and loss of moral piety, among others.

Evidently, Habila has written *Oil on Water* purposely to call attention to the grim effects of environmental pollution on man and his environment, thereby rousing the consciousness of his readers, with intent to force them to contribute their quota towards making the society safe for all. However, it is noteworthy that Habila's position regarding the actions of the militants (as contained in the novel) appears evasive as there is no strong condemnation as such. Instead, it appears the author endorses, in part, any action (irrespective of its moral implication) that can make the government (with its retinues of 'callous' military officers) and its allied multinational oil companies ponder on the effects of their activities.

Again, beyond detailing the ruinous effects of oil pollution and gas flaring on the inhabitants contained in the novel, Habila, in our own estimation, fails to provide us with some proactive measures or solutions to the numerous challenges confronting this poverty-ridden and violence-prone nation. It would have been expected, in a novel of this magnitude, that the writer would go beyond mere

cataloguing events to suggesting good and ideology-based plans that the government, the oil companies and the people of the affected areas can embark upon to free the nation from the web of utter neglects and total annihilation. Ngugi wa Thiong'O's (1981: 74–75) stance, stated below, succinctly captures our position here:

What is more important is not only the writer's honesty and faithfulness in capturing and reflecting the struggles around him, but also his attitude to those big social and political issues...the worldview embodied in his work... aimed at helping in the community's struggle for a certain quality of life free from all parasitic exploitative relations....

Our observation here is by no means intended to diminish the good quality of this striking and perceptive novel; rather, it is intended to make the would-be writer go beyond mere detailing of events and their consequences to proffering enduring solutions aimed at repairing and/or salvaging our endangered world from further gratuitous activities of man.

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