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Environmental Injustice: An Ecocritical Analysis of Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

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Dedication

To my beloved parents, Abdelghani and Karima, words could never fully express the depth of my gratitude for your unconditional love, endless sacrifices, and boundless support. Your emotional strength is my guiding light, and your financial support is the foundation that made this journey possible. You stood by me with patience, wisdom, and endless encouragement. No achievement of mine would hold meaning without the love and dedication you have poured into my life.

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Finally, I dedicate this work to my family, friends, teachers, and every person who supported and believed in me when I doubted myself. Your faith carried me through, and this achievement is as much yours as it is mine.

With deepest gratitude,

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Dedication

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the consequences of ecological destruction in Africa, with a specific focus on Nigeria. It analyzes the case study of *Oil on Water* (2010), written by Nigerian novelist and poet Helon Habila. His work highlights the deep bond between humanity and nature. This study's main concern is to analyze the impact of oil exploration on the natural environment and local communities. The research employs an ecocritical approach, using postcolonial ecocriticism to explore how colonial legacies shape environmental degradation in Habila's work. It applies slow violence to examine the text's portrayal of ecological harm and its gradual impact on marginalized communities. By analyzing such concepts, the study situates Habila's fiction within postcolonial literature's broader engagement with environmental justice, revealing how his narratives critique systemic exploitation and ecological inequality. It examines how *Oil on Water* portrays the exploitation of natural resources and the marginalization of local populations. This study also considers the potential ways in which nature and the environment shape the characters' identities, decisions, and relationships, offering a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness between humans and their environment. Finally, this study examines the environmental degradation in the Niger Delta stemming from British colonial practices in Nigeria.

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Introduction

Land and nature in Africa and Asia were significantly impacted by colonialism in the 19th and 20th centuries, where environmental degradation resulted from foreign powers' exploitation. This dissertation examines how colonial and neo-colonial practices, particularly in Nigeria's Niger Delta, are portrayed in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010) through an ecocritical lens.

In African culture, the land represents heritage and civilization. However, for the colonizer, it is only a source of exploitation and profit, without consideration for the problems and side effects resulting from these actions. Foreign companies care only about profits and raw materials; however, environmental well-being was never important. Pollution affects not only the colonized countries but also the entire world. Despite the limited means of the colonized countries, writers tried to use their pens to put an end to this phenomenon. The environmental destruction caused by colonial establishments provoked African writers to use their words as a weapon against the harm inflicted on nature and land. Colonial powers exploited natural resources through force, without consideration of the long-term consequences. In response, writers employed theories such as ecocriticism to advocate for the preservation of the land and to resist its ongoing destruction.

Ecocriticism, emerging after Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), interrogates the relationship between literature and the natural world. In postcolonial contexts, it exposes how colonial and neocolonial exploitation disrupts ecosystems and indigenous communities. This study employs ecocriticism to analyze Habila's depiction of oil extraction as a form of neocolonial violence. Writers from colonized states used their literature and ecocriticism to amplify their voices and protest against environmental injustices.

Helon Habila is a Nigerian author born in Konotown, northeastern Nigeria, in 1967. His works explore themes of social and political issues, focusing on the challenges faced by individuals living under oppressive conditions. The chaos of Nigeria's political landscape witnessed firsthand in Habila's youth bleeds into his prose, where fractured narratives mirror a society's systemic decay.

Helon Habila's literary contributions have earned several awards. His novel, Waiting for an Angel (2002), which captures life under a military dictatorship in Nigeria, won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book (Africa Region) in 2003. Habila's *Oil on Water* exposes the human cost of Niger Delta pollution, an achievement recognized by the 2011 Virginia Library Fiction Award. Habila's novel glorifies his reputation as a significant writer in contemporary African literature.

Helon Habila is a prominent voice in contemporary African literature. He focuses on the lived realities of Nigerians. Therefore, his works have contributed to global awareness of Nigeria's political, social, and environmental issues. His writing blends fiction with historical realities and deep political engagement. He employs a fragmented narrative structure to depict the oppressive atmosphere of Nigeria's military dictatorship. Habila often incorporates elements of oral storytelling, creating a rhythm that reflects African literary traditions. His descriptive imagery, particularly in *Oil on Water* , brings to life the environmental devastation of the Niger Delta; he combines storytelling with ecocritical themes, making the novel a significant contribution to environmental literature.

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* is a powerful novel that captures environmental degradation, political instability, and human suffering in the Niger Delta. Set against the backdrop of a region devastated by oil exploration, Habila portrays the devastation of the region, where oil spills, pollution, and corporate exploitation have led to the displacement of

local communities and the rise of armed resistance. *Oil on Water* employs a nonlinear narrative, with flashbacks and shifting timelines that reflect the disorientation and instability of life in the Delta.

In contemporary Nigerian literature, Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* emerges as a significant text in ecocritical discourse. The novel has been widely analyzed for its portrayal of the Niger Delta's ecological crisis, where oil exploration by multinational corporations, in collaboration with the Nigerian elite, has resulted in severe environmental and human consequences. Scholars have explored the novel's engagement with ecocriticism, postcolonial exploitation, and environmental and social justice, situating it within the broader framework of African environmental literature. Various critical perspectives examine how Habila's work reflects the destruction of ecosystems, forced displacement, rising militancy, and the failure of government institutions to address environmental injustices. This section reviews scholarly discussions on *Oil on Water*, analyzing its contributions to ecocritical and postcolonial studies.

AbdEl-Wahab's study on *Oil on Water* provides an ecocritical analysis of the novel, emphasizing its depiction of environmental injustice and neo-colonial exploitation in the Niger Delta. The study argues that Habila presents neocolonialism as a persistent form of imperialism, where multinational oil corporations with the Nigerian government destroy the environment while marginalizing local communities. AbdEl-Wahab examines the ecological, economic, and socio-political consequences of this exploitation, highlighting themes of displacement, poverty, and armed resistance. The paper also explores how Habila portrays different forms of resistance, including eco-activism, cultural preservation, and insurgency, as responses to environmental and economic oppression.

Solomon Adedokun Edebor's study, *Rape of a Nation: An Eco-critical Reading of Helon Habila's Oil on Water,* examines the novel as a reflection of environmental degradation and socio-political crisis in the Niger Delta. Using a sociological and ecocritical approach, Edebor highlights how Habila critiques the exploitation of natural resources by multinational oil corporations and the complicity of the Nigerian government. The study emphasizes that *Oil on Water* raises awareness of the destruction of ecosystems, displacement of communities, and the rise of violence and militancy.

In their article entitled *Oil Pillage of the Ecosystem: A Study of Helon Habila's Oil on Water,* Okachukwu Onuah Wosu and Mbuotiden investigate the devastating impact of oil exploitation in the Niger Delta region, caused by excessive oil exploration by multinational oil companies. They examine how Helon Habila's novel *Oil on Water* vividly portrays the destruction of both the natural landscape and human communities, illustrating the consequences of environmental degradation. The author analyzes how Habila's narrative reflects the social and economic struggles of local communities, who suffer from displacement, water contamination, and the loss of traditional livelihoods such as fishing and farming. Furthermore, Wosu and Idio highlight the novel's depiction of corporate irresponsibility and government complicity. The authors argue that Habila's work serves as both a literary and political critique of the oil industry's destructive impact on the region. They conclude that the novel not only raises awareness of these issues but also calls for urgent action to address the ongoing environmental crisis.

Joseph England published a thesis entitled *The Colonial Legacy of Environmental Degradation in Nigeria's Niger River Delta,* in which he provides a broader historical colonial background of Nigeria, where he examines the long-term environmental damage caused by decades of oil exploration in Nigeria as a consequence of the nation's pursuit of

wealth. He provides an overview of the relationship between the post-independence Nigerian government and multinational oil companies, a relationship often characterized by a combination of cooperation, economic dependence, and conflict. England also discusses the environmental neglect of Nigeria during colonial rule, arguing that exploitative colonial policies laid the foundation for the ongoing environmental crisis in the Niger Delta. He explores how colonial resource extraction prioritized economic gain over environmental protection, a pattern that persisted after independence as Nigeria continued to rely on oil as its primary source of revenue.

Maximilian Feldner's scholarly article, ‘‘Representing the Neo-colonial Destruction of the Niger Delta: Helon Habila’s Oil on Water (2011)’’, published in the Journal of *Postcolonial Writing*, offers an in-depth analysis of the ecological, economic, and social devastation depicted in Habila's novel. Feldner argues that, despite Nigeria's formal independence since 1960, the nation suffers from neo-colonial dynamics, particularly through the extraction of oil in the Niger Delta. He situated *Oil on Water* within the framework of petroculture, emphasizing the profound impact of oil exploitation. Feldner illustrates how Habila constructs his narrative to explore the consequences of oil extraction in the region.

Abianji-Menang explores the environmental and socio-political crisis in the Niger Delta through Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water,* emphasizing how oil exploration has led to severe ecological degradation. The study highlights that oil spillage, gas flaring, and industrial waste have polluted water sources, destroyed ecosystems, and displaced communities, resulting in “mass death, sicknesses, dislocation, and violence” (1). The research also links environmental exploitation to socio-political unrest, illustrating how multinational oil corporations, backed by corrupt governments, have supported militancy and violent resistance in the region. Abianji-

Menang's study highlights how Habila's novel serves not only as a narrative of survival but also as an urgent call for environmental and social justice in the face of unchecked corporate and governmental abuse.

Abubakar Salihu critically examines in his thesis the ecological destruction and various forms of subjectivity in the Niger Delta, focusing on Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* and Kaine Agary's Yellow-Yellow:

Water pollutants in the rivers of the Niger Delta are among the ecological crises that emanate from oil drilling. The spillage of oil on land triggers a chain reaction of vicious events. It releases deadly pollutants that kill fish and other river in eflora and fauna (41).

It highlights how oil has led to severe environmental degradation, including oil spills, gas flaring, and chemical pollution, which have resulted in biodiversity loss, food shortages, displacement, and health issues. The research identifies multiple forms of subjectivity, such as postcolonial oppression, military control, militant resistance, exploitation by oil companies, and cultural influences. It critiques the failure of both the government and multinational corporations in addressing the complaints of the Niger Delta people, showing how militancy emerges as a direct response to these injustices. The study introduces Afroecocriticism, emphasizing indigenous resistance and the role of local knowledge in environmental conservation. Abu-Bakr Salihu calls for urgent interventions from governments, environmentalists, and policymakers to help the Niger Delta's ecosystem.

This study examines how *Oil on Water* critiques environmental injustice in the Niger Delta, addressing gaps in prior research by analyzing the interplay of narrative form and indigenous knowledge. The purpose of this study is to shed light on the environmental problems in Nigeria, especially in the Niger Delta. It also attempts to highlight how *Oil on Water* portrays the exploitation of natural resources and the marginalization of local

populations. Moreover, it studies the effects of oil exploration on the natural environment and local communities. The research adopts an ecocritical approach, situating Habila's work within the broader discourse of environmental justice in postcolonial literature. This thesis analyzes how the abuse of power by British companies not only affected the land but also had severe consequences for the locals of the Niger Delta, due to the strong relationship between the land and human life. This study explores how ecological destruction reflects on human societies and how colonial oppression not only disrupted the socioeconomic and cultural fabric of communities but also ravaged their Mother Nature. The dissertation is an attempt to shed light on the potential ways in which nature and the environment shape the characters' identities, decisions, and relationships, offering a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness between humans and their environment. The main literary theory on which this study relies is ecocriticism.

This dissertation employs close textual analysis and ecocritical theory to examine Helon Habila's portrayal of the complex interdependence between humans and their environment in Oil on Water. This study unfolds through three thematically interconnected chapters, each advancing a layered analysis of the novel's ecological concerns.

The first chapter establishes foundational contexts by examining African literary traditions and the theoretical framework of ecocriticism. It analyzes core ecocritical concepts and their evolution, particularly as they apply to postcolonial environments. This dual focus on literature and theory provides the necessary background for understanding Habila's environmental narrative.

In the second chapter, the focus shifts to Habila's depiction of environmental devastation in the Niger Delta. Through detailed analysis of oil spills, pollution, and ecological destruction, the chapter reveals how colonial and corporate forces have

transformed natural landscapes into zones of exploitation. The analysis demonstrates how profit is prioritized over human health and environmental sustainability, resulting in poisoned waterways, deforestation, and the systematic degradation of land that sustains local communities.

The third chapter explores the human consequences of this environmental crisis, investigating how the characters' survival, identity, and agency are linked to their damaged ecosystem. Moving beyond simple victimization narratives, the chapter highlights how characters actively respond to environmental challenges through resistance, adaptation, and sometimes desperate measures for survival. This examination of human-environment relationships underscores the profound costs of ecological destruction while revealing the resilience of those who inhabit these damaged landscapes.

Chapter I: Ecocritical Perspectives on Environmental Degradation in Nigeria: History, Literature, and Theoretical Frameworks

This chapter analyzes ecocritical perspectives on environmental destruction in Nigeria. It divides into three parts. The first part traces oil extraction's historical background and documents its devastating ecological consequences, including how it pollutes ecosystems, destroys habitats, and displaces communities. The second part examines African literature's engagement with environmental crises, showing how narrative techniques reveal connections between ecological damage and social injustice. The final section introduces core ecocritical principles and their evolution as an analytical framework, examining how this approach transforms literary interpretation of environmental narratives.

I.1. Environmental Degradation in Nigeria: Ecocritical Investigations of Its Historical and Socio-Historical Roots

Nigeria is one of the most ecologically significant regions in Africa for its oil reserves and biodiversity. However, it faced severe environmental degradation due to decades of oil exploration and extraction. This led to widespread pollution of land and water resources. According to Nigerian government data cited by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the region experienced extensive oil spills, with over 6,800 recorded between 1976 and 2001, which impacted local ecosystems and communities. Nigeria calls for urgent and effective environmental management, with equitable resource distribution, to ensure the well-being of its people and ecosystems.

According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), oil spills in Nigeria have contaminated drinking water, destroyed farmland, and devastated aquatic ecosystems, consequently damaging the livelihoods of local communities(UNEP). Oil extraction has led to severe environmental degradation, including oil spills, gas flaring,

deforestation, and contributions to climate change. A United Nations Environment Programme report estimated that approximately 546 million gallons of oil have spilled into the region over five decades(UNEP). These spills have devastated swamplands, aquatic ecosystems, and the primary food sources of local communities. Gas flaring intensifies the environmental crisis by releasing harmful greenhouse gases and contributing to climate change(UNEP). Oil resource exploitation has disrupted the livelihoods of millions of people who depend on fishing and agriculture(UNEP).

The social background of Nigeria during the period of oil exploitation was marked by economic inequality and social unrest. The region, home to over 30 million people, has suffered from the effects of this phenomenon, with devastating consequences for local communities (Watts 50–55). According to Michael Watts, the oil industry exemplifies the resource curse, where the presence of natural resources leads not to prosperity but to economic stagnation, environmental destruction, and violent conflict (50–55).

The oil industry intensified social inequalities and ethnic tensions in the region. Nigeria is home to diverse ethnic groups, including the Ijaw, Ogoni, and Itsekiri. Historically, these groups controlled the land and its resources. However, the discovery and exploitation of oil intensified existing conflicts, as each group demanded access to the benefits of oil production. As Watts observes, the benefits of oil wealth are concentrated in the hands of a small elite and foreign corporations, while the majority of Delta residents live in poverty (50–55). The people of the Niger Delta believe that corporations and the government exploit their land and resources without fair compensation or their consent. Helon Habila's Oil on Water mirrors this theme, portraying displaced villagers who endure oil spills and militarized violence, exposing the region's suffering.

As Watts notes, the Nigerian state, heavily dependent on oil revenues, has played a significant role in the marginalization and exploitation of the Delta's inhabitants, contributing to widespread poverty (52–53). This marginalization has fueled resistance among the local population. Consequently, militant groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) engaged in sabotage, kidnappings, and armed conflict to demand a fair share of oil revenues and environmental justice. Habila reflects this in his fictional portrayal of militant characters who kidnap a British engineer's wife to draw attention to the broader injustices faced by Niger Delta communities.

Watts also documents how oil-driven tensions contributed to rising violence between ethnic communities, particularly the Ijaw, Urhobo, and Itsekiri, in the creeks around Warri, a city in the Niger Delta. This violence has led to over 100 deaths and the devastation of eight communities (51).

Oil exploration in Nigeria began in 1903 when the Nigerian Bitumen Corporation drilled in present-day Ondo State. However, exploration stopped due to World War I (1914–1918) and technological limitations. In 1937, the British government granted Shell D'Arcy Petroleum Development Company, a partnership between Royal Dutch Shell and BP, an exclusive exploration license for the entire country lasting until 1960. This license embodies the extractive logic of imperialism, which centralized resource control under foreign corporations. The company conducted geological surveys and drilled several wells, but with World War II (1939–1945) disrupting global activities, significant progress in oil discovery was slow until after the war. Shell-BP (renamed from Shell D'Arcy in 1956) resumed its efforts in 1947, leading to the eventual discovery of commercial oil in 1956 at Oloibiri in the Niger Delta (History of Oil and Gas in Nigeria). The ecological consequences of this

discovery, as ecocritics like Rob Nixon argue, would later manifest as ‘‘slow violence,’’ a gradual destruction of the Delta’s environment and communities.

According to the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), by the early 1960s, Nigeria began exporting oil. From a postcolonial perspective, this period marks the transition from direct colonial rule to neocolonial economic dependence. During the oil crises of the 1970s, Nigeria’s production levels rose, making it one of the largest oil producers in Africa. The discovery of oil contributed to political tensions, particularly in the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), where control over oil-rich territories became a strategic factor.

The Ministry of Petroleum Resources (MPR) in Nigeria has a rich history. Initially, the Ministry of Mines and Power managed petroleum affairs, but expanding oil production demanded specialized governance, prompting the creation of the Nigerian National Oil Corporation (NNOC) in 1971. This move helped Nigeria join OPEC, enabling it to play a significant role in global oil markets. In 1975, the government officially created the Ministry of Petroleum Resources (spun off from Mines and Power) to oversee the sector, ensuring regulatory control over exploration and production. As oil production expanded, other international companies like Mobil, Agip, Texaco, Gulf (now Chevron), and Elf (now Total Energies) joined the Nigerian oil industry. This multinational presence results in local communities losing their land and livelihoods to corporate interests.

I.2. African Literary Traditions and Contemporary Environmental Literature

African literature is deeply rooted in oral traditions, which functioned as the foundation of its narrative forms, themes, and communal values. These traditions, characterized by storytelling, proverbs, and performance, influenced written literature. As Abiola Irele notes the emphasis on orality reflects a “cultural-nationalist orientation” that unifies African literary discourse beyond ethnic or national boundaries (16). Post-

independence, African literature became a tool for cultural reclamation, critiquing colonialism and envisioning pan-African identities.

These foundational themes converge with ecocritical concerns in contemporary works like Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*. The novel frames environmental degradation as a consequence of colonial exploitation and postcolonial neglect while employing African communal storytelling traditions to center marginalized ecological perspectives. African environmental writing also highlights the spiritual and cultural ties between communities and their environments, a theme central in *Oil on Water*. Habila's novel, set in the Niger Delta, mirrors this tradition by depicting the environment as inseparable from identity and survival, thus grounding its ecocriticism in African epistemologies rather than Eurocentric environmentalism.

Byron Caminero-Santangelo argues that African environmental literature critiques colonial and postcolonial resource extraction, displacement, and ecologically destructive policies (33-80). This critique is uniquely African, contrasting indigenous ecological knowledge, which emphasizes harmony with nature, against Western environmentalism's often exploitative frameworks.

Kerridge emphasizes that ecocriticism requires a dual focus, where literature must respond to environmental crises while achieving artistic excellence. He outlines how different genres approach climate change. Apocalyptic science fiction and horror shock readers into awareness, theoretical fiction advocates solutions, and realist fiction integrates ecological, social, and individual perspectives (361). *Oil on Water* operates within this realist tradition, documenting petro-capitalism's human and environmental costs.

Kerridge particularly notes the lack of climate realism in novels (86–87). Kerridge also highlights poetry's role in fostering emotional connections to threatened environments by

blending personal narratives with scientific and cultural perspectives. Johns-Putra examines how cli-fi explores themes of intergenerational responsibility and environmental justice across genres (367–371).

Kerridge applauds experimental forms as opportunities for literary innovation, positioning eco-writing not as a limitation but as a creative challenge. However, much climate literature leans toward dystopian visions, which might overwhelm rather than motivate action. A more balanced exploration of hopeful or solutions-based narratives could strengthen ecocriticism's impact.

Contemporary African literature reflects dynamic cultural, historical, and social landscapes. Irele clarifies that it engages with postcolonial identity, colonial legacies, and globalization while drawing from indigenous oral traditions (209). Environmental degradation, with Habila's *Oil on Water* exemplifying how African literary traditions inform ecocriticism. The novel has used a narrative structure that echoes oral storytelling, emphasizing communal trauma caused by oil exploitation in the Niger Delta, thereby situating environmental crises within a distinctly African sociopolitical context.

In the Niger Delta, oil exploration's ecological devastation—gas flaring, oil spills, and acid rain—has provoked literary responses that merge environmental advocacy with anticolonial resistance. Habila's *Oil on Water* represents this trend, framing ecological collapse as a continuation of colonial violence. By centering indigenous perspectives, the novel critiques Western environmental policies that prioritize profit over sustainability.

Environmental health, threatened by climate change and neglect, demands urgent literary engagement. African ecocriticism, as demonstrated in *Oil on Water*, uniquely integrates indigenous ecological knowledge, viewing nature as ancestral and sacred, with critiques of global capitalism. This approach contrasts Western environmentalism's

technocratic solutions, offering a neocolonial framework for sustainability. Writers thus advocate for environmental consciousness, using literature to inspire solidarity with ecological struggles in local realities. The ecological themes in *Oil on Water* use local narratives to critique oil corporations, illustrating how African literature bridges local and global environmental justice movements.

I.3. Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism represents a critical approach that examines the relationship between literature and the natural environment. As Cheryll Glotfelty defines it, ecocriticism constitutes ‘‘the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment’’ adopting ‘‘an earth-centered approach to literary studies’’ (6). This theoretical framework emerged from the recognition that literary scholarship had largely neglected environmental concerns, despite growing ecological crises. It also reflects a reaction to the impressive aesthetic achievements of American nature writing, which helped shape early ecocritical interest.

The field evolved through two key waves: the first (1980s) emphasized nature writing and wilderness preservation, while the second (1990s) expanded to urban environments and linked ecological degradation to social justice, challenging rigid human/nature divides (Al Fawareh, Dakamsih, and Alkouri 738–48). Solvic expands this definition, noting that ecocriticism involves either the study of nature writing by way of any scholarly approach or, in contrast, the examination of ecological implications and human-nature relationships in any literary text (13).

This dual focus allows ecocritical analysis to encompass both explicit nature writing and texts that initially appear unconcerned with environmental themes. The field's development reflects its evolving scope. Initially coined by William Rueckert in 1978, the

term gained academic traction through Glotfelty's advocacy in the late 1980s, transforming from a specialty interest into an established critical methodology(Glotfelty 6)

Contemporary ecocriticism has expanded beyond literary analysis to engage with what Dean terms cultural artifacts, including art, media, and scientific discourse, through an ecological lens (5). In an effort to bring academic research back into line with urgent environmental issues, this interdisciplinary approach tackles humanity's increasing detachment from natural systems.

I.3.1. Evolution of Ecocriticism: Historical Foundations and Theoretical Frameworks

Scholars actively trace ecocriticism's development through historical literary traditions and contemporary theoretical exchanges. They demonstrate how environmental consciousness has evolved across different cultural periods. Gillian Rudd specifically identifies Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* as the text that sparked the modern ecological movement (27-30). This dual nature mirrors the world's current challenge, the need to confront both deep-rooted ideologies and unprecedented climate emergencies simultaneously.

This foundational work fundamentally shaped ecocriticism as an academic discipline. Rudd underscores how Carson’s opening imagery of a world without birdsong resonates with older literary traditions, where birdsong symbolized nature’s vitality. She contrasts medieval cyclical interpretations (e.g., winter’s silence in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight) with Carson’s anthropogenic crisis, showing how historical context defines ecological narratives (27–30). Contemporary works like *Oil on Water* extend this tradition by documenting the silencing of ecosystems through oil pollution in the Niger Delta.

Carson's haunting vision of a birdless world powerfully echoes earlier cultural connections between birdsong and environmental health. Medieval texts like Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Romantic poems such as Keats's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* established

these connections. These persistent literary motifs reveal humanity's deep-seated ecological anxieties, showing the evolving, often troubled relationship with the natural world (Rudd 27–30).

Rob Nixon characterizes slow violence as a type of harm that develops gradually and frequently goes unnoticed immediately. The poor are affected by this violence, which takes the form of contaminated water, degraded land, and escalating climate disasters. By pointing the finger at governments and corporations, ecocriticism reveals how power structures allow this delayed destruction. Through literature, the narratives that normalize environmental exploitation are challenged, and these invisible crises are brought to light. By documenting gradual harm, writers resist the erasure of marginalized communities and demand accountability for systemic violence.

A quarter century ago, Raymond Williams urged writers to create novels that focus on the intricate details of local life while also uncovering the hidden global forces like economic pressures and labor systems that influence it. Creating such stories presents unique creative challenges, unlike writing self-contained narratives that ignore these broader connections. In today's rapidly globalizing world, scholars increasingly frame this challenge through spatial rather than temporal lenses. Edward Soja cites John Berger's argument in Postmodern Geographies that modern prophecy demands first, recognizing global inequalities; second, analyzing differential lived experiences worldwide; and third, privileging spatial awareness over historical narratives to expose systemic consequences (Nixon 45).

Robert Watson productively complicates the conventional Romantic-era focus of environmental studies. He demonstrates how Renaissance humanists like Pico della Mirandola and ancient texts articulated ecological concerns. Watson critiques the Romantic-era bias, showing that Renaissance humoral theory and political debates already struggled

with humannature tensions. He argues these older frameworks reveal enduring attitudes that fuel today's crises, not just modern negligence (40–41). His work expands ecocriticism's historical scope beyond Romantic idealism to examine enduring Western attitudes toward nature.

Contemporary ecocriticism continues expanding its interdisciplinary scope and theoretical complexity. Bartosch roots the field in environmental philosophy and literary studies while urging clearer distinctions between discourses. He highlights literature's unique role in bridging nature/culture divides, drawing on Eagleton's utopian potential and Gadamer's interpretation theory to show how texts resist fixed meanings while fostering ecological dialogue (24–27; 69–71). This is best illustrated by novels such as *Oil on Water*, which depict environmental violence as both a tangible reality and a cultural metaphor.

Postcolonial ecocriticism, as explored by Sumedha Bhandari, investigates how literature negotiates global environmental issues through diverse cultural lenses, challenging dominant narratives while centering marginalized voices. Neo-colonialism, in contrast, refers to the continued economic, political, and cultural domination of formerly colonized regions, often through disparate power dynamics that sustain ecological exploitation. Bartosch's concept of ''EnvironMentality'' critiques such imbalances by advocating for authentic intercultural exchanges that resist exoticism and instead highlight shared ecological vulnerability (69–71). Postcolonial fiction disturbs neocolonial frameworks by fostering balanced dialogues about environmental justice rather than reinforcing extractive or reductive portrayals of people and nature.

Since 2005, various armed groups in Nigeria have engaged in violent resistance against the government and oil corporations, holding them accountable for the environmental destruction in the Niger Delta. These militants have targeted oil infrastructure, engaged in illegal oil theft by collecting and selling crude from spills, and taken oil workers and officials

hostage. However, with the growing urgency of climate change and global warming, there is a need to reconsider the effectiveness of such tactics. While groups like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) continues a tradition of anti-colonial resistance, using force to demand corporate and governmental accountability in oil-rich regions. The ecological crisis demands alternative approaches that minimize harm. Despite having their roots in past conflicts, their aggressive behavior might not be the best course of action during a period of extreme environmental degradation (Iheka 86). Armed resistance, though rooted in anticolonial struggle, replicates the destructive patterns of exploitation it opposes, further damaging the very land and communities it seeks to liberate.

I.3.2. Applied Ecocriticism: Educational Strategies for Environmental Engagement

Neo-colonialism perpetuates systems of domination and exploitation, often under the guise of economic development or globalization, reinforcing inequalities between formerly colonizing and colonized nations. Bartosch emphasizes that ecocriticism should move beyond strict theoretical frameworks and adopt cross-cultural, interdisciplinary approaches to address global ecological crises (70). This perspective challenges neo-colonial power structures by rejecting uniform environmental narratives and instead advocating for diverse, localized understandings of ecological issues. Bartosch highlights the postcolonial context, transnational environment, and global environmental crisis, arguing that understanding across strictly defined interpretive communities are necessary (69). A novel like *Oil on Water* serves as a case study for this approach, bridging local ecological destruction with global oil politics, exposing how neocolonial forces such as multinational corporations and geopolitical interests exploit both land and people. By centering postcolonial ecocriticism, literature can resist neocolonial narratives, revealing the interconnectedness of environmental harm and systemic oppression while fostering genuine transnational dialogue.

Grimm and Wanning highlight how politicians position education as a tool for reshaping societal attitudes toward nature, but this approach can also serve imperialist agendas. By framing sustainable development as a political task, powerful nations often impose environmental policies on weaker states, reinforcing global hierarchies (516–17). Literature such as *Oil on Water* that exposes the roots of environmental crises may challenge these dynamics, yet imperialist systems frequently appropriate ecological awareness to justify intervention. For instance, Western governments promote sustainability education in the Global South while exploiting its resources, masking exploitation under the guise of environmental development. Thus, Grimm and Wanning's analysis inadvertently reveals how imperialism coopts ecological discourse to maintain control.

Ecocritical analysis evaluates whether narratives deepen sustainability understanding through character development, themes, or structure, demonstrating literature's capacity to either reinforce harmful ideologies or inspire ethical environmental engagement. Additionally, Grimm and Wanning present literature as a bridge between local and global issues,

Ecocriticism exemplifies Scott Slovic's advocacy for storytelling as a central strategy in practice. Slovic emphasizes that literary analysis should employ narrative techniques not to compete with creative literature but to clarify its relationship to real-world ecological experiences (13). Helon Habila in *Oil on Water* represents this principle by using investigative journalism techniques to expose ecological devastation.

Slovic argues that ecocritical practice must actively challenge readers to confront what is significant and meaningful in our relationship with the environment, building on Glen Love's claim that literature plays a fundamental role in redirecting human consciousness toward our place in nature (13). Ecocriticism, according to Slovic, ought to encourage readers to rethink their relationship with nature, moving beyond passive analysis to provoke ethical reflection. His treatment of literature as a tool to reshape environmental consciousness

highlights the ability of storytelling to highlight tensions between ecological sustainability and human behavior. This method challenges readers to face hard realities about how humans affect the natural world by presenting ecocriticism as both interpretive and interventionist.

Chapter II: Ecological Devastation and Human Cost

This chapter deals with the devastating ecological and human consequences of oil extraction in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, focusing on how the novel portrays the Niger Delta as a landscape transformed by industrial exploitation. Through Habila's imagery of oil-choked rivers, gas flares, and abandoned villages, the narrative reveals the interconnected crises of environmental destruction, health epidemics, and cultural disintegration. The analysis highlights the concept of "slow violence" (Nixon), the gradual but deadly impact of pollution that affects marginalized communities while remaining invisible to global audiences. By juxtaposing Habila's fictional account with real-world studies of the Niger Delta's ecological collapse, the chapter demonstrates how literature bears witness to systemic violence, where corporate greed and government complicity sacrifice both land and people for profit. Ultimately, *Oil on Water* urges readers to recognize oil pollution not as an isolated environmental issue, but as a form of political and social warfare that demands urgent intervention.

II. 1. Environmental Degradation: Oil Spills, Pollution, Deforestation, and Their Impact on Ecosystems

In Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, the catastrophic decline of biodiversity in the Niger Delta serves as a clear example of environmental degradation caused by oil extraction. The novel portrays an ecosystem in collapse. The absence of diverse plant and animal life reflects the harm caused by human and industrial exploitation. Through vivid descriptions of polluted rivers, dead wildlife, and devastated landscapes, Habila emphasizes how the loss of biodiversity disrupts not only nature but also the human communities that depend on it. For instance, the narrator observes, "This place is a dead place, a place for dying" (Habila 90). An explanation that highlights the ecological collapse. Fishermen can no longer fish: "No crabs here now. The water is not good" (Habila 26). Poisonous waters and floating dead fish serve

as a metaphor for the devastation of aquatic ecosystems and illustrate the effects of pollution on marine life.

The Niger Delta in *Oil on Water* is a landscape transformed by oil extraction, where water and land, once life-sustaining, have become toxic reminders of loss. Habila's imagery captures this transformation: rivers that once overflowed with crabs now hold only brackish water that laps at the roots of dying mangroves (33), and self-sufficient villages are now surrounded by oil slicks and barrenness (8). This degradation is not accidental but systematic, caused by oil companies that prioritize profit over people. The different forms of environmental harm: oil spills, gas flares, poisoned water, and contaminated soil combine to create a growing, devastating impact on everyday life.

These losses extend beyond environmental damage. Dead fish floating in the water are not just symbols of ecological imbalance; they represent the collapse of fishing, a livelihood central to the Delta's communities. Similarly, the mangroves that were once teeming with birds and crabs are now dead places, which denies the locals access to food and income. The narrator's observation of "dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil" (Habila 9) symbolizes the broader collapse of biodiversity as a struggle to survive in polluted environments. Plant life also falls victim: "The patch of grass growing by the water was suffocated by a film of oil" (Habila 9), this shows how pollution destroys even small parts of nature, leaving animals with no food. This is how biodiversity collapses one piece at a time until whole ecosystems fall apart. The novel's repeated references to "barrennessg and "stench" reinforce the idea that pollution renders the land uninhabitable for all life, human and nonhuman.

This fictional portrayal aligns with real-world studies. A journal article, ''*Quantifying the Impact of Crude Oil Spills on the Mangrove Ecosystem in the Niger Delta Using AI and Earth Observation''* confirms severe biodiversity loss in the Niger Delta due to oil spills, with

fish populations declining by 60% in heavily affected areas, and mangrove forests critical to both wildlife and local subsistence are experiencing die-offs (O'Farrell et al. 8-10); this mirrors Habila's fictionalized wasteland. ‘‘Multiple studies have documented the damage to mangrove forests caused by petrochemical activities. Together, these studies indicate that crude oil spillages play a significant role in damaging fragile mangrove ecosystems’’(O'Farrell et al. 20).

The gas flares burn endlessly in the distance; oil slicks spread over the water. These threats are not only environmental; they erase lives. They sever the deep ties between people and the ecosystems they depend on, stripping away livelihoods and cultural identity. Habila's description of the village, which looked as if a deadly pandemic had swept through it (8), presents oil pollution as a deadly and unseen force that is destroying both human communities and ecosystems. Scholars note that environmental contamination in the Niger Delta often imitates disease, with toxins infiltrating water, soil, and food chains (Omoogun et al. 145). The pandemic metaphor underscores pollution's creeping reach, later confirmed when a doctor reports, "I took samples of the drinking water… the level of toxins… had grown to almost twice the safe level" (Habila 92). Unlike sudden disasters, oil spills produce slow harm, as seen when Zaq falls violently ill after exposure (79, 90). The villagers' initial ignorance celebrating the gas flare's light (92) before suffering its effects mirrors the delayed lethality of industrial pollution, framing it as a manmade pandemic.

A ‘‘bat flying overhead, a dead fish on the oil-polluted water, a gathering of rain clouds in the clear sky’’ (Habila 5) are some of the images used to depict the slow but widespread devastation brought on by oil extraction in the Niger Delta. Rob Nixon's theory of ‘‘slow violence’’ in which environmental damage develops gradually and escapes immediate notice (2), is reflected in this scene. The contrast of natural elements, some dead (the fish),

others foreboding (the rain clouds), suggests an ecosystem on the brink of collapse. Later, Rufus and Zaq encounter “a fire burning on the beach… the whole island was aflame” (Habila 68), a spectacle mirroring the toxicity of oil spills. Nixon contends that marginalized communities are impacted by this kind of violence (4). He exposes how delayed ecological consequences portray certain populations’ invisible suffering (Nixon 4). By showing how corporate and governmental negligence permits ecological damage to worsen, Habila supports this point by showing how the villagers gradually realize their environment is poisoned, such as when blood tests show rising toxin levels (92–93).

The reality of the Niger Delta, where life is subordinated to profit. As Cajetan Iheka argues, ecological violence in African literature often exposes the commodification of nature and human life (112). The dehumanizing effects of oil extraction are highlighted by the spectacular fire throwing up a cloud of smoke over the trees (Habila 78), which later mirrors the wildlife casualties and turns the area into a cemetery. Habila thus critiques a political economy that treats both land and people as expendable.

The observation that “over the black, expressionless water there were no birds or fishes or other sea creatures we were alone” (Habila 10) conveys the isolation wrought by environmental ruin. The expressionless water embodies nature's silenced voice and the erasure of marginalized communities, its lifeless surface exposing oil extraction's irreversible ecological violence. This isolation recurs when Rufus and Zaq navigate rivers where “their waters were already polluted and useless for fishing” (Habila 39), severing communities from traditional lifeways. The delta, once vibrant, becomes a godforsaken wasteland (90).

The villagers' misguided celebration of the gas flare “they had no need for candles or lamps” (Habila 92), exposes the cruel irony of environmental injustice. As Iheka notes, resource exploitation often offers illusory benefits that mask long-term harm (115). The flare,

a symbol of toxic progress, embodies oil's false promises, where short-term gains obscure systemic poisoning. This delusion peaks when villagers interpret the flare as "the fulfilment of some covenant with God" (Habila 92), unaware their feast on contaminated water (92) will bring death. The subsequent toxin-laced blood tests (93) and governmental neglect confirm Nixon's argument that slow violence thrives on institutional indifference (6). Habila thus underscores the cyclical nature of exploitation, where communities are first seduced by, then sacrificed to, oil's destructive allure.

II.2. Physical and Psychological Effects on Local Communities

Through the journey of journalists Rufus and Zaq, the novel exposes environmental degradation and community suffering. One of the main points in *Oil on Water* is the health consequences faced by Nigerians, their bodies damaged by polluted water and toxic air. The novel explores the depiction of health crises. It also mirrors reality: villages along the Niger Delta suffer from chronic illnesses caused by oil pollution. Habila describes communities affected by breathing problems from gas flaring, and the polluted water becomes a silent killer. Like Character Zaq, who suffered from unexplained fatigue and coughing caused by long-term toxin exposure.

In *Oil on Water,* polluted water directly impacts human and animal health. For instance, the doctor proves this by testing samples: ‘‘Toxins in the water were rising steadily, reaching almost twice the safe level in one year’’ This pollution, resulting from the oil industry's gas burning, poisons the environment. The health crisis occurs in stages: "the livestock began to die, and the plants began to wither on their stalks" before people fell sick (Habila 92).

When people become ill, the doctor takes “blood samples and records the toxins in them.” However, his science fails because the community trusts the oil’s false promise of “fulfillment of some covenant with God” over his warnings. While the oil company silences him by offering money and ordering him to “continue doing what I was doing, but this time I was to come to him only with my results” Habila 92). This corruption allows the toxins to keep killing.

The novel’s portrayal aligns with real-world studies. Oil pollution becomes a health disaster: water turns toxic; nature dies first, then people. Habila uses the doctor’s powerless fight to warn how ignorance sacrifices health for profit. This mirrors a journal article titled ‘‘*Health Risks Associated with Oil Pollution in the Niger Delta Nigeria”* argues that the oil industry's exploitation in the Niger Delta has caused severe health crises for local communities. Decades of oil spills, gas flaring, and toxicity have polluted air, water, and soil, exposing residents to harmful chemicals like benzene, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), and heavy metals. These pollutants lead to chronic health issues, including respiratory problems, skin diseases, cancers, and reproductive disorders. For example, drinking water sourced from oil-polluted streams causes gastrointestinal illnesses, while declining fish stocks and ruined farmland contribute to malnutrition, exemplified by high rates of kwashiorkor, a proteindeficiency syndrome (Nriagu et al. 14-16).

Gas flaring compounds these health threats. In the novel, the flares burn day and night, turning the sky into a feverish orange while the air tastes like ash (Habila 92). This imagery reflects the respiratory illnesses plaguing real Delta communities. Similarly, a review article titled: *‘‘Environmental Influence of Gas Flaring: Perspective from the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria’’* confirms that toxic chemicals like benzene and sulfur dioxide cause asthma, bronchitis, and cancer near flaring sites. The study notes, Communities near flaring sites in the Niger Delta suffer significantly higher rates of asthma, bronchitis, and premature

deaths compared to non-exposed populations (Kingsley Eghonghon Ukhurebor et al. 4-6), a direct parallel to Habila's fiction.

The novel's scenes of environmental collapse are not exaggerated. When militants attack an island, ''the smoke rose like a tornado into the sky'' (Habila 68), mirroring the suffocating pollution from gas flares. The stench and thick smoke symbolize air pollution's real health impacts. By combining Habila's narrative with scientific evidence, *Oil on Water* reveals that the Niger Delta's plight is neither imaginary nor isolated. The novel urges readers to see environmental justice as inseparable from public health, a lesson as urgent in reality as in fiction.

The environmental crisis in the Niger Delta, as portrayed in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* inflicts severe psychological damage on local communities. Constant exposure to oil spills and gas flaring creates chronic anxiety and hopelessness, exacerbated by the destruction of farmlands and fisheries, the region's economic lifelines (Iniaghe et al. 67-68). As Habila's novel illustrates, this ecological apocalypse strips residents of their livelihoods and cultural identity, leaving them trapped in cycles of despair.

This despair fuels violence, epitomized by the kidnapping of Isabel Floode, a white journalist, in the novel. Militant groups emerge from polluted landscapes, their actions reflecting what Giadom and Wills term ''the paradox of resistance'' using violence to protest the very systems that created their marginalization (7-8). The military's brutal responses compound civilian trauma, forcing communities to live under dual threats: environmental poisoning and state-sanctioned violence. Habila's depiction of this vicious cycle mirrors real-world patterns observed in conflict zones where ecological destruction and armed resistance intersect.

Children bear the deepest scars, as shown in the novel's harrowing pipeline explosion scene. Bhandari's analysis confirms that such events create intergenerational trauma, with youth inheriting ecological grief from parents who can no longer sustain traditional ways of life. Habila's child characters carry the crushing weight of survival, their minds shadowed by the ghosts of peers lost to preventable disasters, a haunting echo of the PTSD documented in Niger Delta youth (Abd El-Wahab 79). Systemic failures intensify these wounds. The novel's journalists document how cleanup projects like Bodo's become theater for political lies (Giadom and Wills 3), echoing academic findings about remediation programs that prioritize optics over healing. Meanwhile, civilians like Habila's protagonist Rufus navigate impossible choices: collaborate with polluters for survival or resist and risk militarized violence.

Ultimately, *Oil on Water* reveals pollution as both physical and psychological warfare. As Abd El-Wahab argues, even peace initiatives like the Niger Delta Amnesty Program fail to address the trauma embedded in the land itself. Habila's fiction becomes documentary, capturing how oil's toxicity seeps beyond water and soil into the human psyche (Abd El-Wahab 22). This powerful analysis underscores how environmental degradation surpasses environmental damage, turning into a serious human rights violation that persists long after pipelines corrode and political pledges are broken. Habila's writings serve as an essential illustration of the multigenerational effects of neocolonialism.

II.3. Colonial Legacies to Neocolonial Exploitation: Corporate and Government Roles in Ecological Harm

Habila's novel ultimately exposes the devastating consequences of colonial and neocolonial resource extraction in the Niger Delta, demonstrating how environmental destruction enables systemic violence against marginalized communities. The villagers who tap pipelines out of desperation, only to suffer catastrophic fires that scar both land and bodies

(Habila 178) embody Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, gradual ecological damage that primarily afflicts the poor while corporations and state powers prioritize profit (11).

The villagers' brief feast on stolen oil, followed by irreversible ruin (Habila 92), metaphorizes the false promise of resource wealth in neocolonial economies. While multinational corporations and government elites prosper, local populations endure pollution, health crises, and displacement. As Cajetan Iheka argues, such exploitation continues colonial legacies that frame Africa as a site of extraction, denying indigenous agency and perpetuating ecological violence (45).

The Nigerian government compounds this injustice by describing Delta residents as barbarians: a discursive strategy Abd El-Wahab identifies as justifying repression (22). By criminalizing resistance, the state masks its complicity in corporate plunder, reinforcing cycles of poverty and environmental harm.

Nevertheless, the novel highlights defiance, particularly in the declaration "This land belongs to us" (Habila 210). Yet as Ferdinand Giadom and Iniruo Wills demonstrate, even remediation efforts often fail due to bureaucratic corruption and corporate evasion (8-10). The novel's portrayal of land further develops these themes. For the villagers, land represents far more than territory; it is central to their identity, survival, and ancestral heritage. Their refusal to sell land to oil companies demonstrates its profound cultural value. As Chief Malabo declares, "This was their ancestral land; this was where their fathers and their fathers' fathers were buried" (Habila 112). This connection to ancestors establishes the land as sacred space, anchoring community history and traditions. For these villagers, land constitutes their collective memory and continuity; they were "born here, they'd grown up here, they were happy here" (Habila 114), illustrating how deeply their identity is rooted in place.

Economically, the land provides complete sustenance, offering food, water, and all necessary resources for self-sufficient living. While the villagers “may not be rich, the land had been good to them; they never lacked for anything” (Habila 118). This reflects a subsistence lifestyle where natural abundance meets all basic needs through farming, fishing, and communal sharing. However, the looming threat of oil exploitation promises short-term financial gain but guarantees long-term environmental ruin. Habila warns of neighboring villages that accepted oil money, only to find “their rivers were already polluted and useless for fishing, and the land grew only gas flares and pipelines” (Habila 121). This demonstrates how industrial exploitation dismantles traditional economies, replacing sustainable practices with ecological devastation and creating dependency on fleeting material wealth.

A systematic erasure of belonging, orchestrated by complicity between state power and corporate interests, is exposed by the desperate cry, "We are mere wanderers without a home" (Habila 41), which goes beyond ecological loss. This calculated dispossession transforms the Delta from a living ecosystem into a sacrifice zone, where both government and oil companies treat human lives and environments as expendable. The Nigerian government's complicity is clear: it portrays protesters as criminals while providing corporations with legal immunity (Iheka 89).

The depiction of pipelines “sprouting from the evil-smelling, oil-fecund earth” (Habila 34) frames industrialization as a monstrous invasion. Niger Delta literature often portrays oil companies as foreign impositions that disrupt agricultural lifeways (Omoogun et al. 148). Habila’s surreal imagery exposes the duplicity of this transformation land mutilated for global capital. When villagers recall how the rigs went up… and we saw our village change, right before our eyes (40), their shock mirrors industrialization’s violent rupture, made by gas flares

and pipelines that colonize the horizon (39). Uncontrolled fires (68) crown this corporate dystopia, forging the Delta into a hellscape where profit burns brighter than human life.

What transforms this ecological violence into something particularly insidious is its duality: the slow poisoning of land and water coincides with the rapid unraveling of social fabric. Fishermen who lose their livelihoods don't just endure economic ruin; they witness the extinction of ancestral knowledge. Farmers tending poisoned soil do not just face failed harvests; they watch cultural identity wither with each barren season. The crisis is both chemical and existential.

Nowhere is this systemic betrayal more evident than in the repair failures of Bodo and Ogoniland. When cleanups stall in "complex balancing among local communities, government agencies, NGOs, cleanup contractors, and the petroleum industry" (Giadom and Wills 5), the truth surfaces: the system isn't malfunctioning, and it's operating as intended. Endless negotiations and deferred action perpetuate a smokescreen, enabling relentless exploitation.

Such manufactured instability serves a singular purpose. By keeping communities in perpetual crisis, too preoccupied with survival to organize, too broken to refuse predatory offers, the power structure cements its dominance. Thus, the villager's cry, "We are mere wanderers without a home" (Habila 41), transcends grief; it becomes an indictment of a regime that methodically dismantles the very concept of belonging.

Chapter III: Character Responses to Ecological Devastation in *Oil on Water*

This chapter examines *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila as an ecocritical novel, exploring how environmental degradation in the Niger Delta harms human morality, identity, and survival. Through the disintegration of Rufus and Zaq, the suffering of villagers, and the rise of militancy, Habila illustrates the link between ecological destruction and human crisis. The polluted rivers, gas flares, and oil-choked landscapes are not only backdrops but active forces that reshape consciousness and force individuals into morally ambiguous roles. This chapter also presents the forms of resistance in the Niger Delta as a site of environmental collapse and human damage, revealing the devastating consequences and the urgent need for decolonial resistance.

III.1. Environmental consequences on Rufus, Zaq, and Villagers

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* offers an ecocritical examination of the ways in which human psychology, morality, and survival are directly impacted by ecological degradation in the Niger Delta. The gas flares, oil-choked landscapes, and polluted rivers are not passive backgrounds; rather, they are dynamic forces that influence consciousness and determine the conditions of life for those who are confined by them. Rufus's psychological and moral disintegration mirrors the environmental collapse around him as observer and participant, journalist and survivor. The oil-slicked creeks reflect his contaminated morality, illustrating how ecological destruction erodes human identity as thoroughly as it poisons nature. As Wosu and Idio argue, the Niger Delta functions as a pillaged ecosystem where oil pollution disrupts both ecology and human subjectivity, forcing individuals into morally ambiguous roles (45).

The novel's ecological violence operates on both macro and micro levels, breaking down Rufus's ideals while exposing the false divide between human and environmental health. His imprisonment by militants unfolds against a backdrop of burning oil fields,

explicitly linking political violence to ecological exploitation. His journalistic credentials, rendered worthless in this context, reveal how survival in the Delta depends on navigating oil politics rather than professional identity, forcing Rufus to replace naive idealism with harsh environmental realism. Caminero-Santangelo and Myers describe this as a crisis of environmental subjectivity, where individuals must adapt to survive under extractive capitalism (112).

This idea of a crisis of environmental subjectivity represents the reshaping of human identity under ecological collapse. Rufus's transformation from journalist to traumatized survivor reveals how extractive capitalism does not just exploit land and labor; it colonizes consciousness itself. Habila shows us that in such spaces, adaptation is not growth; it is the slow loss of oneself, step by step, until what remains is a creature shaped by the demands of a ruined world.

This change is further contextualized by Iniaghe et al., who demonstrate how oil exploitation requires reconsideration of identity and agency in the face of poverty and displacement (34). The novel exposes that when land turns toxic and traditional livelihoods vanish, people are not relocated; they become refugees within their own identities. The fisherman who becomes a militant, the farmer turned saboteur, the journalist reduced to silent witness. This isn't adaptation but a kind of existential exploitation where oil capitalism replaces human destiny, rewriting personal histories into harsh survival scripts where agency means choosing between complicity or starvation. The tragedy lies not in people's change but in their forced self-betrayal to survive a world engineered against them.

The novel's depiction of ecological trauma is particularly striking in scenes like the dead fishermen floating in oil-polluted waters, an inversion of natural cycles where water, a life-sustaining force, becomes an agent of death. The environmental witnessing is highlighted

by Rufus's defenseless documentation: although it seems morally required, bearing witness has no effect on ecosystems that have reached their breaking points. The fishermen's corpses, preserved by oil rather than decomposed naturally, symbolize capitalism's disruption of biological and social systems. Rufus's camera captures these horrors but fails to convey their full meaning, just as human justice systems prove insufficient for ecological crimes.

This merging is further evident in the abandoned hospital episode, where the distinction between environmental and humanitarian crises collapses entirely. The clinic's decay mirrors the patients' decline, illustrating how infrastructure and organisms fail together in degraded ecosystems. Rufus's photographs of this scene reveal another ecocritical concern: the inadequacy of human representation in capturing slow-moving environmental catastrophes. The pictures capture painful moments, but they are unable to show the structural collapse that makes them possible, which foreshadows Rufus's eventual silence. Nixon's slow violence framework applies here, as the hospital's decay exemplifies how ‘‘environmental destruction often unfolds invisibly, eluding traditional crisis narratives’’ (14). According to Iniaghe et al., oil pollution in the Delta correlates directly with increased mortality rates, making medical collapse mirror ecological collapse, which relates this to public health. (42).

The body itself becomes an archive of ecological trauma, as seen in Boma's burns, which literalize the idea of the body as environment. Her scarred flesh documents ecological violence as clearly as polluted water, forcing Rufus to confront his sister's body as another ruined landscape. His journalistic mission, once driven by idealism, now feels futile, a realization reinforced when militants destroy his camera, symbolizing the Delta's resistance to human representation or control. Wosu and Idio interpret Boma's scars as a living archive of ecological trauma, emphasizing how environmental violence inscribes itself on human bodies (52). Bhandari adds that Rufus's shattered camera signifies the failure of mediation where ecological reality exceeds representation (84).

Ultimately, Rufus's silence in the novel's climax is not an act of cowardice but an acknowledgment of ecological realism. Having witnessed how the Delta has degraded environment dictates survival, he abandons truth-telling because he recognizes its futility. His suppressed article becomes an adaptive response to an ecosystem where information, like oil, circulates only to maintain power structures. He has finally changed from an idealistic outsider to a traumatized native, and his consciousness is now completely in line with the harsh environmental logic of the Delta. Caminero-Santangelo and Myers term this environmental resignation a survival tactic in spaces where agency is constrained by ecological precarity (129).

Through Rufus's journey, Habila presents a profound ecocritical argument: in profoundly damaged ecosystems, environmental forces shape identity, survival, and agency. The Niger Delta is more than just a backdrop; it actively shapes its people. dictating their moral concessions, stifling their opinions, and rewriting their identity. Survival here demands complicity, and wisdom resembles surrender.

Zaq's constant cough and weakness act as a direct metaphor for the polluted air and water in the Niger Delta. Gas flares from oil drilling release toxic chemicals into the air, causing breathing problems for people living nearby. Zaq's illness is a reflection of the oppressive surroundings. Zaq's failing body mirrors the Delta's own sensory erasure under pollution's smothering weight. For instance, the constant stench of gas flares and crude oil, described as ''orange fire…..Night and day it burned'' (Habila 91), weakens his ability to perceive clean air, symbolizing the suffocation of both body and landscape. Imre Szeman et al ,discuss how industrial modernity (driven by fossil fuels) transforms both the environment and human psychic and sensory life (158-161) and how fossil fuel industries alienate communities from their sensory environments (124-126), a concept reflected in Zaq's numbed

senses. His watery eyes struggled to see clearly through the smoke and contaminated rivers, linking his failing vision to the land's obscured vitality.

Zaq's loss of appetite signals a metabolic breakdown tied to the Delta's food insecurity. Oil spills have destroyed fisheries and farmland, leaving villagers and Zaq dependent on limited, contaminated resources. His refusal to eat " Zaq did not eat"mirrors the land's inability to sustain life. Zaq's body becomes a site of starvation, emphasizing how corporate extraction starves both people and ecosystems (16).

Zaq's alcoholism is another sign of the Delta's sickness. He drinks heavily to forget his pain and guilt, but this self-destruction mirrors the polluted rivers that villagers can no longer use. In the novel, water is described as water is not good undrinkable, and deadly (Habila 26). Zaq's reliance on alcohol instead of clean water shows how the environment's ruin forces people into harmful choices. Rob Nixon calls this ''slow violence'' (2) a type of harm that happens gradually, often unnoticed, until it is too late.

Zaq's alcoholism reflects the same slow violence as the Delta's oil spills, each a self-perpetuating erosion, each suffering prolonged by the powerful who look away. In the end, Zaq's death is a final metaphor for the Delta's fate. He disappears into the polluted creeks, becoming part of the landscape he once tried to save. Zaq's body, broken by alcohol and disease, becomes one with the poisoned land. His death warns readers that ecological devastation does not just harm nature; it kills people, too.

Zaq's role as a journalist also ties his health to the Delta's crisis. Early in his career, he tried to report on the oil companies' crimes, but over time, he was unable to finish his work. His body weakens as his hope does, symbolizing how the truth about ecological destruction is often silenced. Scholar Iheka argues that stories about environmental damage in Africa are ignored by global media (2). Zaq's abandoned article, its pages as incomplete as his failing

health, stands as an example to the silenced victims whose stories oil companies and governments systematically erase.

As a journalist, Zaq initially represents the voice of witnesses. However, his disillusionment reveals the limitations of storytelling in the face of systemic exploitation. His alcoholism and weariness signify a retreat into apathy, a response to the overwhelming scale of ecological destruction. He acknowledges the futility of narrating a crisis that powerful actors, oil companies, and governments actively suppress. This replicates the Delta's enforced silence, corporations and governments systematically erasing communal suffering from global consciousness. Iheka,, notes that Habila's work often critiques ecological imperialism, where foreign corporations exploit African resources while ignoring local suffering (8-15). Zaq's inability to complete his article reflects this dynamic: his paralysis symbolizes the broader silencing of marginalized voices in environmental discourse.

By linking Zaq's health to the Niger Delta's suffering, *Oil on Water* highlights the human cost of oil exploitation. Zaq's cough, alcoholism, and failed journalism show how greed destroys both bodies and ecosystems. The novel urges readers to see environmental issues as deeply personal, not just political. As Zaq's health fails, so does the land, reminding us that the fight for a healthy planet is also a fight for human survival.

In *Oil on Water,* the constant displacement of Niger Delta communities reflects a profound loss of identity and connection to land, as families must abandon their homes simply to survive. The father's concern for his son's future is a heartwarming example: ''I fear that he will soon join the militants... Na good boy intelligent... but im school don close down'' (Habila 36). This moment embodied the generational anxiety that environmental degradation and military occupation create. Collapsing education, disappearing traditional livelihoods, and

desperation push young men toward militancy, not by choice. The father's concern reveals how cultural continuity unravels when people can no longer sustain their way of life.

Forced displacement worsens this instability, as villagers ‘‘pick up their tents and move with the first hint of trouble’’ (Habila 7) to escape military attacks. The current generation lives in a state of displacement, in contrast to their grandparents, who lived in "a small village close to Yellow Island where they lacked for nothing" (Habila 38). Repeated abandonment of homes to ‘‘empty squat dwellings with a community of ghosts... powerless to return’’ (Habila 8), oral histories, and communal bonds. This type of displacement is cultural dispossession, as Cajetan Iheka points out in Naturalizing Africa, where individuals lose not only their physical land but also their past, caught between a devastated homeland and an uncertain future. The father's grief for his son mirrors a broader tragedy: when the land dies, so does the culture it once nourished. A brutal alliance between a corrupt government and powerful multinational oil corporations facilitates the displacement and suffering of Niger Delta communities. The Niger Delta is a postcolonial landscape where ecological inheritance has turned into an ecological burden, as Dr. Sumedha Bhandari contends, because the state neglects to protect its citizens in favor of enabling extractive exploitation (64).

In *Oil on Water*, Helon Habila offers a vivid fictional depiction of the environmental and social devastation that oil exploitation causes in the Niger Delta, a reality that *The Guardian* website article *‘‘This place used to be green: the brutal impact of oil in the Niger Delta’’* mirrors. Both texts reveal the loss of ecological vitality and cultural continuity, as communities that once flourished on fishing and farming now tolerate toxic water, infertile land, and economic despair.

Habila describes the abandonment of villages now haunted by ‘‘a community of ghosts... powerless to return’’ (8), while *The Guardian* website article documents real-life

residents of Bayelsa State who report that after a full day of fishing, they return with nothing (The Guardian). The emotional weight of these testimonies in both the novel and the article exposes a shared grief for a land that oil spills and neglect have transformed into something unrecognizable and unlivable.

The Guardian report observes the harsh impacts on health and livelihood, particularly among younger generations. The statement that ‘‘this place used to be green’’ does not just comment on the environment but reflects the deep cultural and spiritual loss that communities experience as they no longer recognize the land that once sustained them. In both accounts, the government and oil companies worsen the tragedy through betrayal. Habila’s fictional characters struggle between survival and resistance, just as real-world residents endure toxic landscapes while waiting for justice that rarely arrives. The powerful refrain ‘‘this place used to be green’’ becomes a shared accusation against a system that turns nature into profit and people into damage.

III.2. Forms of Resistance

III.2.1. Militancy and Armed Rebellion as Response to Corporate Exploitation

The militants in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* emerge as direct consequences of ecological devastation and systemic exploitation in the Niger Delta, exemplifying what Anna Zalik terms ‘‘petro-violence’’ (406). This concept perfectly captures the novel's depiction of how oil extraction fuels conflict through environmental destruction and community displacement. When Rufus and Zaq journey through villages where oil spills have poisoned water sources, leaving fishermen unable to sustain their livelihoods (Habila 78), Felicity Hand's observation about Habila framing these militants as victims of a ravaged environment becomes particularly in Chief Ibiram's lament: ‘‘The water is dead, the fish are dead, even the

mangroves are dying’’(92). This environmental catastrophe creates the conditions for militancy (45). This lament lays bare the fundamental truth of ecological violence: when an environment dies, so too do the ways of life it sustains. The militants emerge not as rogue actors but as inevitable byproducts of this systemic unraveling of their violence, a distorted echo of the violence first inflicted upon the land. The militants' attacks on pipelines, including their bombing of an oil facility that mirrors real-world MEND tactics (BBC), represent desperate responses to systemic violence rather than mindless aggression. What appears as militancy is in fact the last convulsive reflex of an ecosystem fighting for survival through the only means left to it: the desperate hands of those it once fed.

Philip Aghoghovwia's postcolonial analysis proves crucial for understanding how the militants in *Oil on Water* occupy this interdisciplinary space between victimhood and perpetration (78). His framework helps decode scenes like when Nigerian soldiers dismiss the militants as oil thieves and pirates (Habila 156), showing how state forces deliberately otherize them to obscure legitimate political grievances. This dynamic aligns with *Human Rights Watch's (*2002) documentation of how military crackdowns in the Delta fuel further insurgency (15). The novel complicates this narrative through moments like Rufus witnessing militants executing a hostage (Habila 203), where their violence appears simultaneously ruthless and desperate. Anyaduba's postcolonial reading helps navigate this tension by framing militancy as resistance against erasure, even when its methods become indefensible (93). The militant who justifies kidnapping Isabel Floode as retribution for decades of exploitation (Habila 124) embodies this complex duality that both Aghoghovwia and Anyaduba illuminate.

The militants' defiant agency, encapsulated in their rallying cry ‘‘We are the Delta’’ finds its most powerful expression when they explain their motives to Rufus: ‘‘The oil is ours,

but they take it and leave us with nothing but poison'' (Habila 142). This is more than mere rhetoric; it's a demand for recognition that mirrors real-world MEND tactics (BBC). Their kidnapping of Isabel Floode serves dual purposes: forcing international attention while exposing foreign journalists' complicity in the Delta's exploitation (Habila 165). Tanure Ojaide's poetry, as cited by Aghoghovwia, provides a crucial intertextual lens for understanding how Habila portrays these insurgents as tragic defenders of their land (82). The militants' attack on an oil rig (Habila 187), while destructive, stems from a fundamental demand for agency. Habila's nuanced portrayal neither glorifies nor wholly condemns this violence, instead presenting it as a desperate response to systemic erasure.

The novel's most devastating critique of militancy comes when a pipeline bombing intended to harm oil companies instead ignites an inferno, devastating a nearby village (Habila 211). Zalik's critique of hollow corporate partnerships (405) exposes the militants' doom, a truth brutally confirmed when military forces raid their hideout and execute their leader (Habila 234). Human Rights Watch's documentation of real-world counterinsurgency operations (2002) mirrors this fictional outcome, showing how state violence escalates rather than resolves conflict. Habila's narrative thus aligns with these critical perspectives by refusing to romanticize militancy, instead presenting it as a tragic cycle where even justified resistance becomes complicit in perpetuating violence against the very communities it seeks to liberate.

Synthesizing these perspectives, the militants embody the contradictions of resistance in petro-capitalism's shadow. They are shaped by the ''petro-violence'' Zalik identifies (406) and stigmatized through the etherizing processes Aghoghovwia analyzes (156). The climactic pipeline explosion (Habila 211) becomes the ultimate symbol of this contradiction, a resistance that destroys what it seeks to save. Habila's novel presents militancy as the inevitable yet tragic offspring of systemic oppression.

III.2.2. Storytelling and Traditional Practices as Acts of Resistance

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* uses nature as an indigenous knowledge and resistance to critique the damage inflicted on cultural and ecological heritage. For Niger Delta communities, the natural environment forms more than a resource; it is identity, sustaining cultural traditions, spiritual practices, and social bonds. The novel depicts traditional riverside and forest communities sustaining themselves through fishing, farming, and hunting practices that once shaped their cultural identity and daily rhythms. These natural elements hold profound spiritual and cultural significance, as communities engage in rituals and traditions that honor water spirits and the environment, reinforcing a strong sense of belonging and collective identity. Through this close relationship, nature becomes the source of shared life and resilience for Niger Delta communities.

For the villagers, land represents far more than territory; it is central to their identity, survival, and heritage. Their refusal to sell land to oil companies demonstrates its profound cultural value. As Chief Malabo declares, “This was their ancestral land; this was where their fathers and their fathers’ fathers were buried” (Habila 39). This connection to ancestors establishes the land as sacred space, anchoring community history and traditions. For these villagers, land constitutes their collective memory and continuity; they were “born here, they’d grown up here, they were happy here” (Habila 39), illustrating how deeply their identity is rooted in place.

The land provides complete sustenance, offering food, water, and all necessary resources for self-sufficient living. While the villagers “may not be rich, the land had been good to them; they never lacked for anything” (Habila 39). This reflects a subsistence lifestyle where natural abundance meets all basic needs through farming, fishing, and communal sharing. However, the oil exploitation promises short-term financial gain but guarantees long-term environmental ruin. Habila warns of neighboring villages that accepted oil money, only

to find “their rivers were already polluted and useless for fishing, and the land grew only gas flares and pipelines” (Habila 39). This demonstrates how industrial exploitation dismantles traditional economies, replacing sustainable practices with ecological devastation and creating dependency on fleeting material wealth.

This theme connects directly to Adamu and Yahaya’s analysis, which explains that traditional African societies viewed land as a sacred ancestral gift belonging collectively to the community rather than individuals (3-5). Colonialism disrupted this worldview through land commercialization that left many Africans with no land to call their own (3). *Oil on Water* demonstrates how this historical pattern continues in the Niger Delta, where oil companies replicate colonial exploitation by seizing control of resources and poisoning water and farmland.

Habila employs powerful imagery to show nature degradation. The village near Yellow Island initially appears as paradise where residents live harmoniously with nature (Habila

38), however, this balance is upset by oil exploration. The gas flares, “long and coiled like a snake, whispering, winking, hissing” (Habila 38), represent invasive industrialization that divides communities between those seduced by promises of wealth and education and those resisting to preserve tradition. The land’s transformation embodies the tension between cultural preservation and exploitation, showing how environmental damage severs communal bonds and ancestral connections.

The priest’s declaration that “The air alone will heal you” (Habila 84) encapsulates nature’s dual role as both physical sustenance and spiritual force. This belief in nature’s healing power persists even amidst environmental devastation, reflecting the Nigerian communities’ profound connection to their ecosystem. For them, nature constitutes more than

resources; it represents identity and survival. Rivers, forests, and air sustain communities physically and spiritually, offering resilience against industrial destruction. Yet this bond strains under pollution and corporate greed, transforming nature into a contested space. The quote symbolizes enduring faith that nature's inherent purity can still nurture and restore, highlighting the unbroken connection between people and land that persists despite violence and pollution.

On the other hand, Helon Habila presents resistance as a form of cultural preservation through Boma's transformation into a member of the Worshippers. This group, which respects water as sacred, embodies a desperate effort to reclaim indigenous identity amid ecological destruction, which Anna Zalik terms ''petro-violence'' the systematic exploitation and environmental ruin caused by oil extraction (401-402). This is more than ecological harm; it is cultural genocide, where the relentless drive for fossil fuels treats both nature and heritage as expendable. Therefore, petro-violence is an attack on memory, belonging, and the foundations of cultural survival in addition to being an environmental crime. As Rufus describes at the end of the novel, ''Now the worshippers were in the water, ... Boma. She'd be happy here, I was sure. This was a place of healing... Her scars would recede to the back of her mind, and one day she'd look in the mirror and see they were gone'' (Habila 216). These acts of purification contrast with the oil-polluted rivers, framing environmental ruin as both physical and spiritual violence. Boma's choice to join the Worshippers underscores how oil exploitation severs ties to ancestral land, turning her defiance into an act of rebellion.

A second mode of preservation arises through oral tradition and storytelling, embodied by Rufus, the journalist-narrator, a modern storyteller. His fragmented accounts of the Niger Delta's devastation serve as ecological witnessing, linking ancestral myths to contemporary crises. Yet, as Habila suggests, ''The meaning of the story, and only a lucky few ever discover that'' (5). Rufus's incomplete narratives reflect the fractured ties between people and

their land under oil exploitation, mirroring what Edebor describes as the silencing of indigenous voices in the face of corporate and state power (47). This dynamic exposes how power operates: by rendering certain lives and languages irrelevant in the pursuit of profit. True environmental justice must then begin with amplifying these silenced voices, recognizing that the fight for land is also a fight for cultural survival. The stories Rufus collects—like those of river spirits are not just folklore but remnants of a culture under siege, revealing how environmental destruction erases generational memory.

Habila emphasizes communal rituals, funerals, gatherings, and shared mourning as acts of cultural ecological resilience. Even in displacement, characters uphold ceremonies that root them in their land, reinforcing belonging in the middle of erasure. The novel illustrates this when ‘‘One day, early in the morning, Chief Malabo called the whole village to a meeting’’ (Habila 38). Such scenes echo Benjamin Okonofua’s analysis of post-conflict Niger Delta, where communal practices persist despite state-sponsored ‘‘amnesty programs’’ that fail to address root causes of violence (48). These rituals are not just tradition but defiance, asserting identity in a place ravaged by external forces. Okonofua’s study of the Niger Delta exposes the hypocrisy of state amnesty programs: they buy silence with temporary payouts while ignoring the oil industry’s theft of land and livelihoods. Communal survival here isn’t passive resilience; it's active defiance.

Finally, the novel portrays journalism as cultural preservation. Rufus and Zaq’s documentation of the Delta’s crisis exposes both human suffering and ecological silencing, yet risks commodifying harm. Still, their work forces outside attention onto a marginalized struggle. As the professor demands, ‘‘Write only the truth. Tell them about the flares you see at night and the oil on the water. ... Tell them we are going nowhere. This land belongs to us. That is the truth; remember that’’(Habila 209-210). Here, Habila critiques the limits of

journalism, which Zalik calls ‘‘partnership development’’ narratives that often sanitize corporate accountability (408-409). Zalik’s critique of partnership development exposes corporations rebrand exploitation as collaboration. These narratives frame oil companies as allies, masking their evasion of justice spinning spills into shared challenges and displacement into progress. But no glossy report can bleach the stains of contamination or the theft of land.

While acknowledging its necessity. Through these strands—resistance, traditional practices, storytelling, communal rituals, and journalism. Habila argues that cultural survival is inseparable from environmental justice.

III.3. Oil Spills and Environmental Injustice

Oil spills don't just damage ecosystems; they violate environmental justice, excessively harming marginalized communities while corporations escape accountability. The toxic legacy of oil poisons ecosystems and the people who depend on them, demanding urgent action and systemic change.

When oil contaminates water, it chokes marine life, destroys livelihoods, and infiltrates food chains. Fishermen lose income, Indigenous peoples lose sacred waters, and coastal families face health crises: cancers, respiratory diseases, and poisoned generations. In contrast, the burden never falls equally. Vulnerable communities, often Black, Brown, Indigenous, or low-income, bear the worst consequences while holding the least power to demand justice. Bhandari’s eco-critical analysis of *Oil on Water* highlights how oil exploitation harms both ecosystems and marginalized communities, reinforcing environmental injustice (66-68).

The cycle repeats without fail: companies privatize profits, while the public absorbs the damages. Oil corporations promote efforts, but the stains linger in the sediment, in the bodies of marine animals, and in the blood of the exposed. Legal settlements may happen, but they rarely restore what was lost. The true cost reveals itself in cultural erasure, shattered ecosystems, and stolen futures. Wosu and Idio demonstrate how Oil on Water unveils the oil industry's extractive logic of corporations privatizing profits while imposing ecological devastation on vulnerable publics (216). This mirrors *Oil on Water's* critique of legal settlements failing to restore what's lost: shattered ecosystems, health, and intergenerational justice.

Edebor portrays the Niger Delta's oil extraction as a ''rape of the nation'' destroying Indigenous livelihoods and sacred ties to the land (42). Edebor condemns how spills erase cultures and futures, leaving fishermen and coastal communities with poisoned resources and health crises. Environmental justice requires more than fines or temporary fixes. It demands accountability: break down systems that prioritize profit over people, center frontline voices in policy, and enforce corporate responsibility. Action of transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy is not a distant goal but an immediate necessity.

The *oil on water* acts as a mirror, reflecting our values. Will we stand idle as the sheen spreads? On the other hand, will we rise fighting not just for cleaner waters but for a world where no community becomes collateral damage for corporate greed? The call rings clear: justice for the water, justice for the people, justice for the planet. *Oil on Water* as a depiction of neo-colonial resource plunder, where systemic power imbalances silence frontline communities (Feldner 3-4).

Conclusion

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* offers a profound exploration of the ecological and human devastation caused by oil exploitation in the Niger Delta. Through an ecocritical lens, this dissertation analyzes the novel's depiction of environmental degradation, corporate and governmental complicity, and the resilience of marginalized communities. The study reveals how Habila's narrative not only documents the physical destruction of the Delta but also interrogates the systemic violence embedded in colonial and neocolonial resource extraction.

The first chapter lays the groundwork by examining the socio-historical context of the Niger Delta and the theoretical framework of ecocriticism. It demonstrates how African literary traditions, with their emphasis on oral storytelling and communal values, provide a unique framework for understanding environmental crises. By situating *Oil on Water* within this tradition, the chapter highlights the novel's role in exposing the slow violence of oil extraction—a violence that affects humans while remaining invisible to the global gaze.

Building on this foundation, the second chapter delves into the ecological consequences of oil exploration as depicted in the novel. Through vivid imagery of oil spills, gas flares, and deforested lands, Habila illustrates the transformation of the Delta from a thriving ecosystem into a toxic wasteland. The analysis underscores the collusion between multinational corporations and the Nigerian government, which prioritizes profit over environmental and human well-being. The chapter also explores the novel's alignment with real-world studies, revealing how fiction and reality converge in portraying the Delta's ecological collapse.

The third chapter shifts focus to the human dimension of this crisis, examining how characters respond to the devastation of their environment. Rufus's journey from an idealistic journalist to a disillusioned survivor exemplifies the moral and psychological damage of ecological degradation. Zaq's physical decline, mirroring the pollution of the Delta, serves as a powerful metaphor for the interconnectedness of human and environmental health. Meanwhile, the villagers' resistance—whether through militancy, cultural preservation, or passive displacement—highlights their agency in the face of systemic oppression. These narratives challenge simplistic portrayals of victims and violators, instead presenting nuanced survival strategies.

Ultimately, *Oil on Water* transcends its role as a work of fiction to become an urgent call for environmental justice. Habila's novel exposes the Niger Delta as a microcosm of global ecological exploitation, where the consequences of greed and negligence are borne by the most vulnerable. By weaving together ecological, political, and personal narratives, the novel urges readers to confront the ethical implications of resource extraction and the enduring legacies of colonialism.

This study contributes to the growing field of ecocriticism by demonstrating how literature illuminates the intersections of environmental and social injustice. Future research could further explore the role of indigenous knowledge in ecological resistance or the potential of storytelling to inspire activism. For now, *Oil on Water* stands as a testament to the power of literature to bear witness, provoke reflection, and advocate for change in an increasingly imperiled world.

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الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل عواقب التدمير البيئي في أفريقيا، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على منطقة دلتا النيجر. وتستند إلى دراسة رواية "النفط على الماء" للروائي والشاعر النيجيري هيلون هابيلا، الذي يسلط الضوء من خلال عمله على العلاقة العميقة بين البشر والطبيعة. يكمن الاهتمام الرئيسي لهذه الدراسة في تحليل تأثير استخراج النفط على طبيعة البيئة والمجتمعات المحلية. يستخدم النقد الإيكولوجي ما بعد الاستعماري لاستكشاف كيف تُشكّل الإرث الاستعماري التدهور البيئي في عمل هابيلا. كما يطبق مفهوم العنف البطيء لفحص تصوير النص للأضرار البيئية وتأثيرها التدريجي على المجتمعات المهمشة. يعتمد البحث منهجًا نقديًا إيكولوجيًا، موضّحًا عمل هابيلا في سياق اوسع للعدالة البيئية في الأدب ما بعد الاستعماري. تدرس هذه الدراسة كيفية تصوير رواية "النفط على الماء" لاستغلال الموارد الطبيعية وتهميش السكان المحليين. كما تتناول الطرق المحتملة التي تشكل بها الطبيعة والبيئة هويات الشخصيات وقراارتهم وعلاقاتهم مما يقدّم فهمًا أعمق للترابط بين البشر وبيئتهم. أخيرا ، تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تسليط الضوء على التحديات البيئية في دلتا النيجر كنتيجة للاستعمار البريطاني في أفريقيا. أخيرًا، تبحث هذه الدراسة في التدهور البيئي في دلتا النيجر الناتج عن الممارسات الاستعمارية البريطانية في نيجيريا.

Résumé

Cette étude analyse les conséquences de la destruction écologique en Afrique, en prenant en particulier la région du delta du Niger. Elle s'appuie sur le roman Pétrole sur l'eau (2010) de l'écrivain nigérian Helon Habila, dont l'œuvre explore la relation profonde entre l'homme et la nature. L'objectif principal est d'évaluer l'impact de l'exploitation pétrolière sur l'environnement et les populations locales. En adoptant une approche écocritique, cette recherche inscrit le roman de Habila dans le débat plus large sur la justice environnementale en littérature postcoloniale. En utilisant l'écocritique postcoloniale pour explorer comment les héritages coloniaux façonnent la dégradation environnementale dans l'œuvre d'Habila. L'étude applique le concept de violence lente pour examiner la représentation textuelle des dommages écologiques et leur impact progressif sur les communautés marginalisées. Elle examine comment Pétrole sur l'eau met en scène l'exploitation des ressources naturelles et la marginalisation des communautés riveraines. L'étude analyse également la manière dont la nature influence les identités, les choix et les relations des personnages, révélant ainsi l'interdépendance entre les humains et leur écosystème. Enfin, ce travail vise à mettre en lumière les défis environnementaux du delta du Niger, héritage du colonialisme britannique en Afrique. Enfin, cette étude examine la dégradation environnementale dans le delta du Niger résultant des pratiques coloniales britanniques au Nigeria.