

## ECOCRITICISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN HELON HABILA'S *WAITING FOR AN ANGEL, MEASURING TIME AND OIL ON WATER*.

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### Abstract

The relationship between literature and the environment is one of the latest developments in interdisciplinary studies that respond to increasing environmental challenges, arising from industrial activities, conflicts, violence and other human activities. Ecocriticism, as a critical theory, attempts to incorporate the principles of ecology in literary analysis. Hence, postcolonial scholars have begun to engage the ideas of ecocriticism in existing literature. However, much of ecocritical ideas that have emerged over time appear grounded in Western epistemologies and do not sufficiently reflect the authentic African experience. Only a few scholars have highlighted the peculiarities of environmentalism in Africa. Thus, this study explores this gap and illustrates the examination of emerging ideas in postcolonial ecocriticism in three works of Helon Habila – *Oil on Water*, *Measuring Time* and *Waiting for an Angel*. Using the qualitative, content-based analytical method, this study highlights the vivid representation of environmental issues, including the dynamics of place, the realities of displacement and the revolutionary dynamics that have emerged as the result of eco-devastation. This study highlights how the texts portray the complicity of oil corporations, political institutions and military regimes in the destruction of the environment of Nigeria's Niger Delta oil-rich areas. The study concludes that the environmental issues in oil-rich regions and beyond can only be addressed when the relevant stakeholders realize the transgenerational consequences of their neglect. This work is a significant contribution to the body of knowledge because it illustrates the application of Afrocentric ecocritical tenets to the works of a contemporary writer.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial ecocriticism, eco-devastation, place and displacement, environmental justice, Afrocentric.

### Introduction

Environmental degradation and injustice have become paramount among issues in literary studies because of the ecological troubles that people contend with as a result of soil erosion, nutrient loss, the ozone layer depletion, rural to urban migration which is the reason for overpopulation, over dependence and exploitation of the natural resources like air, water, farming and grass. According to Adah J.A et al "rural to urban migration is a result of government's neglect of the rural areas by not providing sufficient infrastructure and social amenities" (25). Nwalusi et al, insists that the effect of overpopulation is accommodation

scarcity which affects the environment so much. This is because people are made to pay very huge amount of money to secure accommodation. A lot of people that are not able to afford the hike in house rent contribute to the problem of slums and their occupants which affect the environment (59). Sennuga et al agrees with Nwalusi et al, on the issue of scarcity of accommodation as a problem of rural-urban migration but adds that it also leads to poverty and criminality because there may not be enough jobs to go around (32). The situation becomes worse the moment oil is discovered in Nigeria's Niger Delta region and other regions of the world; the manner in which its exploitation and exploration are handled are

the reasons for the significant socio-environmental challenges for human beings in the contemporary era. Also, Oil spills, gas flaring, militarization and negligence have destroyed farmlands, rivers and livelihoods producing displacement, poverty and resistance. Literature has become a critical medium for interrogating these realities.

Although ecocriticism developed largely in Western literary traditions, scholars such as Huggan and Tiffin (2010), Nixon (2007) and Vital (2008) have called for postcolonial and Afrocentric approaches that foreground the environmental experiences of formerly colonized societies. This study responds to that call by examining Helon Habila's fiction as a material for African ecocritical discourse. Incidentally, international and foremost writers on ecocriticism like Lawrence Buell, Harold Fromm, Scot Slovic, Cheryl Glotfelty and others, in a bid to promote nature writing, have engaged in the canonization of American writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Also Leopold, Edward Abbey, Annie Billard, and others.

African literature has also featured the works of renowned environmental campaigners like Wangari Maathai, Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Ken Saro-Wiwa among others. Also, Afrocentric dimensions of ecocriticism emerged through Huggan and Tiffin's theses on postcolonial ecocriticism. Other scholars in Africa have embraced ecocriticism to a large extent such that Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* written before the ecocritical theory came on board in Africa has been analysed as a novel that celebrate nature (environment) and its preservation (Gitanjali 2). Ecological writings in Nigeria have exposed the inefficiency of post-independence African leaders; the corruption that permeates the entire nation and the social injustices meted to humans and non-humans alike. It clearly captures the exploitation of the resources of peripheral states and the level of displacement that accompanies this exploitation. It also includes nature writing reflecting on the pristine pre-colonial societies, and uncorrupted by colonial societies. These perspectives to

ecological issues have brought the African literary process under heavy criticism. African writers have responded and still respond to stemming ecological issues; but the responses seem to deviate from the trend of ecocriticism projected by the Western world, a trend that is steeped in deep ecology and virtually ignores humans as an integral and important part of the environment. Assessing the trend of ecocritical responses from Africa, one can say that ecocriticism in Africa has been largely anthropocentric, in other words, human-centred.

Recent writers like Helon Habila and Kaine Agary and many other African writers have approached ecocriticism in relation to humans in their immediate environment because the African Literary process, focuses on appraising ecocriticism in the light of socio-political issues. Also, African writers seem to have reservations about projecting abstract concepts in ecocritical studies. Therefore, this study examines the literary responses to the challenges of ecological abuses; the issues of place and displacement, social injustice and resistance.

### **Objectives of the Study**

This study seeks to:

1. examine the representations by Habila of issues like the use and misuse of the features in the environment and social justice in *Oil on Water*, *Measuring Time* and *Waiting for an Angel*.
2. analyse the dynamics of place and displacement in the selected texts.
3. interrogate the literary representation of resistance, corruption and its attendant social injustice and other vices.

### **Methodology**

This research adopts the qualitative analytical method and features content-based analysis of the works of Helon Habila from the perspective of post-colonial ecocriticism, with reference to other secondary material from libraries and online sources, with no requirement for field work. The data for this study was designed to be collected from excerpts in the primary texts: *Waiting for an Angel*, *Measuring Time* and *Oil on Water*.

The data analysis is anchored on three frames developed from the tenets of ecocriticism adopted for this research, they are:

Environmental concerns relating to environmental and social justice: the evaluation of the treatment of people in their immediate environment and in the post-colonial context, Place and displacement dialectics that underscore environmental issues depicted in the selected texts, Resistance and the revolutionary aesthetics that underscore the clamour for environmental sustainability in Nigeria and beyond. Generally, the analysis illustrates how the selected novelist has successfully highlighted a more realistic and unifying approach to issues that border on environmental sustainability in Africa and beyond. Ecocriticism forms the critical approach to the review of the selected texts. The brand of ecocriticism discussed in this study, attempts to liberate African literary scholarship from the claws of western hegemony. It is different from the brand of ecocriticism developed in North America and proliferated in Europe as Anthony Vital noted. According to him, it does not consider the lived experiences of the African societies especially the effects of colonialism in West Africa. Post-colonial ecocriticism reconciles issues of exploitation orchestrated through imperialist activities. This critical inter-textual model is validated by the constant call by Glotfelty and other critics to strengthen the connection between issues of environmental justice and social justice. The Post-colonial ecocriticism is people-centered and focuses on environmentalism as long as it places value on humans in society. It deconstructs deep ecology which lays much emphasis on the biotic community in an ecosystem and de-emphasizes concerns for human nature in new environmental movements. It is a movement that obscures various concerns for human nature in the ecosystem. Therefore, by attending to a post-colonial perspective, an attempt is made to seek a balance.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Ecocriticism provides the theoretical framework for this study, with particular emphasis on its postcolonial and

Afrocentric variants. The variant of ecocriticism adopted in this study seeks to liberate African literary scholarship from the Western variant of ecocriticism. According to Anthony Vital, ecocriticism was first developed in North America and was later studied in Europe. The problem with that variant of ecocriticism is that it does to capture adequately the lived experiences of African societies, particularly, the ecological consequences of colonialism and postcolonial exploitation. Indeed, Western conceived perspectives to ecocriticism formed the foundation for the theory and have thrived over the years but for the African literary process, the concern is on appraising ecocriticism in the light of how writers have been able to reproduce the socio-political, cultural, economic and psychological contexts of environmental issues in Africa. It is also important to note that, the fact that this study focuses on the works of a Nigerian writer does not imply that there are not works from other countries that can be read using the tenets of the brand of ecocriticism derived from the postcolonial point of view. Postcolonial here means works that consider the consequences of colonial and imperialist exploitative activities on the African environment. The focus on the works of Helon Habila is premised on the author's graphic depiction of the spate of environmental despoliation, especially explosions from oil exploration, decay of infrastructure as a result of neglect as well as obliteration of communal life and non-human forms through reckless human politics.

#### **Abuse of the Environment, Place and Displacement of People in Habila's Novels**

The environment in this context refers to the surroundings and everything in them, that is, humans, plants, animals, water, air, land, soil, light and microorganisms. The features of the environment that man interacts with often are water, air, forests and land which have been tampered with due to oil exploration in *Oil on Water*, Ignorance by the keti people in *Measuring Time* and corruption in *Waiting for an Angel*. The novels reveal abuse of the environment by the manner the oil company

drills and explores oil in Nigeria without the consciousness of the rules of engagement thereby destroying fishing and farming profession in the area. During oil exploration, the ground and water bodies are polluted by toxic substances like sludge from storage tanks, oil debris, gaseous pollutants and sanitary waste. Waste water is discharged from major production terminals together with other contaminants. Also, there is the release of poisonous gases into the atmosphere that causes air pollution.

In the face of neglect by the government and the oil companies, the people have to travel out of their homes to get basic education, the youths go to live with relatives and friends outside the region where they are treated as slaves. In fact, the people captured in *Oil on Water* have been displaced and uprooted from their root, thus, "...always we've had to move. We are looking for a place where we can live in peace. But it is hard. So your question, are we happy when we are mere wanderers without a home". (Oil 41) The situation forces them out of their root, turning them into wanderers. The psychological trauma that they are made to deal with because their cultural life is truncated is worth noting. This is also the reason for their social marginalization and landlessness. "Though the government makes a lot of money from the region, there is no development and infrastructure" (Hand 2021). Citizens are made to live like animals in their country blessed with all kinds of resources. War, militancy and conflicts arise from lack of agreement on the manner natural resources should be distributed within the polity. The people are of the opinion that if the resources in their region are well utilized, there will not be the need for the Nigerian civil war which Habila makes reference to in *Measuring Time*. They believe that if the environment had not been polluted out of neglect, the people will still be farmers and fishers. Also, if the government is not corrupt, there will be good roads, equipped clinics, good schools and employment opportunities.

It is more painful as the villagers watch

the edifice that the oil companies build for themselves ignoring the needs of the host community. The discovery and exploration of oil are the reasons for the abuse of the environment and the displacement of animals and humans in the region. In a conversation between Gloria and Rufus, Gloria says to Rufus, "These Islands used to be a big habitat for bats; now only a few dozen remain here and there..." (Oil 129). One of the villages Rufus visits looks like, "a setting for sci-fi movie. The meager landscape covered in pipelines, flying in all directions, sprouting from evil smelling, oil fecund earth. The pipes are seen, crisscrossed and interconnected endlessly all over the field" (Oil 38). In fact, during oil exploration, gas flaring occurs which According to Afinotan et al, "...causes damages to buildings, leads to acid formation, and the depletion of floral periodicity, discomfort to humans and poses a lot of risk to pulmonary disease. It is associated with atmospheric, and thermal pollution; the depletion of wildlife and vegetation" (192).

There are incessant wars and conflicts between the militants and the soldiers which further makes the environment inhabitable. According to Feldner, *Oil on Water* shows Niger Delta as, "a war zone, where the military is in conflict with the militants who sabotage the oil production and kidnap foreigners for ransom" (516). The situation has reduced Niger Delta to a squabble as revealed in the novel: "Irikefe is now mostly ashes and rubble, bombed by the gun helicopter over there. Not a hut is left standing...what of the people? Expect a lot of casualties, unavoidable of course" (Oil 156). War is the people's last resort because a lot damages are done during the war and it is the common man that bears the consequences. For instance, Toma and Uncle Haruna enlist in the Nigerian Army, to participate in the war against Biafra. Toma returns home from war with one leg while Uncle Haruna is traumatized by the experience he had at the battlefield and commits suicide. (MT 542)

In one of the letters written by Lamamo,

a mercenary soldier, he explains how the environment is destroyed by wars, thus, "...all the houses are empty, it seems so much fighting has been done here, the village is empty, it smells of dead bodies, we even saw half buried corpses in the bush. He showed us his house; it has been burnt down by fire" (MT 129). The presence of dead bodies with stench, half buried corpses in the bush show how unhealthy for habitation the environment has become because of war. Lives and resources that would have been channeled to other productive things are wasted in wars. Lamamo lost one of his eyes in martial war.

### **The Issues of Social and Environmental Justice**

Habila's novels embody themes and ideas that border on environmental and social justice. What is destroyed in Niger Delta as vegetation is medicinal herbs and barks; wood for energy and shelter. Also Niger Delta had a greater amount of Africa's mangrove forest. They also had different species of fishes, shrimps, crabs, clams, exotic wildlife like Delta elephants, white crested monkeys, the river hippopotamus, and the colourful array of exotic birds, crocodiles, turtles and alligators. (Afinotan and Ojkorotu 130) The stealing of resources and decay in the environment are the reasons for protests, kidnaps, bunkering, and fights. Lamamo leads a protest that led to his death because he could not deal with the destruction of the environment, the neglect of the masses and the selfishness of the traditional rulers.

In *Waiting for an Angel*, Lomba is confined within the walls of the prison awaiting trial that may never come because of his involvement in a peaceful protest. Morgan Street is captured in the novel as where poverty and neglect are most evident, thus; "There is a tributary of narrow, dirt roads that led off Egunge Road to the dark interior of the street...The later was the flux point for all vices on the street, there were hotels for sex and alcohol, and there were doorways and alley mouths for Marijuana and Cocaine". (WFA 120-121) The manner Habila

portrays Morgan Street shows that it is an example of environmental injustice on the citizens. It also shows the level of poverty, dirt, and degradation that feature in many parts of Nigeria despite the country's oil-rich status.

Also, Lomba's trial that may never happen shows neglect and dehumanization and social injustice. Consequently, ordinary people end up frustrated. They deal with their frustrations by patronizing hotels for sex and reveling in alcohol. This is even at the expense of little or no money in their pockets. Furthermore, the insensitivity of the government towards the plight of the people forms the description and state of the environment which is indeed pathetic, thus,

"The houses were old and craggy and lynched. The place had the unfinished, abandoned appearance of an under waterscape. Crouching under the bigger or in their own clusters were hastily built wood and zinc structures that housed an incredibly large number of families, the fathers were mostly out of work drivers, labourers, fugitives, convalescing between prisons". (WFA 97)

The description of the weather in *Waiting for an Angel* shows how helpless the people are to the scorching sun because they cannot afford fans and air conditioners: "... by 11am, the sun was already high in the sky, and by noon the heat would really begin to show its hand, it would force the people off the main street and back roads, and since the heat is worse indoors, the people would sit out on their verandah's on old folding chairs". (WFA 119) Brother therefore says that, "If heat no kill you, soldiers go harass you" (WFA 131).

Therefore, the problem is political and environmental. The heat can be ascribed to the depletion of the ozone layer as a result of human activities, industrial activities and unjust environmental practices like felling of trees and poor waste disposal. The novel further describes people's houses which by extension, is a description of the people's environment thus:

“the storey buildings looked shaky, adventitious, as if the first strong wind that passed this way, would uproot them” (WFA 122) Brother’s shop is also described as “covered by garbage heaps at the sides and at the back. It is made of corrugated iron, which leaked when it rained and cracked and expanded under the hot sun. In front of the shop was a burst pipe” (WFA 125) Madam Rachael’s restaurant is described by a character as ‘poor man’s paradise’ (WFA 132) Brother and others usually sit in the shop fantasizing their victory over poverty.

### Resistance in Habila’s Novels

This study argues that Habila’s novels- *Waiting for an Angel*, *Measuring Time* and *Oil on Water* show literary resistance as a form of civic intervention which enables accountability for social and environmental injustice. The situation in *Waiting for an Angel* is such that the military is in power and sends people to prison for any slightest provocation even without trial. From all indications, the story in *Waiting for an Angel* is set during General Abacha’s reign, when the military cowed individuals with their guns and presence on the streets. There is abuse of human rights, lack of social amenities and poverty due to the corruption of the military in power.

In *Waiting for an Angel*, We see a people the government of the day has denied conducive environment that will enable them work and earn a living. In a bid to draw the attention of the government to the plight of the people, Joshua calls on the citizens especially those living in Morgan Street for a protest. When the people have gathered, Joshua decides to address them, to remind them that they are peaceful Nigerians and that whatever they are going to do in the course of the protest will be done peacefully, thus, “We have come to read out to the military sole administrator our needs and go home” (WFA 129) Joshua continues thus, “We are here to protest against neglect. Where is the subsidized drug programme, promised us from the special petroleum fund?” (WFA 138) Though the protesters try to make it peaceful but it turns bloody as a result of what Della Porta calls the

“undemocratic regime, which often respond to protest campaigns with repression and continued political exclusion which can trigger a counter-reaction...” (464) Instead of the government to allow the citizens enjoy their right to protest, an inspector, an anti-riot police, comes with teargas, guns and batons, helmets and bamboo shields to attack the protesters. (WFA 134) Joshua in a bid to have a peaceful conversation with the police man meets with an attack as the officer raises his baton on Joshua’s head and he goes down immediately.

Resistance to the excesses of the government is seen also among university students who boycott lectures to engage in protests, “the students who should have been busy taking their bath and getting set for lectures, sat idly outside their rooms, by the roadsides in groups, discussing, the boycott of lectures” (WFA 40).

Resistance means actions, movements or ideologies intended to stand against power structures, policies and social norms. According to Erica Chenoweth and Maria Staphan, the examples of resistance are protests and demonstrations, revolution, civil disobedience, activism and social movements (12). Habila’s novels being studied show that the people do not just fold their arms in the face of neglect and corruption. They put up a fight in total resistance of the government’s carting away of their resources. The people had to resist the unfriendly policies of the government through protests and demonstrations, civil disobedience, activism, social movements and revolutions.

Habila’s *Oil on Water* is set in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria at a time when corruption had eaten deep into the polity. At a time, Ken Saro Wiwa stood out as one of those who laid the foundation for environmental and social activism in the region. Hand says that Ken Saro Wiwa believed that politics is the same as environmental issues, thus, “...we all stand before history. I am a man of peace, of ideas, appalled by the denigrating poverty of my people who live on a richly endowed land, distressed by the political marginalization and economic

strangulation, angered by the devastation of their land, their ultimate heritage, anxious to preserve their rights to life and decent living...” (107) Ken Saro Wiwa’s was arrested and killed by the military government because of his intellectual agitation and protests, alongside other eight Ogoni natives. Meanwhile, it is important to note that the first agitation was led by Isaac Adaka Boro. According to Azeem Olaniyan, Boro and other agitators that followed his footsteps were violent such that they were involved in the destruction of oil pipes, setting up of illegal refineries, kidnap of oil staff, destruction of offices and buildings to get the attention of the government (24). Also, the desire to be in charge of petroleum resources, improve to a large extent the ecological state of the region, and increase the provision of social and economic infrastructure gave rise to armed youth organizations and movements in the region. Examples of such movements are Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND) led by Henry Okali; The Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVP) led by Asari Tokubo of the Niger Delta, Vigilante led by Ateke Tom and others. They were engaged in various forms of violent and criminal activities including sea piracy which worsened the problem of oil spillage, environmental pollution, degradation, further depletion of farmlands, and unemployment rate. Not only that, the situation scared potential investors away which affected the growth and development of the region. This is the reason for increased poverty, crime rate and insecurity in the Niger Delta region. (Olaniyan, 28)

Therefore, militancy in the Niger Delta region is tantamount to war in *Oil on Water* and protests in *Waiting for an Angel*. The essence is to draw the attention of the government to the plight of the people. With reference to the work of Chenoweth and Stephan, and as expected, we see what they call the “the unpopular regime”, play out in the manner that instead of the Nigerian government to get to the root of the

problem and try to solve it. They decide to send soldiers to the militants, and to the protesters. In fact, the actions of the soldiers worsen the situation. The soldiers are said to have raped the students in *Waiting for an Angel*; harassed natives in *Oil on Water*. Also, Lamamo was killed in a protest in *Waiting for an Angel* from a bullet released by a policeman.

### Conclusion

This study was carried out to examine representation of ecological issues in Niger Delta region using Helon Habila’s novels. The purpose of study was to determine the nature of African ecological literature, the manner Africans see land in terms of the place they originated from and have lived their lives and other non-human aspects of nature that helps them survive in their place. How they interact with features in the environment economically, socially, religiously, culturally and what influence those things have on them in return. Also, the issues in the environment that literature is supposed to resolve and how much literature is able to do justice to that expectations.

After the review of oil corporations and their regulators, as well as, existing imperialist structures identified as major culprits in the devastation of communities in Nigeria and Africa at large. The situation is worsened by the level of corruption in the political and economic system and the overdependence on oil resources for the sustenance of the Nigerian economy. The findings are highlighted below:

1. There has been recognizable representation of ecological issues in African literature.
2. Environmentalism in Africa is seen as largely anthropocentric and does not meet the specifications of western originators.
3. The spate of violent uprisings, oil theft and militancy in the Niger Delta region is traceable to the issues of environmental and social injustice as well as the various levels of physical and economic displacement.

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