

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT NATURE-AN ECOLOGICAL STUDY OF HELON HABILA'S OIL ON WATER

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Abstract

The paper aims to explore the ways that environment concern & oil exploration are captured in Helon Habila's Oil on Water. The novel represents the environmental concerns with representation of the oil encounter. Ecology and Eco criticism is the latest branch of literary analysis. Through the reading of environmentally conscious text scholars and researchers are finding the connection between natural world and human beings and also analyzing how nature is represented in literature. With the emergence of eco-criticism many writers focuses how human activities affects ecology and environment and these human and environmental degradations are well depicted in the work of many Nigerian writers and critics like Gabriel Okara, Tanure Ojaide, Onyema, Ken Saro wiva etc. Helon Habila one of the leading novelist from Nigeria also addresses the issue of environmental devastation and inhumanity in his novel. An eco-critical study of the novel Oil on Water, set in Nigeria's Niger Delta reveals the reality of degradation of environment, occasioned by a number of instances of petroleum energy exploitation. The main theme of the novel is the ecological problems of Nigeria delta which Helon brings into light. He documents the aftermath of oil spillage in the environment.

Keywords: Environment, degradation, ecology, Nigeria, Oil exploration.

1. Introduction

Nigeria is a country of diverse culture inhabited by more than 500 ethnic groups, these groups speaks variety of language but on the other hand the entire country has one common overwhelming reality: OIL. The nigger delta reign of Nigeria is rich in crude oil. The economy of Nigeria is fuelled by oil money, oil is also known as black gold. Nigeria's foreign exchange comes from oil exploration, and marketing by oil companies. But the discovery of oil has effected the living conditions, agriculture, fishing etc. and the region witnessed marginalization and negligence. The region is suffering from ecological crisis and certainly this is Nigeria's most important political issue in recent times. As Nigerian sociologist, Inya Eteng says:

What currently prevails in the Southern oil enclave is a specific variant of internal colonialism... The specific, highly exploitative and grossly inequitable endowment/ownership-exchange entitlements relations between the Nigerian state and the oil-bearing communities in particular, which explains why the enormous oil wealth generated is scarcely reflected in the living standard and life chances of the peasant inhabitants of the oil-bearing enclave (Eteng, 1997: 21).

After the discovery of oil, many oil companies have established themselves in the Nigeria delta region. The land has been wasted because of many exploratory activities in the area. The land has become infertile as gas flaring and oil spillages destroyed the humus in the soil. Apart from the degradation of soil, the activities of oil explorers also led to the death of aquatic animals. As Nigerian environmental expert, Ojakorotu, states:

This activism can be attributed to frustration (on the part of the region) arising from both state and oil companies' negligence and destruction of the Niger delta's ecology, which is the basic structure that supports life in the region, as elsewhere. It may be said that the struggle by the people of the region has been predicated on certain fundamental issues, namely: their exclusion or marginalisation in terms of access to oil revenue; their struggle for greater access to resource sharing (known in Nigerian parlance as resource control); environmental degradation; and egregious human rights violation (Ojakorotu, 2008: 93).

Here, in oil on water an ongoing state of environmental devastation and human rights issues has brought into light by the author that either most of the people aren't aware of or probably they don't care about it because it's somewhere over in Africa and isn't significant to their day to day life.

2. Theoretical Background

Eco-criticism critically examines the connection between human and nature in literature. The term eco-criticism was first coined by William Rueckert in 1978 in *Literature and ecology: An experiment in Eco-criticism*. Eco-criticism is one of the latest branch of literary analysis in a line after Feminism, Marxism and other theories. The analysis of language, narrative, social and cultural background was the center of emphasis in late 20th century. Where feminism deals with the issues related to women, Marxism talks about labour and the economy, and post-colonial analysis discusses the effects of colonialism, ecocriticism seeks to foreground a sense of place, and the interaction between humanity and nature.

As Cheryll Glotfelty says:

If your knowledge of the outside world were limited to what you could infer from the major publications of the literary profession, you would quickly discern that race, class, and gender were the hot topics of the late twentieth century, but you would never suspect that the earth's life support systems were under stress. Indeed you might never know that there was an earth at all. (1996: xvi)

The term Eco-criticism gained popularity in 1990's with the publication of Cheryll Glotfelty: the Eco- criticism Reader Landmark in Literary Ecology. According to Glotfelty ecocriticism deals with 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.' (1996: xx). It was Glotfelty efforts that Eco-criticism become famous as a theory with this name. To define the importance of works that have eco-critical approach Glotfelty states: Regardless of what name it (ecocriticism) goes by, most ecocritical work shares a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems. 'We are there. Either we change our ways or we face global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow species in our headlong race to apocalypse. (1996: xx)

Eco critical study of literary text examines how writers perceive nature and reflects natural phenomena in their writings. After the emergence of eco-criticism as a critical theory, there are a number of writers and critics, including Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, Timothy Morton, Greg Gerrard, Karla Joni Adamson, Harold Fromm, Armbruster, and Ursula Heise who have written books on ecocriticism. The study of ecological system, relation of nature and man, environmental degradation and its effects on natives are also the major concern of literary work of many African writers. As William Slaymaker remarks:

Black African critics and writers have traditionally embraced nature writing, land issues and landscape themes that are pertinent to national and local cultural claims and that also functions as pastoral reminiscences or even projections of a golden age when many of the environmental evils resulting from colonialism and the exploitation of indigenous resources have been remediated. A review of any number of bibliographies, literary histories, and anthologies of black African literature and criticism in the past several decades will bear out this intense interest in the local recapture of a violated nature. (2007: 683)

There is a long list of critical work that deals with ecology in Africa. Ugwu's 'Ecological Degradation in Selected Niger Delta Novels (2014), A 'Eco-critical Reading of Selected Poems of Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide' (2011), and Ecopoetics and Contemporary Nigerian Poetry: A Study of Nnimmo Bassey's We Thought it was Oil but it was Blood' (2011) are some of worth mentioning. While reviewing eco-criticism and African literature in relation to the efforts made so far to protect the environment Byron Caminero Santangelo states that:

In the past fifteen years, African environmental activism has been brought to the world's attention through the martyrdom of Ken Saro Wiwa and more recently, by the awarding of the Nobel Peace prize to Wangari Maathai. These figures point not only to the ways that Africans have mobilized against environmental degradation, but also to the grave environmental problems faced by Africa which have become, especially in conjunction with social problems, a significant threat to its present and future-well-being. Ken Saro-Wiwa's leadership also

suggests that African writers can play a significant role in environmental causes. Just as they have in other forms of social activism (2007: 698)

3. Environmental Crisis in Oil on Water

Oil in water, an example of superb narrative arts of Helon Habila, describes about human and environmental conditions in Nigeria. Set in the Niger Delta, the novel provides a description of the happening in the Delta area, and inspects the changes brought about by the oil industry, which drilled its first well in 1956 and has remained a permanent fixture ever since. As in an interview with Rebecca Zerzan, Helon Habila himself says:

“It's one of the biggest wetlands in the whole world, the Niger delta. It's a really beautiful place, and it's systematically being destroyed by the activities of this oil company. It's such a waste, such a shame that it's happening. And for what? It's for money, it's for oil. It is the duty of the government to protect the country and the environment, and they are not doing that because they get money from the oil companies.’ (2011)

The frame for the novel is that the wife of a British oil executive has been kidnapped by a group of militant and journalists have been invited to make the journey up the river for an interview with her and her kidnappers. The protagonist of the novel Rufus, a young journalist along with Zaq Rufus’ idol “once a great reporter” takes the assignment to find the white women and they travel into the troubled oil-rich Nigerian Delta, hoping to interview the captors and to provide that the captive is alive or not. But, what appears to be a simple task takes an unexpected and complicated turn and leads Rufus and Zaq on an unwanted adventure and life-threatening journey. They discover “the larger picture,” the truth about this region; the troubles and difficulties of native people whose land and water have been ruined that describes the title of the novel Oil on Water. Through the adventures introspect journey, both Rufus and the reader reminded of Zaq’s advice, “Remember, the story is not always the final goal.”

Habila intertwines the story in a non-chronological manner: it flows back and forth in time, We observe the difference between past and present environment conditions. He connects the reader with the physical environment of Nigeria Delta region, we witness beautiful description of the sea, landscape and natural beauty of the Delta.

Midriver the water was clear and mobile, but toward the banks it turned brackish and still, trapped by mangroves in whose branches the mist hung in clumps like cotton balls. Ahead of us the mist arched clear over the water like a bridge, our light wooden canoe would be so enveloped in the dense gray stuff that we couldn't see each other as we glided silently over the water. (36)

He describes air and uncontaminated sea, having natural healing power. People of Irikefe worship nature (sun) and believe that nature is not only protecting to the environment but also to their lives. As this is clearly evident from the words of Naaman, the Chief Priest of the shrine at Irikefe village when Rufus shows concern for Zaq’s ill health: ‘We have a nurse

here and she will attend to you (Zaq). But perhaps you won't need her. The air alone will heal you. I have seen it happen' (86). In another conversation with Rufus, Gloria also emphasizes on the healing power of sea. For the inhabitants of Nigeria Delta sea and rivers were the main source of income and food. As Rufus reminds of his childhood we observe the beautiful description of sea as a living character:

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

But the major sources of livelihood have now ruined due to oil spills and toxic waste contamination. He draws a picture of the disruptive effects of the reckless actions of these forces on the society, environment, and other living beings.

Midriver the water was clear and mobile, but towards the banks it turned brackish and still... a bat flying overhead, a dead fish on the oil-polluted water.... We drifted almost aimlessly on the opaque misty water. The water took on various forms.... Sometimes, it was a snake, twisting and fast and slippery, poisonous.... Their rivers were already polluted and useless for fishing, and the land grew only gas flares and pipelines (3, 4, 34, 40).

Later Gloria also says that many islands around her used to be a big habitat for bats, but now have a few dozen due to the gas flares that kill them (120).

As the story of the novel unfolds we come to know that Niger Delta is all about peaceful islanders and their lives have been turned upside down by the arrival of the oil companies who are taking their land by force. Their water and the environment is also polluted. The Nigerian government is comfortable with international oil companies and is making lots of money, but the public is living in amidst extreme environmental degradation and gain no benefit from the oil. As a result, many of these peaceful island people have turned into militants and rebellion groups have emerged, apparently to restore the power imbalance and to try to get back their lives and their livelihoods. The environment and society have been destroyed by the greed of the oil industry, government and of the world that demands the oil.

One day the patrol [local militants] came upon two oil workers piling soil samples into a speedboat. There was a brief skirmish ... one of the oil workers escaped with a swollen jaw, the other with a broken arm ... the next day the soldiers came. Chief Malabo was arrested, his hands tied behind his back as if he were a petty criminal, on charges of supporting the militants and plotting against the federal government and threatening to kidnap foreign oil workers (40)

The novel highlights the injustices and cruelties with the native people. Helon Habila in an interview tells Rebecca Zerzan the reason behind taking an ecological issue for the novel:

I did not want to make it too much of a political novel. I wanted to carry the reader into this landscape that's being destroyed and show the people who are also being destroyed. The big people—the oil companies and the government—they are in the background. You have a sense that they are there, always pulling the strings. But I wanted to draw attention to the environment and the people who are living on that land and who are really suffering. (2011)

Rufus, the narrator of the story, throws light on the degradation and distressing contamination of the Niger Delta nation due to oil spillage and gas flaring. As in the beginning of the journey he notices: At every direction now, one sees '...dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fish bobbed white-bellied between tree roots.... The patch of grass growing by the water was suffocated by a film of oil...' (8-9).

Onyema in *crude Waves of the Delta* also express his grief and passes a message to oil explorers:

Tell them they have killed our waters,
Tell them they have killed our farms,
Tell them they have killed our air,
With crude and killed the farmers
And killed the fishermen in us. (2007: 125)

Apart from knowing the horrific destruction of waterways and land that used to sustain residents and dreadful effects of environmental degradation on the existences of fishes, animals, birds, river and grass both Rufus and Zaq also became the first hand witnesses the dreadful consequences of the activities of the oil companies on the host communities like poverty, violent acts, murder, broken homes, accidents, hopelessness, ruined villages, mass death, sickness, sudden loss of life, dislocation and many more. Doctor Dagogo-Mark while discussing about health problems of local people laments how because of environment pollution villagers are succumb to various diseases which result in loss of lives. Zaq also became the victim of a number of diseases that resulted in his eventual death. Doctor Dagogo-Mark tells Rufus;

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

Doctor Dagogo-Mark even writes to the government about the harmful effects of the activities of oil companies but no action was taken and the results of his tests dumped in 'some filing cabinets'. On the other hand oil companies try to bribe him by offering a job. The

conditions show how nation is trapped in hopeless situation where government corruption leads to poverty and poverty engenders groups like the militants and freedom fighters started disturbing oil production to continue their ongoing struggle against the oil companies and the government authorities to save their environment. The "rebels" have a reputation of violence. The condition is so worst that native people do not want their children to stay there as the damage caused by pollution is very high and there was no future for them. As the old man, the guide of Rufus and Zaq request them to take his son Port Harcourt

‘He no get good future here... see, wetin he go do here? Nothing. No fish for river, nothing. I fear say soon him go join the militants, and I no wan that’ (36).

The local inhabitants like farmers and fishermen, with hope of a healthier and simpler life and happier times, are caught in the middle, people are also tempted by promised of getting money from the oil wells on their shores. Due to lack of necessities they have started engaging in oil-theft, kidnaping etc. The condition of Rufus’ father clearly describes the plight of every people. After losing his job, he gets engage in oil theft, bribes the policemen to remain in business. He smokes and drinks a lot. As Rufus says: ‘...I saw how much my father had changed. He had turned his back on his religion, and now smoked and drank ogogoro almost nonstop’ (65) People have also started leaving their lands because of the oil companies activities and they started selling their lands to oil companies and search for a safe zone. Once upon a time they lived in paradise.... They lacked for nothing, fishing and hunting and farming and watching their children growing up before them, happy. The village was close-knit..... (but now) the close, unified community was divided... tempted... with a lot of money, more than any of them had ever imagined....(38 - 39).

The following lines also capture the inner dilemma of chief Ibiram who leads his own people out of their ancestral land.

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

Conclusion

Thus in *Oil on water* writer not only provides the different point of views of the locals, militants, government, soldiers, and even have a chance to talk to people from the oil industry but also describes every minute details about the environmental devastation; river with its floating dead and dying wildlife, poisoned fish, oil soaked land that become futile, heavily polluted air, toxic fumes produce by the perpetually-burning flares of gas throughout the night. Habila call the attention of reader by showing worse effects of environment degradation that arouses the conscious of the reader to think about the environment crisis but on the other hand we feel that writer could have gone beyond by portraying some events of suggesting strategies made by government, native people and oil companies to save the environment.

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