

Environmental Degradation, Militancy/Kidnapping and Oil Theft in Helon Habila's *Oil in Water*

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Abstract

The degradation of the Niger Delta environment through pollution has constituted challenges and concern for the people of the oil rich region. The ecosystem has completely been violated and destroyed. The destruction of the flora and fauna without clean – ups or compensation paid to host communities have resulted in youth restiveness and the up surge of militancy in the region. The violation of the system by the multinationals and the insensitivity of the Federal Government of Nigeria to the plight of the Niger Delta people have also escalated the controversies. The government has been indicted for lack of development of the region. Militancy/kidnapping are social vices which have bedeviled the area and led to oil theft through vandalization of oil pipelines and illegal bunkering causing widespread spillages, degradation and pollution of the ecosystem. This ugly trend often leads to closure of oil companies, loss of revenue, life and the people's source of livelihood. This paper therefore seeks to explore the issues of environmental degradation and its attendant consequences like the rise of militancy, Kidnapping, bunkering, oil theft in the region using Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* as the focal text. The paper seeks to proffer solutions to this age-long problem if socio-economic and political growth is to be met in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

Keywords: Environment, oil theft, militancy, kidnapping, bunkering degradation, vandalization, spillages

1. Introduction

To Africans, land which constitutes the environment is regarded as an important entity which cannot be toyed with or given out or taken indiscriminately. This is why the Kenyans through the Mau Mau struggle fought and resisted foreign occupation and exploitation of their rich land by imperialists. Ngugi captures this picture vividly when he writes that "the alienated (*polite word for stolen*) has always been the key to Kenyan's problems, as indeed it is to all the settler colonies of Central and Southern Africans" (27). Biakolo agrees that land is the source and prime resource in material production as well as the terrain and organizing matrix of social relations. The Kenyan scenario was re-enacted in South Africa under the obnoxious Apartheid regime. Darah opines that "the iniquity of the apartheid legislation was finally resolved in 1994 when Nelson Mandela became the first black ruler of that country. Millions perished in the 81 years of that obnoxious law... (113). Land therefore has always been viewed as a source of conflict and violence among people. It is tied to people's cultural, spiritual and physical inheritance. A landless person has no roots, no ancestor and indeed no identity. This is why Ngugi reasons that "to live in the level of race or tribe is to be less than whole" (23). The exploitation of the environment – land, water, air by multinationals in collaboration with the Federal Government in the oil producing areas of the Niger Delta has generalized controversies in Nigeria. On this the Amnesty reports that:

Widespread and unchecked human rights violation related to the oil industry have pushed many people deeper into poverty and deprivation, fuelled conflict and led to pervasive sense of powerlessness and frustration....Oil spills, waste dumping and gas flaring are endemic in the Niger Delta. This pollution which has affected the area for decades, has damaged the soil, water and air quality. Hundreds of thousands of people are affected, particularly the poorest and those who rely on traditional livelihoods such as fishing and agriculture (9).

The Niger Delta region belongs to the area known as minority. Atemie and Akikibofori argue that since power comes with numbers or money, the Niger Deltans are forever locked out. This situation can be regarded as robbery of the minority and what Chinaka refers to as "plutocracy of kleptomaniacs at the Federal Government levels" (35). The majority has little or no regard for Nigeria, what they are interested in is exploiting minority resources for the development of self and their area. The neglect of the region has led to environmental degradation, pollution, loss of traditional occupations, rise in social vices like gun-running, kidnapping, militancy, oil theft as well as health hazards to mention a few. Commenting on the plight of the Ogoni people, Amanye explains that

Oil exploration has turned Ogoni into a wasteland; lands, streams, and creeks are totally and continually polluted; the atmosphere has been poisoned, charged as it is with hydrocarbon vapors, methane, carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide and soot emitted by gas which had been flared 24 hours a day for 35 years in very close proximity to human habitation. Acid rain, oil spillage and oil blowouts have devastated Ogoni territory (11).

Amanye's position agrees with the later views of Asagba who avers that in:

the Niger Delta region, the oil pit of Nigeria and symbol of economic prosperity for the future, the battle line between the ragtag militants and the government has been drawn. In spite of contrived peace parleys, rehabilitation and resettlement initiatives that have remained unresolved, the issues of resources control, or social justice and equity, cultural liberation, community right and economic independence have continued to haunt and gape at a country in dire strait (7).

The legendary Ken Saro-Wiwa's fight for the Ogoni people was against the devastation of the neglect of the region. Apter submits that "in the global media, the struggle came to represent the rapacious appetite of oil capitalism and the ruthless abandon of military dictatorship, as oil-spills, burn-off and blowouts destroyed the creeks and farms of the Ogoni people with no compensation provided in return" (122).

2. Environmental Degradation in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

The environment is made up of land, air, and water. Advocates of ecocriticism like Evernden hold that "in order for there to be perceptible pollution, there must first be an understanding of systemic order, an environmental norm" (5). The system here referred to as the Niger Delta environment. However, before the discovery of oil in Oloibiri in 1956, Nigeria was largely an agrarian economy. With independence in 1960, the revenue of the country was shared in such a way that some percentage went to each region according to its contribution to national economy and level of production. After the 1967-70 Nigerian/ Biafra civil war, new states were created and, family lands were taken over by the Federal Government. The 1999 constitution of Nigeria as amended represents this thus,

The entire property in and in control of all minerals, oil and natural gas in under and upon any land in Nigeria or in under or upon the territorial waters and the exclusive economic zones of Nigeria shall vest in the government of the federation and shall be managed in such a manner as may be prescribed by the National Assembly.(Clause 44).

Thus this brought to an end the derivation sharing principle and introduced the domination and marginalization of the Niger Delta.

Environmental degradation and pollution have caused untold harm and hardship to the Niger Delta region. In discussing these critical issues, theories of ecocriticism will be explored. Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Rueckert agrees that "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature is what ecocriticism entails". The awareness reached today is that the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basis life support system. It is therefore pertinent for humans to change their ways or face global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow species in man's headlong race to apocalypse. These are the issues raised in Habila's *Oil in Water* where he depicts widespread pollution and degradation of the ecosystem thus:..we followed a bend in the river and in front of us we saw dead birds

draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fish... blobbed white. bellied between tree roots (*Oil in Water*, . 9)

This situation is replicated in another village

*In the village centre, we found the communal well. Eager for a drink, I bent under the wet, mossy pivoted beam and peered into the well's blackness, but a rank smell wafted from its hot depth and slapped my face. I reeled away, my head aching from the encounter. Something organic perhaps human lay dead and decomposing down there, its starch mixed with that unmistakable smell of oil. At the other end of the village a little where we had towards the big river where we had left our boat. The patch of grass growing by the water was suffocated by a film of oil, each blade covered with blotches like the liver spots on a smoker's hand (*Oil on Water* 9).*

As a result of environmental degradation and pollution, the inhabitants of these communities are often forced to relocate to other areas to farm and fish. The Flora and Fauna of the ecosystem are destroyed, creating dirt and discomfort. Douglas submits that there can be no dirt with a system, for dirt by definition is matter out of place and all places are defined by system. In addition roofs of houses are affected by gas flares, acid rain among others. Bassey is of the view that "over 100 flares sites in the Niger Delta belch 400 million tons of carbon dioxide equivalent into the atmosphere annually" (80). This position agrees with the earlier views of AKe who avers that Nigeria contribute to global warming the whole world put together. There are also incidents of oil spillage caused by vandals and multinationals. Chinaka avers that these multinationals use less expensive equipments which often break down. This critic adds "according to Greg Campbell in *Times Magazine*, most pipelines crisscrossing the Delta are 30 years old and build at lower standard than modern pipes" (30). Again, the multinationals seldom inspect the state of their equipments as the impact of pollution affect border line communities in the Niger Delta system.

Ignorant Niger Delta people use these flares for doing businesses, oblivious to the adverse health hazards. Habila writes: "the villager feasted for weeks they got their orange fire, planted firmly over the water at the edge of the village. Night and day, it burned and now the village had no need for candles or lamps, all they had to do at night was to open their doors and windows and just like that, everything was illuminated..."(91- 92). Some of the health hazards associated with flaring include cancer, asthma, bronchitis, blood disorder etc. in addition global heat, deforestation, wild fires, toxic water among others.

In contrast, the air on Irikefe Island where the worshippers lived and worshipped in their shrine was relatively free from pollution, at least until the clash between militants and soldiers. Zag, one of the journalists declares "I like the air here, its pure. Who knows, I might even get some sort of religion" (*Oil in Water*, p. 85), but he ironically died of dengue fever. Zag's health is similar to Dr. Dagogo – Mark's who is apparently waiting for death. The later informs Rufus, that they needed more grave diggers than doctors in the region. This implies that the entire village/community will soon wipe out. It is against this back drop that Douglas argues that "uncleanliness or dirt is that which must not be included: if the pattern is to be maintained. To recognize this is the first step towards insight into pollution" (3). These are some of the issues the Federal government and multinationals fail to acknowledge.

Critics, writers as well as environmentalists have unanimously condemned the environmental degradation and pollution of the Niger Delta region. These defenders of the system argue that it is "unnatural" behavior which can be discerned by the consequences of nature itself. Saro – Wiwa recognize that "the entire position of the polluter is untenable" to borrow Evernden's expression. The polluters of the environment have violated the system and the polluter is condemned not only for physical pollution and degradation but also implicitly for moral pollution that is revealed by physical pollution and degradation of the ecosystem. The oil spillage in the Gulf of Mexico which occurred briefly raised international attention, yet the Niger Deltans have been living under this hazardous condition for years, with no compensation or clean – off. Nwahunanya adds that the American house of representative infact insisted that shell must pay \$20 billion dollars as compensation for the damage caused by blow – out from the deep – sea off shore well (47). The degradation and pollution are threat and danger to the well being of individual and society. They are example of gross violation of human right, therefore, the pollution by not doing that which is unnatural has place nature and people at risk.

Militancy/Kidnapping in *Oil on Water* Environmental degradation, pollution, poverty, lack of social amenities as well as insensitivity of the Federal government and multinational in the Niger Delta region are the major causes of youth restiveness in the region. Militancy is indeed not new in the region. It first started in Isaac Boro, who out of "fear that the Ijaw would not have a fair deal in the military dispensation declared the Niger Delta republic in 1966" (Darah, 10). The militant in the region are seen as defenders of the system. The youth in this region have turned militants because they want to draw attention to their bastardised environment. This militancy can be likened to guerilla fighters. In *Oil on Water*,

the militant groups include: the Black Belt of Justice, the Free Delta Army, the AK – 47 Freedom Fighters among others. These groups comprise youth, school drop – outs, and criminals like Professor, a militant kingpin. Hitherto, the self – styled Professor (Ani Willson) was a backstreet thug, jailbird, party thug, and killer, turned militant/kidnapper. Inyang notes that “the militants operate clandestinely, deliberately attacking civilians, while military objects, are rarely engaged, if they are then usually using indirect approach such as bombing”(59). Clad in black, some wearing head bands and masks, wielding sophisticated guns like AK – 47, machine guns, grenades, 97.62mm, X39mm, shells purchase from overseas, they terrorized innocent people, dared the military operatives in the region. Some militant groups operate as criminals, kidnapping and raising money from oil companies and collecting ransom from kidnapped hostages, rapping, killing and looting. The Professor’s group is orderly. He tells Rufus “... I am aware that out there, they are criminal elements, looting and killing under the guise of freedom fighting but we are different. Those kind of rebels, they are our enemies. That is why I am letting you go so that you can write the truth...”(209). The Professor obviously likes media publicity and recognizes the role of the journalist in writing stories e.g. informing, educating and sensitizing the masses. He enjoins Rufus to “write only the truth. Tell them about the flares you see at night the oil on water and the soldiers forcing us to escalate the violence ...”(Oil on Water, 20). The book title is obviously derived from the above statement.

The militants abduct expatriate oil workers, attack/vandalize oil installations and attack military personnel who try to obstruct their nefarious activities. The activities of militants have caused hardship, death, violence, psychological trauma and insecurity to residents, communities and oil workers in the region.

In *Oil on Water*, the central ideal is the kidnap of Mrs. Isabel Floode, the expatriate wife of a British Petroleum engineer. Habila links the prevalence of kidnapping to lack of good jobs, poverty, disillusionment, corruption among others. Salomen, Mrs. Floode’s graduate driver is betrayed by his boss when the latter impregnates his girl – friend, Koko. In connivance with Jamabo, a police officer and Bassey, his neighbor, they hatched the kidnap plan in order to raise money to better their lot. Jamabo draws an analogy between kidnapping and ransom, he declares that “it is like plucking money off a money tree” (Oil on Water, 199). This is a clear indictment on the Nigerian police that should protect life and property. Habila’s narrative is riddled with ironies. Jamabo tells Salomen that it is not kidnapping per se, but “payment for all the pain these people caused me a refund for all my investment in Koko... The Oga had insulted me badly, he’d taken away my pride, my dignity, my manhood... the money wasn’t even coming out of his pocket: the oil company always pays the ransom... the money came from our oil, so we are getting back what was ours in the first place... I could get out of the country and no one would ever find me...” (Oil on Water, 200).

Habila recalls other examples of kidnapping e.g. the case of a 70 years old woman and a 3 years old girl. In their bid to make quick money, Monday, one of the militants kidnapped an albino for which he was severely punished by his leader. In addition, one foreign family was kidnapped and their company paid the sum of “three million ransom for them” (Oil on Water, 202). In Isabel Floode’s case, the smart militants sent her hair strands as evidence to her husband and demand a ransom of five million dollars as well as five reporters to confirm that she is alive and well. Inyang concurs that these militant activities have snowballed into full – blown armed conflicts, sometimes coloured with criminality, where ever septuagenarian and toddlers are not spared in the mad rush for ransom as depicted earlier.

The militants and kidnapers took Mrs. Floode to Irikefe Island, deceived Naman, the assistant head priest that they had killed and buried her there. The subsequent clash between the militants and soldiers on the Island left many dead, the shrine and statuary were completely destroyed, leaving the people spiritually disconnected. Habila writes

But the soldiers came early the next morning. First they came in a boat, and there were only five of them. They were on routine patrol; they hadn’t known the militants were here, and they ran into an ambush. It was massacre... the militant had machine guns and grenades... The water turned red. Blood. It was blood. But in the confusion the rebels slipped away and left the villagers to face the soldiers (154).

Nwahunanya opines that “government on its part, often in league with the representatives of the comprador bourgeois class that own the oil companies, has used the force of the military to clamp down on the militants and muffle the voices of dissents and protest” (Nwahunanya, 45 – 46).

It has become evident to Niger Delta indigenes that the acquisition of their oil wealth by the Nigerian government was an act of forced territorial acquisition by a conquering army, as imposition on them of a government they did not recognize (Nwahunanya, 47). This again is an infringement on their human rights hence their resistance through acts of violence. Corroborating the above claim Onukaogu and Onyerionwu hold that:

Apparently because the government of the day has shown such crash insensitivity to the problems and protests of the people of the area, the response of the natives to the crisis of their lives takes a different pattern: that of guerilla

confrontation, utilizing this strategy, which entails bombing oil facilities, kidnapping of especially expatriate oil workers and general restiveness, the Niger Delta was able to score some more points for the struggle.(53).

Trapped on the island of Irikefe, the journalist, Rufus finally meets Mrs. Isabel Floode and her driver, who was to be sent to Chief Ibiram so that they could travel, unnoticed to Port Harcourt. Another militant group led by the Professor got wind of their movement, and at night fall they circled their boat blocking all avenues of sudden escape and demanding for the white woman: "we want the white woman now. Give us the white woman and her driver, and we won't harm you. If you don't, we will sink all your boats and set fire to your things. If you think say na joke, try us" (*Oil on Water*, 186). The militants are "the masters of the water ways – they knew every turning every shallow – every rapid ..." (189).

The Professor expressed dismay at Chief Ibiram's betrayal. Rufus and Grace, were released to go. Salomen tried to escape and lost his life. Rufus was given an envelope containing more of Mrs. Floode's hair, with a stern warning: "take this envelope to her husband. It contains more of her hair. Tell him his wife is safe, but after two days if you don't hear from him we can't guarantee her safety any more. We are getting impatient. Two days, final" (*Oil on Water*, 209). The Professor also increased the ransom to ten million.

3. Oil Theft in Habila's *Oil on Water*

Oil revenue forms part of Nigerian's gross domestic product. It has been used to develop many parts of Nigeria especially Lagos and Abuja. Darah is of the view that "the Niger Delta oil and gas provide 90% of Nigerian government's revenue. By virtue of its strategic importance to the survival of Nigeria and her numerous beggarly countries, the Niger Delta is to Nigeria what the Nile is to Egypt. Just as there can be no Egypt without the Nile, so also there can be no Nigeria, as presently constituted from the bowels and water ways of the Niger Delta" (106).

Oil theft in the Niger Delta has been fueled by poverty, lack of employment, neglect of the region, greed among others. As parents lost their traditional occupations of fishing, farming and trading, their children dropped out of school to engage in illegalities like bunkering and oil theft, which have proven to be lucrative business irrespective of the risk associated therein. In *Oil on Water*, Habila depicts the plight of children forced to steal fuel from vandalized pipelines in order to earn a living. Rufus's father and his friend bought stolen fuel from little children. He tells his son "this is the only business booming in this town. I buy from little children. I buy cheap and I sell cheap to the cars that come here at night...." (64). This is their quick way of making money in order to keep body and soul together in a bastardised economy. This clandestine business applies to the nation's crude oil which vandals sell to their customers. Barrels of crude are siphoned from vandalized pipelines daily.

Morally benefit of conscience, Rufus's father fails in his duty to reprimand because he is part and parcel of the stealing cartel. On the other hand it is his socio – economic condition that has reduced him to this level. This is an indictment on the government for failing to provide for its citizens.

Again, Habila depicts the level of poverty and corruption in the society. The police collide with the masses to defraud the nation. Rufus's father informs him that "... we get by, we give the police a little something to look the other way ..." (64). Late President Umaru Yar 'Adua reiterated that stolen crude oil aids corruption and violence could lead to war. In linking militancy and oil theft, some criminals use the disguise of militancy to steal the nation's crude. In addition, arms are brought into the country to aid this criminality. These are examples of economic sabotage. Oil theft (sellers and buyers) should be prosecuted so as to serve as deterrent to others. At a meeting of the G-8 nations in Japan in July 2008, Late President Yar 'Adua canvassed that the international community should treat stolen crude oil as stolen diamonds known as "blood diamond". Oil theft, bunkering etc can stall oil production, lead to closure of oil facilities and affect the general revenue from oil wealth. These are evil wind, if not checked will adversely affect the economic growth of the nation.

4. Conclusion

The multifaceted problem of the Niger Delta – degradation, pollution, militancy, kidnapping, oil theft, bunkering etc has far – reaching effects on the growth and development of the region and indeed the nation. Environmentalists, writers as well as critics, advocates that over – emphasis on oil wealth will one day cripple the nation's economy. More emphasis should be placed on agricultural activities. This can only be achieved if the Federal government pay more attention to the problem of the Niger Delta, engage in clean – ups, provide jobs as well as basic amenities like roads, pipe borne water, electricity, hospitals, schools among other in the region. Also the issue of insecurity and proliferation of sophisticated arms should be checked and militants encouraged to engage in meaningful ventures. In this respect the granting of

Amnesty to militants by Late President Yar'Adua in 2009 has helped to reduce militancy and kidnapping but the issue of oil theft is still lingering.

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