

“Oil is on Water”: Reading Habila’s *Oil on Water* through Said’s Imaginative Geography and its Representation

Onyinyechi Ugwuezumba
Department of English Studies
University of Port Harcourt
Port Harcourt, Nigeria
onyinyechi.ugwuezumba@uniport.edu.ng

&

Paul Kennedy Ndubuisi Enesha
Department of English and Literary Studies,
Imo State University.
paulkensha@yahoo.com
paulkenedy.enesha@imsuonline.edu.ng

Abstract

Against the background of environmental devastation and change brought about by oil exploration, this article studies the representation of the effects of the extractive oil industry on the local environment in the Niger Delta in Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*. Beginning with the assumption that the impact of oil exploration on the environment can be better understood by having a sense of place, this article will engage in a reading of Habila’s novel. Unlike the previous scholarship which perceive the novel as a narrative of militant realism, this study will argue that in the context of environmental transformation animated by petro-extraction and distribution the narrative of the novel challenges us to the inevitable need of collective social responsibility and action in the preservation of human, non-human lives and the environment. Working with the central motif of water as a life agent to human, non-human, and the ecosystem in general we will show that the story of the novel reveals that the destruction of water and the general aquifer turn every one into victims. In order to achieve our goal we will adopt Edward Said’s concept of imaginary geography and its representation in order to interpret the underlying contrapuntal relations in Habila’s novel. This contrapuntal relations manifest in the presentation of space, characters as victims and the complicity of traditional mode of worship in the conflict between the State and the militant groups. Again it is shown that the innumerable divisions between the militant groups raise the sceptical worry that these groups may have become trapped in the same ills they potentially confront.

Key words: Imaginary geography, representation, place, contrapuntal relations, water, oil.

“... almost every media available to us today is materially and even philosophically indebted to oil” --- Stephanie LeMenager.

Introduction

Oil is a major catalyst of environmental transformation in postcolonial Africa and contributor to global climate change. It fuels industries, transportation even as it powers the domestic sphere. Oil promotes major developments in sub-Saharan Africa and other parts of the world even as it is at the centre of major conflicts. It animates the rise and fall of the stock market and sustains militancy in the Niger Delta while fanning the embers of terror in North East Nigeria. Oil pays the bills for momentous state infrastructures but cements the network of corruption. Although oil is a veritable harbinger of change in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria it has equally brought about the disruption of “normal” social life which as a result has engendered displacement and untold human suffering.

The idea of oil as both a harbinger of change and a destructive agent of normal social life mandates an interrogation of what constitutes the “normal”. As Amitav Gosh (n.d.) has explained our perception of the normal life even in neo-liberal postcolonial context is derived from what Max Weber has called “the rationalization of modern life”. The underlying credo of this rationalization Gosh explains is that: “nothing could change otherwise than the way things were seen to change in the present”. Following from this, social life follows a pattern of regularity manifesting in seasons, festivals, birth and death. Accordingly, children grow up in a structure determined by their social contexts through family, community, and nation. Their lives become inured in such regularity to the extent that

they see the regularity that defines their lives as normal. Ironically, Gosh has shown that it is this same sense of normality and its rationalization that renders the human unprepared for the abnormal that comes as a result of environmental change.

Helon Habila adopts water and oil as tropes in order to narrate the transformation in the environment. But beyond this we are presented with characters in his novel whose sense of the normal is shattered in the face of environmental change caused by oil. This is the story of James Floode the British petroleum engineer posted to the Niger Delta. It is the dilemma of his wife, Isabel, who follows the normal wifely instinct in order to protect her marriage. She travels to the Niger Delta and gets abducted and detained in an inhospitable environment by her captors. It is the dilemma of the natives such as Chief Ibirima and members of his community who become displaced. This narrative line develops as multiple ripples erupting and circling across a vast body of water, of rivers and ocean, circling both the human and non-human elements in the environment.

The multiple ripples in their wake reveal the fundamental contrast between oil and water especially as they are used in our main title. Ordinarily, water is a refreshing agent and source of life. For the inhabitants along the many tributaries of the River Niger, water is both a major factor in the local economy as the basis for the fishing industry and local transportation. It is these attributes that place it in sharp contrast from oil. As David Orr (2004) has rightly observed, the relationship between these two substances hinges on a stark contrast: “Water makes life possible, while oil is toxic to most life. Water in its pure state is clear; oil is dark.” Besides he says, “Oil and water have had contrary effects on our minds”: water is a source of inspiration and healing while oil deadens the imagination and renders us corrupt (Orr, p.3)

Consequently, oil in our title is used to underscore the fact that it is, and especially in the form of petroleum and its by-products, it has become a double-edged tool in the hands of petro-capitalism and the Nigerian state. On the one hand it is a natural commodity like water. But it is also a commodity that is exhaustible. On the other hand, it functions as an agent of natural and environmental destruction. As an agent of destruction, it pollutes and thereby negates the value of water as a life support agent to human, aquatic and terrestrial lives, of animals and forests. It is mainly this destructive tendency of oil that does not only provoke the note of alarm in our title, but that has engaged the literary imagination in the outcry against the destructive and destabilizing tendency from oil.

The pollution from oil has not only deprived the inhabitants of the Niger Delta access to their local water supply. It has destroyed the local fishing economy with the aquatic life diminished and the fishes retreating to deep ocean waters. What crystallizes in the attendant change from oil and its effect on the environment and its representation in a diversity of media is the fact that it is man-made. And as Stephanie LeMenager (2014) underscores in the epigraph above, contemporary media culture on the environment are now in debt materially and philosophically to oil. Besides, as Amitav Gosh (n.d.) has observed we live in a time when the “accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere [as a result of oil exploration]is rewriting the destiny of the earth” (Gosh, 2). Carbon itself is the emission from human activities.

PLACE: In spite of how ubiquitous and pervasive oil related activities have become, their effects on the environment and the interpretation of the representation of these effects can only be experienced and appreciated in definite places at any given time. Consequently, we need what Donna Haraway (1988) has called “situated knowledge” in order to both witness and to read the representation of the effect of oil in the media and especially the Nigerian novel (Haraway, 575-599). Even though Haraway made her case in the context of feminist theory, the expression “situated knowledge” echoes a sociological awareness and reminds us of what C. Wright Mills (1959) had identified as “sociological imagination” which emphasizes the interconnectedness between individual creative consciousnesses, knowledge production, make ups, actions and the social context. In other words, reading and production are socially and contextually determined. Besides following the case made by Robert Allen Rouse (2019) and Ursula Heise (2008) the environment in which we read influences our interpretation of texts. Thus, Rouse affirms that “reading takes place, and place takes reading” (xii). The thinking of Rouse is hinged on the premise that the act of reading happens or is actualized in a place, a location, or context. As a communicative act, reading is realized in and realizable in a context, in a world. As such, reading to use Edward Said’s (1994) words is ultimately *wordly*. The second part of Rouse’s (2019) statement underscores the effect of reading in the construction and reconstruction of place. By happening in the world, reading has the ability to affect the way we as readers perceive the world. This covert and even

duplicitous relationship between place and reading, context and our apprehension of this reality through reading is a sharp reflection of the relationship between the environment and its representation. On her part, Ursula Heise (2008) underscores the need to shift from a sense of sameness, globalism to difference in location (Heise, pp.10-13). Following her case, therefore, the narrative of oil extraction is exemplary of how local cultural production can interrogate the essentialism associated with the global. What is interrogated in essence is how global capitalism functioning through the extractive appetite of mega oil corporations in collusion with agents of the State ravages the local. Therefore, we cannot make sense of contemporary environmental change without a sense of history and a sense of place. It is this need for “situated knowledge” that compels our earlier placement of LeMenager (2014) and Gosh (n.d.) side by side. They have in their different contexts re-echoed Edward Said’s (1994) claim about the importance of geography to the effect of change including change in our environment in Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa. In this regard geography is not simply a matter of description; it is rather an inescapably political practice of “world making” through representation. Said’s act of “world making” underwrites the current transformation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The following is a brief account on this context especially as it forms the immediate background of *Oil on Water*.

The Niger Delta is not just a place on the map of West Africa adjacent to the Gulf of Guinea. From colonial times it has continued to be a form of political and ideological practice through a particular form of world making and representation. European merchant ships had contact with the area now called the Niger Delta as far back as the 15th century. But the official process of configuring the area as part of Nigeria dates back to 1826 with the influx of British merchant ships in the Bonny River. As James Coleman (1986) has recorded the Berlin Conference of 1885 later gave the British the mandate to acquire the Niger Delta area. This was followed by the renaming of the region as the Oil Rivers Protectorate with a charter given to the Royal Niger Company “to administer, make treaties, levy customs and trade in all territories in the basin of the Niger and its affluents” (Coleman, p.41). Even after colonialism the Niger Delta has become an integral part of the Nigerian modernity and with oil exploration, it has served to reconfigure Nigerian experience in more fundamental ways.

First, the Niger Delta is no more the mere physical complex of space on the map. Rather it has become a place of agency where human agents both experience and creatively transform their geographical surroundings into spaces of struggle and conflict. In addition, the Niger Delta has become not merely a geographical location, but a representation of a type of material practice and a form of power. As a space of practice, the Niger Delta now shares common characteristic with another theatre of conflict in Nigerian modernity, that is, Sambisa Forest. Sambisa as an integral part of Nigerian modernity was a safe haven for wildlife and a place of rest and tourism. But the emergence of a new subject position driven by terrorist agenda transgressed that modernity and redefined it in line with a different set of language games, as a place of terror. The consequence of that transgression crystallizes in the emergence of a subjected group, identified as internally displaced persons. Incidentally while Sambisa and the Boko Haram terrorist group(s) operating from it has created displacement that can be accounted for in physical sense, that is, in terms of statistics and numbers, displacement in the Niger Delta acquires a more psychosocial significance and requires to be examined from two perspectives, that of the official government position and the position of the governed and natives of the Niger Delta.

Officially, oil and gas exploration form the main stay of the Nigerian economy. But to reach the crude the environment will be affected leading to the devastation and degradation witnessed in oil producing communities. Besides in conveying petroleum products to where they are needed either in refineries or in depots or even for export, oil pipelines have invaded the human space of the individual. In other words, the natural human space is appropriated in a way that is reminiscent of Karl Marx’s () account on the process of “colonialist primitive accumulation”. The open spaces where children ought to play and learn are surrounded by monstrous pipelines. In addition to this the sanctuary of homes are invaded and “appropriated” by gas flares. The obvious consequence of these is the destruction of the human element in the Niger Delta. The psychosocial effect of this manifests in the increasing army of youths recruited into cultism and militancy. Also, a phenomenon that is increasingly becoming apparent is the alarming disregard for human life and the erosion of traditional value of respect for the other or for traditional civil authority, what Weber had earlier referred to as the “rationalization of normal life”. The reason is that traditional allegiance to local customary authorities is dissipated and turned into a commodity in line with global capitalism. Rufus reports on the account by Chief Ibiram on the dilemma of his uncle, Chief Malabo, who resisted till death the attempts of the oil company and the government

to take over their community (pp. 34-41). Indeed as LeMenager has affirmed, oil has become the defining decimal of experience in the Niger Delta. It is against this kind of violent transformation of both the human and the environment that we can make sense of the account narrated in Habila's *Oil on Water*. The title itself presents a problem. It is used to underscore the fact of oil especially petroleum and its by-products as a double-edged tool in the hand of petro-capitalism and the Nigerian state. On the one hand it is a natural product, like water, but it is also a commodity that is exhaustible even as it drives industry, capitalist modernist development. But on the other hand, it functions as an agent of natural and environmental destruction. Thus, as an agent of destruction it pollutes and thereby negates the value of water as a life support agent to human, aquatic and terrestrial lives, of animals and forests. It is mainly this destructive tendency of oil that does not only provoke the note of despair in our title, but that has engaged the literary imagination in the outcry against the destructive and destabilizing tendency from oil. But we need a strong sense of place, of where we are in the present world petro-capitalism.

The Problem: Critical scholarship on the representation of the Niger Delta in works of literature continues to emerge regularly. A great deal of the critical endeavour is focused on what Sule Emmanuel Egya (2017) has captioned as the representation of the "eco-human ruination caused by multinational oil corporations in connivance with the central government of Nigeria" (Egya, p.95) Egya's contribution finds its timbre within a shared critical commitment to understand how language and other systems of signs are framed by writers from the Niger Delta in order to determine how we read and how we experience works of literature and more generally, how we make sense of our experience of the devastation in the area through literature. It equally involves how we construct our own identities and take ownership of our lives through our experience of literary representations and consequently, make sense of our world. Even though he does not foreground it, Egya's (2017) argument is animated by the popular assumption of the writer as a legislator of the world, or more pointedly as Chinua Achebe (2007) has put it, the writer as a teacher. With this in mind, therefore, Egya constructs the aesthetic and creative endeavour a writer like Helon Habila especially, as constitutive of "literary militancy". He adds, that "literary militancy", a form of aesthetic ideology, "is more visible" not only in the narrative line of Habila's work, but in the poetry of other writers writing about the Niger Delta region including, "Nnimmo Bassey, Ogaga Ifowodo, Ebi Yeibo and Lambert Ototo" (p.95). Unlike Habila who is from the North East region of Nigeria, these other writers are from the Niger Delta. But more significantly the common thread that defines their work is "the tone and tenor that are consistently *militant*" (p.95). Literary militancy forms a counter-discursive framework through literature in order to defend the local and the environment. Consequently, he argues, Habila's novel is a form of action "against institutional power in a society that through economic activities undermines the existence of its people". Recalling Rob Nixon's (2011) argument in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* Egya affirms that the people of the Niger Delta are exemplary of:

indigenous communities ... [that] suffer untold brutalities as a result of the resources mined from their lands and waters to feed the ever yawning desire of petro-capitalism. (98)

What is new about Egya's contribution is that it shifts from the lachrymal tenor that tends to characterize the critical scholarship on the literature of the Niger Delta as we witness in some of the contributions to the volume of essays edited by Chinyere Nwahunanya entitled *From Boom to Doom: Protest and Conflict Resolution in the Literature of the Niger Delta*. Egya's preoccupation is focused on a commitment to account for the aesthetic ideology of an author such as Helon Habila. Aesthetic ideology according to Terry Eagleton (1991), "involves a phenomenalist reduction of the linguistic to the sensuously empirical ..." (Eagleton, p.10) This appeal to aesthetic ideology is praiseworthy. But it is articulated from the perspective of the author and not necessarily from the perspective of the indigenous people, the readers. What has exacerbated the effect of environmental transformation especially from petroleum extraction is that the Nigerian state still persists as a colonialist and the managers of the state perceive themselves as occupiers of oil-bearing communities. The State appropriated the British colonial policy of indigenization and has made it an integral aspect of its federal character policy. In postcolonial Nigeria the constitution underscores that rights belong to indigenes. But the policy of federal character enshrined in the same constitution has reconstructed the nature of those rights. Therefore, one may be an indigene, but on the basis of ensuring equity and fair distribution that same person may not have rights even though one may be notionally qualified. The consequence is that one may have rights but one may equally be excluded even on the basis of those rights because notional

qualification is not an adequate criterion. This is the root of the re-colonization of the indigenous inhabitants of petroleum bearing communities such as the island community of Irikefe and others like it in *Oil on Water*. We can recall the incident of the BP blowout in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 and the swift response from the American government compelling BP to take responsibility. Compare the accounts by Iheka (2018) and Nwahunanya (2011). Place the account of the BP accident side-by-side with the continued devastation of communities in the Niger Delta even as recorded by Habila and the indifference of the Nigerian authorities who rather than showing sensitivity to the rights of the inhabitants criminalize them. The staggering contrast between the two locations, Gulf of Mexico and the Niger Delta and the response and care of one government and the indifference of the authorities from the other government is indicative of how the two governments place value on human rights and lives. The American government demonstrated solidarity while the Nigerian government treat its people as a colonized group. This, we think, is what sets the work of Helon Habila apart from other works on the Niger delta. In the face of ever-increasing environmental transformation, Habila is insistent that it has become urgent for the State as the dominant power structure should form solidarity with eco-system people especially in the Niger Delta. It is true that we witness echoes of the indigenous struggle against the grab of crude oil by both the State and the petro-multinational corporations exemplified in the activities of the militant groups who are being slaughtered by the security forces. But we find that Helon Habila goes beyond this elemental manifestation of violence in order to trace the underlying fibre of reality.

The Aim: We will argue therefore, that the intervention of Habila's novel through its realistic journalistic reportage and the employment of the journey motif is not only to interrogate the history of violence in the region but more importantly equally to underscore the need for a new form of solidarity between the Nigerian State, the eco-system people in the region affected by the years of oil exploration and extraction and the multi-national oil corporation. The sceptical objection to our case is that it is reactionary to anticipate any form of solidarity with the enemy. But to follow that line of argument is to be trapped in Max Weber's "rationalization of modern life". As Amitav Gosh (n.d.) has reminded us the freakish environmental change of our era do not follow a normal pattern. Thus, he says: "climate change events [are] peculiarly resistant to the customary frame that literature has applied to Nature: they are too powerful, too grotesque, too dangerous ... to be written about in lyrical ... vein". In this regard, neither the rich nor the poor is spared from the effect of such change on the environment. The condition of the poor is made worse by official policies of the government that treat these people as the *other*, a colonized group. In 2019 the extreme flood conditions that ravaged parts of Greater Abuja metropolis despite the advanced state of infrastructure in the city did not follow the normal pattern. And beyond the shores of Nigeria, across the Atlantic Ocean, the devastation that ravaged the island nation of the Bahamas did not discriminate between the rich and the poor. By adopting Edward Said's (2003) imaginary geography and its representation we will illuminate the possibility of how journalistic reportage through a realistic form as the novel form can engage the history of violence in a postcolonial context as the Niger Delta.

Said's Imaginary Geography

Said's (2003) work *Orientalism* is animated by the thesis that geography is socially constituted as a source of knowledge and power. Geographical construction takes over existing physical and social formations and subjects them into a new pattern of knowledge for the purpose of control. Said's case is that this appropriation of geography for the purpose of knowledge, control and power was self-evident in the colonization process especially in the construction of distinction between the Occident and the Orient. Thus:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it by teaching, settling it, ruling over it: in short Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient (Said, p.3)

By employing Michel Foucault's notion of discourse enunciated in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and in *Discipline and Punish* Said contends that Orientalism manifested as a discourse that enhanced manageability of the Orient for European interests. What Said's contention suggests, even as Ashley Dawson (2013) and others have observed is that there is no geographical region naturally designated as the Orient. The significance of this for us is that the arbitrariness that was basic in the construction of the Orient equally applied to the Niger Delta region. Chinyere Nwahunanya (2011), for instance, has

called attention to the re-politicization of the geographical area called the Niger Delta which has led to the distinction between the political delta identifiable on the basis of oil and the other delta designated on the basis of natural geography (Nwahunanya, p.xvii). What is pertinent for us is to show that the knowledge of geography is animated by the prevailing power structure of the time. Ultimately, therefore, Said underscores that imaginary geography legitimates a vocabulary, a universe of representative discourse (Said, p.71).

From Said's encyclopaedic account on imaginary geography and its representation we can glean the following ideas for interpretative purposes. Firstly, geographical descriptions are not innocent. They are attempts to configure certain form of knowledge and power in order to represent it in a way that reveals an inner contrapuntal relation. It is on this basis that Ashley Dawson (2013) acknowledges that Said's ideas blazed a trail for the political and theoretical project that confronts the movement for climate justice and environmental transformation. Secondly, and following from this, since geography is animated by a certain form of knowledge, it also reveals a relationship between the knower (the subject who knows) and the known (an-*other*) brought into the orbit of the knower's space of consciousness. Within the context of environmental transformation, it mandates the need to forge mutual solidarity between people who are potential victims of the effects of climate chaos. At a broad global perspective Dawson underscores the benefits of such solidarity between "ecosystem people in the global South and victims of climate chaos in the global North" (Dawson, n. p.). Thirdly, Said underscores the importance of representation. Ordinarily, representation is about "speaking for" as when our legislators speak on our behalf in the state legislator. But by speaking for us they reflect a pattern of power of inclusion and exclusion, of presence and absence. Said shows that a measure of arbitrariness manifests itself in the way distinction between these aspects are secured and defended. Recalling the idea from Claude Levi-Strauss on the distinction between "our land-barbarian land" form of categorization he shows that arbitrariness come into play since the "barbarians" are not necessarily required to acknowledge the distinction between "us" and "them" (p.54). Said (1994) has acknowledged in *Culture and Imperialism* that *Orientalism* underscored the division between Europe and its *Others* especially the difference between the Occident and the Orient. Besides he has shown the role of representation in maintaining this division. At the same time he acknowledges that *Orientalism* falls short of capturing the resistance that emerged from this division (*Culture and Imperialism*, p.xii). What is pertinent for us here is the fact that the contrapuntal relation that underwrites Said's imaginary geography and its representation sutures the narrative line in Habila's *Oil on Water*. Habila foregrounds the divisive tendencies that propel environmental transformation in oil-rich regions like the Niger Delta. But he also underscores the need to break down the walls of division between people, between the State and the governed. These are walls of division erected by the State as a divide and rule tactic for the purpose of maintaining hegemony. It is in this underlying contrapuntal relationship that we witness how Habila has mobilized the realistic form of the novel in order to interrogate the forces that engender environmental transformation in the Niger Delta.

Besides, the more enduring lesson from Said's "imaginative geography" against the background of climate change and environmental transformation is the urgent need to dissolve the "mind-fogged manacles" that, on the one hand, separate human beings under different political components: herdsmen versus farmers, citizens and migrants, the rich and the poor. And, on the other hand, there is the division between humans and non-humans. What is needed is how to forge bridges to tackle the common dilemma emanating from the increasing and continuous change in the environment. It has become imperative to recognize the contrapuntal relationship between people and the need to work hard to use the differences between them for our advantage. We think that the Nigerian State has woken up to this reality in its recent desire to reclaim the disappearing water of the Lake Chad basin through bilateral and multilateral action with other nations and even presenting a case at the United Nations General Assembly. With respect to the Niger Delta, LeMenager's assertion that "almost every media available to us today is materially and even philosophically indebted to oil" remains pertinent. But we can equally extend its underlying "philosophical debt" to include epistemological, geographical and cultural debts to mean the very fact that our lives in the Niger Delta have become trapped in the mire and fume of what has become life itself.

The term "contrapuntal" derives from Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) stress on the polyphonic and dialogic essence of the novel. The essence of the polyphonic form is the liberation of the hero to the position of a subject with his own independent view point. For example, in *Oil on Water* the major

character and narrator, Rufus finds liberation towards the end of the narrative. Nevertheless, his liberation finds value at different plains: he is liberated literally as the militant Professor (an antagonist character in the novel) asks him to go. At this point he stands liberated because he is confronted with the truth behind militancy in the region. He is equally liberated from the domineering figure of Zak his idol and veteran journalist. His initial quest in search of the adopted white woman is fulfilled. He comes to the knowledge that the circumstance behind her adoption includes her husband's infidelity and the betrayal of trust. Roger Fowler (1981) has explained that if polyphonic refers to compositional structure in anaesthetic and perceptual sense, dialogic refers to the ideological interrelationship between the unmerged voices. According to Fowler (1981), dialogic contains two distinct but compatible meanings. First, it means consciousness of the actual or potential response of an interlocutor or orientation towards an act of speech. The second meaning is connected with the dialectical orientation in discourse. In this sense the dialogic relationship confronts unresolved and contrary ideologies, opposing values or voices in which conflicting world views resist submission or cancellation (Fowler, pp.142-147). Fowler's second sense of the dialogic is of pertinence for our reading of *Oil on Water* because it serves to foreground what we had earlier identified as the inner contrapuntal relationship in the text. In the next section we will focus on the manifestation of this pattern of relation in the novel.

Contrapuntal Relations: Structurally, the account of the novel is arranged in two parts and sub-divided into 21 chapters. Part One flows from Chapter one to twelve while Part Two flows from thirteen to twenty one. The significance of this pattern of division on the development of the action and the subject matter of the relationship between oil and water is that we are brought to the irreconcilable mix between water and oil. But that incompatible value becomes an index to the inner contrapuntal relationship in the entire account. The action opens in *media res* in an atmosphere filled with water and watery images. Thus, it begins by foregrounding the embeddedness of the material aspects and features of things. The natural elements of water, sky, and foliage cluster to be covered by the fog. The water by the river bank is brackish and still as if held in check by the mangrove which in turn is canopied by the mist that hangs over it. Soon it is revealed that something has occurred. Thus, the action has begun as Walter Benjamin would have put it in a kind of death. The British woman, Mrs. Isabel Floode, has been kidnapped. Observe her surname is a corruption of the word "flood". In a detective fashion, the first-person narrator and main character reveals that the party in the boat including himself is on her trail. This *homodiegetic* narrator and character is called Rufus. He is an apprentice journalist/photographer. He is "going in search of the kidnapped British woman with Zaq". Zaq is a renowned journalist admired by colleagues including the young and inexperienced Rufus. As the account begins, we are told that they have embarked on this trail for the woman from Port Harcourt for a period of nine days. The trail soon takes them through a network of islands and tributaries of the river.

Zaq confronts Rufus with a question. He asks: "Tell me Rufus, what do you seek?" contrary to Rufus's expectation that their quest is for the woman and her captors, Zaq underscores thus: "What we really seek is not them but a greater meaning". In addition: Remember, the story is not final goal" (p.4). On the surface we have a veteran journalist clarifying a point in their *modus operandi* to a colleague who is in *statu pupillary* to him and in few words Zaq foregrounds the relationship between story and value or meaning. That is the difference between action and the underlying purpose of form and content. To his chagrin Rufus discovers that what he has taken to be a mere quest for a woman and her captors snowballs into an inner journey to understand and make sense of an underlying pattern that animates the incidents on the surface. It is that pattern, that inner sense that holds the rhythm of the atmosphere. In the course of the journey by boat through the unnamed river he discovers that the brackish and foggy mist that hangs in the sky and the trees contrasts with the clarity of the flowing water mid river. It is as if there is an invisible law that separates the equanimity at the middle of the river with the perilous turmoil by the river bank. Rufus confesses:

I had no idea what he meant about the story and its meaning, but perhaps I would find out before this trip was done. (p.4)

The need to unveil the inner meaning becomes the binding thread that unites the narration of the account and its outcome. Towards the end of the account and with Zaq dead the Professor, tells Rufus:

Write only the truth. Tell them about the flares you see at night, and the oil on the water. And the soldiers forcing us to escalate the violence everyday ... (p.221)

What is dominant in this assertion and also logically connected with what transpired earlier in the account is the contrapuntal juxtaposition of objects, characters, and motives. Thus, we witness "flares

that chase away the night”, of “oil on water”, and of “soldiers and us” (militants). These are soldiers who rather than diminishing and quelling the violence “provoke us to escalate the violence”. This kind of contrapuntal juxtaposition proliferates with intensity in the rest of the narrative.

Spatial Relations: We witness first the essentially spatial focus in the early account in the early chapters. Spatial is used here in relation to space. But it is meant to emphasize the set of ideas that Rufus as the “I-as witness” narrator forms and develops in relation to the effects of the changes on the environment brought about by oil exploration. Rufus and the three other characters in the boat approach a deserted village. We are told that the human inhabitants have been displaced due to the conflict. Rufus interacts with the old man.

--Who lives here?

The old man shrugged –No body.

--Where did the people go?

--Dem left because of too much fighting.(p.7)

Apparently, the inhabitants had fled and become displaced on account of “too much fighting”. Following from this we are told that the village “looked as if a deadly epidemic had swept through it. A square concrete platform dominated the village centre like some sacrificial altar” (p.7). Also, there are “abandoned oil-drilling paraphernalia... strewn around the platform”. The foregoing account follows a series of references to aspects of space and geographical imaginaries. Thus, we are told of the sky, the water, the dense foliage on the river banks. But the narrator notes that all these aspects remarkably look the same. With that we are brought to the concreteness of space as the team arrive at a village characterized by abandonment because the human inhabitants have been displaced. The houses are described as squat structures. But “they were all empty, with wide-open windows askew on broken hinges, while overhead the roof had big holes...” there is the oil drilling platform, a chicken pen with dead chicken in a state of decomposition.

The vivid image emerges as Rufus pans his camera and gives us a panoramic shot from a second village. Thus:

In the village centre we found the communal well. Eager for a drink, I bent under the wet, mossy pivotal beam and peered into the well’s blackness, but a rank smell wafted from its hot depths and slapped my face; I reeled away, my head aching from the encounter. Something organic, perhaps human, lay dead and decomposing down there, its smell mixed with the unmistakable smell of oil. (p.8)

We can observe the image of the well at the centre of the village. Ordinarily, it is a source of water, and as such a source of life. But what we see is on the contrary. Rather than finding water and therefore life-enhancing agent, Rufus finds death wafting up to him, asphyxiating him as he turns away. And mixed with the rank smell is oil. What this means is that in the face of environmental transformation, the source of life has become as Amitav Gosh (n.d.) would have envisioned it, a source of “derangement”. Rufus behaves out of the normal as he goes to the well expecting to find water to refresh his body. But he finds the “unpredictable fury” from the depth of the well propelled by oil. At work in this account is an example of what Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin have referred to as the “interaction of language, history and environment”, on the one hand and the interaction between literary representation and the environment “in the experience of colonized people...” (p.177). Rufus’s images of space revealed as he and his companions visit deserted villages in the Niger Delta replicate the experience of a new form of colonization. The new colonization is embodied in the image of the “square concrete drilling platform” that dominates the village centre. Rufus is right in imagining that the platform is a topological sacrificial altar. It is the activities around that platform that have brought about the sacrifice of the community itself. The platform does not only dominate the village it has brought about the reconstruction of the primal space of the village. Thus, rather than being a space of habitation, of rest, a place of dwelling in that phenomenological sense in which dwelling defines man and paving the way for their subjectivity to manifest itself, space has become a place of decomposition and displacement. What we witness, therefore, is that phenomena in space appear with their essence already negated and diminished in that same sense in which water is negated by oil on its surface.

Another example of the negation of space as indicative of the contrapuntal relation in Habila’s novel is witnessed as the account dramatizes the essentializing potential immanent in the representation of imaginary geography. Said has shown that one of the implications of imaginary geography and its representation is the possibility of “making geographical distinction that can be entirely arbitrary”

(p.54). The term arbitrary finds significance in linguistics but also underscores the essentialism that underwrites representation. In other words, imaginary geography and representation engender the process of *Othering*. And within the context of hegemonic structure as the Nigerian State, such *Othering* process does not require that the margins within the space of liminality acknowledge their own *Othering* process. In Louis Althusser's sense of ideology, they are rather "interpellated" within the orbit of the State. This is the situation that Rufus engages within the encounter between the soldiers as agents of the State and a minor character, Karibi.

Prior to that actual encounter, he leads us through two sections of an inhabited village. Unlike the villages we witnessed earlier, this particular community is inhabited. As the old man leads them through an open street, we are introduced to two diverse sections of the community. In the first section we are told:

On either side were similar boxlike houses looking down on the central street with something like a sneer. The houses seemed to belong more to the trees and forest behind than they did to a domestic human settlement. Women and children stared out inquisitively, but they quickly closed their doors or turned to some task when we waved to them ...(p.10)

The dominant feature here is the general uneasiness in the atmosphere. We witness it in furtive but inquisitive stares of the women. It is in the hushed welcome given to the new comers; it is in the sneers from the boxlike houses that seem to belong to the forest. And as they approach the blacksmith's shop, we see "men talking in low voices" and of a "young man that looked up briefly..." (p.11) The hushed atmosphere suggests that there is foreboding in the air. The attitude of the women and the children is symptomatic of a people inured to witnessing tales of woe from strangers. This hushed and suppressed air is placed just adjacent to another section that surge with activities as "loud-voiced women" clad in grimy aprons carry on with their boisterous activities. Rufus notes, "This part of the village was so different from the one we had just passed that I wondered if we were still in the same village" (p.11). Then we are introduced to the character, Karibi.

The character is juxtaposed with the soldiers in order to on the one hand, interrogate the sense of guilt in the change in the environment manifesting with arrival of the soldiers. As the soldiers bundle Karibi away Rufus naively remarks: "But he is innocent. Isn't he innocent?" Innocence, the absence of blame turns out to be a problematic word in the context. Zaq responds sceptically, thereby questioning the real value of the word. He reasons, "How was he to know who is innocent and who was not" (p.13). Later, Zaq retorts, "Guilty of what and innocent of what?" Beyond the surface value of these words, we are brought to the problem of essentialism and *Othering* associated with the State in its dealing with the inhabitants of the Niger Delta. The manner in which the soldiers arrest Karibi reproduces the colonial logic of *Othering*. Karibi becomes typical of the margin of the Niger Delta perceived by the State as the enemy even before he is proven to be so. Zaq's earlier retort therefore is meant to underscore the vacuity of words like innocent and guilty under the logic of *Othering*. They are vacuous because they turn out to constitute a smokescreen over the operations of power.

Victims All: The narrative of *Oil on Water* projects the indigenous eco-system people, the militant groups, the security forces represented by the army and the multi-national corporations as victims. To recall LeMenager's words cited earlier, all the parties in their different ways have become indebted as victims to oil. For example, in response to Zaq's question, "Are you happy here?" Chief Ibiram narrates how his community becomes victim to oil. He reveals that he is the Chief of a community after the death of his uncle, Chief Malabo. They become displaced as the oil company takes over their ancestral land. Thus he describes his people and himself as "mere wanderers without a home" (p.41).

Besides, at the encounter with the Major on their arrest, Rufus provides for us a long list of victims to oil (pp.56-57). First there is the Major, the army chief in the creeks who has become a victim having been court-martialed by the army and sentenced to patrol the creeks chasing after the militants with his men. There is also his daughter, a victim of rape. The doctor at the camp informs Rufus about the Major, "They say he became like this after his daughter was raped" (p.56). There is also the unnamed minister and his son caught up in the circle of violence. At the camp Rufus sees the seven victims being tortured and subjected to a bath of petrol by the Major. It is feared by the doctor that one day the Major would strike the match and light up the men after a bath of petrol. Then of course there is the boy, Michael being detained with men suspected to be the militants. There is also the old man called Tamuno detained as a suspect. Even the British woman and her husband have become victims of the oil company.

On the surface, there is oil on water even as the title of the novel suggests. But water is the main unifying factor, the main propellant for the activities of all the parties in the narrative. The security forces carry out their activities mainly on water. The militant groups in their fight against oil exploration find water as a powerful ally. The oil corporations operate mainly on water even though they succeed in polluting it; and the ordinary citizens find water both as a source of life, or mobility and when they are threatened by the increasing violence find escape through water. Even the diegesis of the account unfolds as Rufus journeys on water. Rufus is what Alot Amatya (2019) has called “an itinerant narrator”. He is comparable to the narrator in Arundhati Roy’s *Walking with the Comrades* (Amatya, pp.56-57). But while Roy travels through the dense forest of Baster in central India, Rufus journeys through the tributaries and swamps of the Niger Delta to get to the truth.

The Role of Eco-Religion: The narrative presents the curious case of a religious sect flourishing in between the militant hideout and the soldiers. It is curious because while other villages and islands are abandoned as people desert their homes due to the rising conflict in this particular island, the home of the religious sect, is filled with activities. This sect is very close to the forest and mangrove swamps, occasionally providing a safe haven for the militant groups as the shrine provide them with supplies and medication. This sect and its positioning between the two antagonist sides, the State and the militant groups confirm the assertion by Tariq Jazeel (2014) that “for a religion to exist, to dwell in a place, its constitutive outside –the secular- must also be discernible” (Jazeel, p.97). Jazeel’s argument is within his account on “subaltern geographies within the context of Sri Lanka”. Thus, understanding the role of religion in an imaginary geography as the Niger Delta is to equally perceive the effect of a hegemonic space outside the margin.

The consequence of the foregoing is dramatized through the representation of the island community of Irikefe. Irikefe is exemplary of how the ordinary people who inhabit an imaginary geography can turn religion into their dwelling. But in the face of environmental transformation that comes with petroleum extraction, the island community also shows how the people’s dwelling can become the theatre of conflict in the State’s war over oil.

As Rufus and the other journalists set out to interview the kidnapped Isabel and her abductors, they first arrive at a deserted island that has just been the scene of a battle between the soldiers and the militants. As they approach land, they discover the mangled bodies of the dead militants. But as they are about to leave the island some militants that survived the attack emerge from their hiding. They seize the boat that brought the team of journalists with a promise to send it back. And about midnight a boat arrives, bought by Tamuno and his son, Michael. The journalists are taken to the island of Irikefe where the team spend the rest of the night. It turns out that they are taken to the shrine at Irikefe. There they meet Naman introduced as the assistant to the head priest (pp.82-83). While the other journalists join a ferry back to Port Harcourt, Zaq stays back mainly because of his deteriorating health condition. But this becomes a ruse by the writer to first enable Rufus to go back to Port Harcourt in order to gather more information about James Floode and his relationship with his wife, Isabel who is the object of the search in the first place. Second, Zaq’s stay back at the island allows Rufus to return and also for more information to be provided about the shrine, the worshippers, Naman and the curious link between their organization and the militants. Of the shrine Zaq says, “I like the air here. It’s pure. Who knows I might even get some sort of religion.” (p.86). He does not get any religion but he becomes the indirect link that moves the plot forward and leads Rufus to Isabel while unfolding the mystery behind the shrine.

From the perspective of imaginary geography Irikefe stands as some sort of utopia, a place of rest and purification from the violence in the land. Naman intones, “We are a holy community” (p.130). We gather that the sect was set up a long time ago to become a source of cleansing after a period of conflict. But Gloria, the nurse equally remarks about the diminishing ecosystem, “the gas flares kill the bats and other creatures” (p.120). What her comment shows is that the island community is not necessarily such a safe haven. At this point her focus is on the ecosystem and the increasing effect of petroleum exploration on it. But Gloria’s remark also turns out to become the omen of what will eventually happen to the community.

Naman begins also by providing information on their type of religion. On his return from the city Rufus and Zaq reflect about the religion on the island. Thus:

--What kind of religion is it? Rufus asks.

Zaq responds “—No idea. The only thing I’m interested in right now is what their connection is to the militants.” (p.108)

Zaq's question about the link between the religion on the island of Irikife especially, the priest, Naman and the militant is very pertinent in understanding the place of the community in the conflict. Habila subtly makes that connection through the covert activities of Naman. Even though Naman tells us about their belief in "good and bad spirits", of how the bad spirits are the ones that sinned against Mother Earth, and of their belief in "the healing powers of the sea" (p.119) which was actually dramatized with the miraculous awakening of a corps on a stretcher. We are told:

When they got to edge of the water, they put down the stretcher and then the corpse threw aside the white sheet, miraculously sat up to crawl on all fours. Its robe dragging in the sand till its knees and arms were in the waves, and then it sat in the water (p.118)

The ritual here and the "miracle" underneath may have served to give credence to the initiates of the authenticity of their faith. But beyond these rituals the link manifests in their complicity in faking the death of Isabel of whom they know the journalists have come to seek. This complicity comes to the fore at Zaq's sceptical insistence. Thus: "Our job is to find out the truth, even if it is buried deep in the earth" (p.136). They confirm their doubt as they dig through the shallow grave and discover not the dead body of Isabel but a huge rock. After the attack and destruction of the shrine by soldiers Rufus remarks to Naman, "The statuary is all gone". Naman's icy and serene response complicates rather than resolve the connection between him and the militants. He says "It is the nature of existence. A thing is created, then it ceases to be" (p.159).

In summary then, this discussion began with the recognition that Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* is indeed a neatly woven piece of narrative art. Set against a background of abundant body of water polluted as a result of activities from oil exploration and extraction. Unlike the current scholarship which perceive the novel as a narrative of militant realism, this study has argued that in the context of environmental transformation animated by petro-extraction and distribution the narrative of the novel challenges us to the inevitable need of collective social responsibility and action in the preservation of human, non-human lives and the environment. Working with the central motif of water as a life agent to human, non-human, and the ecosystem in general the story of the novel reveals that the destruction of water and the general aquifer turn every one into victims. In order to achieve our goal we have adopted Edward Said's concept of imaginary geography and its representation in order to interpret the underlying contrapuntal relations in Habila's novel. This contrapuntal relations manifest in the presentation of space, characters as victims and the complicity of traditional mode of worship in the conflict between the State and the militant groups. Again the innumerable divisions between the militant groups raise the sceptical worry that these groups may have become trapped in the same ills they potentially confront.

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Note on Contributors

Onyinyechi Ugwuezumba lectures in the Department of English Studies, University of Port Harcourt. Her scholarship is focused on the subjects of resistance in postcolonial literatures of the Global South and the representation of liminality and hybridity in both African poetry and the novel.

Paul Kennedy Ndubuisi Enesha is a distinguished academic in the Department of English and Literary Studies, Imo State University. He has an active interest in the relationship between literary representation in the postcolonial context and legal rights of the Nigerian women.