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## *Environmental Issues and Social Justice in Helon Habila's Oil on Water*



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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores the environmental issues and social justice of the Nigerian people. Nigeria is the second-largest oil and gas producer on the African continent. Helon Habila is a Nigerian novelist and a poet. The Niger Delta, as now officially defined by the Nigerian government, comes under nine states: Abia, Akwa, Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, and Ondo Rivers. In these states, environmentally and socially, how were they losing their justice due to the oil spillage and gas flares, as Helon Habila portrays in his novel Oil on Water. Habila's concern was the people of*

*Nigeria and environmental destruction and degradation of Nigeria. The novel shows the connection between people and the environment and how oil spillage became a major problem for Nigerians as they lost the originality of nature. Environmental friction and the human cost of oil peregrination in the Niger Delta are powerful examples of Habila's affiance with social issues.*

*Keywords: Environmental Justice, Social Justice, Nigerian Delta, Oil Mining Companies, Ecology, Gas Flares, and Oil Spillage*



## Introduction

Environment is the basic/essential human need that everybody requires to lead a healthy life. If environment is imbalanced/destroyed by the human interventions mainly through anthropogenic activities as it is rising these days, it will be inhabitable and people will face problems. One of the environmentalists Rachel Carson, showing concern about the destruction says, “The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction” (43). The environmental destruction will cause havoc for the people of the world and showing concern about it is crucial and finding solutions as well is the need of the hour.

Literature is not out of the tools through which environmental concerns are shown and sometimes solutions to the existing problems too. So is the writer and novelist Helon Habila, his utmost focus in his novels is thematic representation of environmental destruction in Nigeria and other parts of Africa. His advocacy for social justice is also of paramount important in his novels, as he sees environmental destruction as on-going social menace, through which social life of the people of Africa are being affected. Before delving deep into the analysis, let us have conceptual understanding of the term, ‘Eco-socialism’, which would help in analysing the social concerns of environmental destruction, “It is about the environment and environmental issues which widely includes the concern of most of the people.” (Pepper 234). It shows how people live in connection with the environment and the interlinkage of people and nature. According Cheryl and Barry, eco-socialism “is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (239), it is said that ecocriticism helps us study environmental issues with literary contents.

One of the thinkers Pepper says, “Nature, and perceptions of it, affect and change human society; in turn, society alters nature. The changed nature then impacts society, creating a cyclical process of mutual influence” (108). When humans exploit nature mindlessly, they face dire consequences, as seen in the Nigerian Delta. This highlights the urgent need to preserve nature, which is an invaluable resource for all. Protecting natural resources is essential to ensuring their sustainability for future generations. When literature concerns about the nature and environment, Ecocriticism comes in the picture. According to Mishra “Ecocriticism has developed as a worldwide emergent movement during the last three decades” (168). As ecology continues to gain prominence, Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* serves as a significant work within this framework. Mishra further explains, “Together they mean criticism of the house—the environment as represented in literature” (168). According to Barry, ecocriticism is “the study of nature writing” (240), emphasizing the interconnectedness between nature and society.

While talking about the waves of ecocriticism Buell says, “There are two waves of ecocriticism. The first wave focused on nature writing, nature poetry, and wilderness fiction” (Buell 138). In contrast, “the second wave ecocritics inclined towards environmental justice issues, and a ‘social ecocriticism’ which could examine urban landscapes with the same seriousness as natural landscapes” (Buell 22). This shift highlights how eco-criticism



critically engages with both the natural world and its human impact, advocating for the preservation of nature as a societal-priority. If nature is neglected the dire consequences are shown sooner. Second-wave ecocriticism underscores the importance of environmental justice, examining how nature's degradation disrupts communities and condemning acts of ecological violence. Buell emphasizes that both environmental and social justice are integral, with nature occupying a central role in the discourse.

Putting Marxism in the perspective, "By contrast, Marxists offer a dialectical view of the society-nature relationship. This holds, first, that there is no separation between humans and nature. They are part of each other; contradictory opposites, which means that it is impossible to define one except in relation to the other" (Pepper 107). Marxist theory asserts that humans and nature are inseparably linked—humans are a part of nature and cannot exist independently of it. However, the contradiction lies in humanity's destructive exploitation of nature, often forgetting its inherent value and interdependence. Urgency of protecting environment is also seen in the Marxist philosophers. As Pepper notes, while humans depend on nature for survival, they simultaneously contribute to its destruction in their daily lives. This makes the debate more sensitive and directs at the balanced nature has to be followed.

### **Habila's Concern for Environment and Social Justice**

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* delves into the environmental and social destruction caused by oil exploitation in Nigeria. The novel examines issues such as environmental and social injustice and the neo-colonial power wielded by multinational oil companies. As Buell points out, "Environmental justice for marginalized communities connects it with a second emergent initiative, postcolonial environmentalism" (98). Habila expresses concern for future generations, highlighting how the current exploitation of nature threatens their survival. The condition of nature in the Nigerian Delta is dire, and the marginalized communities, who are often voiceless, bear the burden of these consequences.

Habila reflects Mason's idea of justice, as he says, "Environmental justice offers a point of convergence because it foregrounds the interconnections between humans and land" (6). It is very much reflected in the novel. The tone of concern is this way, "This was their ancestral land, and this was where their fathers and their fathers' fathers were buried. They'd been born here, they'd grown up here, they were happy here, and though they may not be rich, the land had been good to them, they never lacked for anything" (Habila 43). The ancestral land represents more than physical territory; it symbolizes heritage, sustenance, and identity. But the heritage land has been exploited for the companies' profits—spoiling the sanctity. Habila is successful in portraying the discontent of the communities that once enjoyed and thrived the in harmony but now inevitably in despair and poverty. The focus of the oil companies remains primarily—profit, without looking at the consequences.

Habila gives importance to the preservation of nature for future, and he is of the opinion that financial gains now cannot compensate the destruction. The Nigerian delta is one of the glaring examples of how environmental injustice prevails—land, water, and livelihoods have been damaged by the growth of oil-industry.



## **Environmental Destruction in the Nigerian Delta**

Albert Einstein once remarked, “The environment is everything that isn’t me”. This statement reminds us of universal ownership of nature; it belongs to everyone and must be protected in order to be enjoyed. Environment is destroyed when it is intentionally damaged, involving economic gain. In the Nigerian Delta, this destruction is vividly depicted in *Oil on Water*, “There was an accident, a fire. An explosion in the barn with oil drums. The fire flew on the wind from house to house, and in a few minutes, half the town was ablaze. Many people died” (Habila 1). The destruction of homes, loss of lives, and ecological damage are all consequences of unchecked oil-extraction. The devastation caused by oil-spills, fires, and pipeline leaks has turned land uninhabitable and worst for living. Rivers that once sustained fishing, farming communities are now polluted with oil, as Habila observes, “Their Rivers were already polluted and useless for fishing, and the land grew only gas-flares and pipelines” (Habila 43).

The practices of oil companies, such as construction of pipeline and gas flaring, have poisoned the land and water. Farmlands have been rendered infertile, and rivers are contaminated, killing fish and depriving locals of their livelihood. Habila portrays the environmental destruction by saying, “A dead fish on the oil-polluted water...No fish for river, nothing” (6-38). The portrayal depicts the reality of the people who are situated in a condition of misery by the destruction. Companies prefer profit over the environment and responsibility of securing social life. Habila highlights their negligence and the resulting destruction, “And thousands of gallons of oil floating on the water” (238). The polluted river, landscapes, damaged ecosystems emphasize at the severity of the damage in the novel.

## **Desire for Financial Gain of Companies and Government**

In *Oil on Water*, Habila explores how financial desires drive the actions of natives, oil companies, and the government, shaping the narrative of environmental and social exploitation in the Nigerian Delta. The oil industry brings economic incentives those often blind communities to the long-term consequences of ecological degradation. “The gas flares that lit-up neighbouring villages all day and all night, and the cars and TVs and video players in the front rooms of their neighbours who had allowed the flares to be set up” (Habila 42).

The economic vulnerability of the Nigerian people made them susceptible to the oil companies’ offers. Promises of modern conveniences like cars, TVs, and video players persuaded locals to allow oil extraction on their land. Similarly, the government, driven by corruption and financial gain, turned a blind-eye to the environmental destruction, “How oil was the main source of revenue, and how because the country was so corrupt” (Habila 103).

Oil became a commercial commodity, with the government getting profit from its extraction. However, this financial-gain came at the cost of the environment and the well-being of the people. Habila reflects on the fleeting nature of these financial rewards, “And just look at the other villages that had taken the oil money: already the cars had broken down, and the cheap televisions and DVD players were gone, and where was the rest of the money?” (43).



The novel critiques the short-term gains offered by the oil companies, which ultimately leave the local communities impoverished and their land irreparably damaged. The financial desires of all parties—natives, oil companies, and the government—drive the exploitation of the Delta, ignoring the long-term ecological and social consequences.

Habila's *Oil on Water* is a powerful commentary on the intertwined issues of environmental degradation, social injustice, and economic exploitation in the Nigerian Delta. It calls for accountability and a re-evaluation of the priorities of all stakeholders involved in the destruction of this once-thriving region.

### **Oil Spills and Gas Flaring's Impact on Health and Social Illusion**

Impact on health and social illusion are very connected themes in Habila's *Oil on Water*. These ideas expanded throughout the novel as oil spills and gas flaring had an impact on physical health, social life, and natural harm in the Nigerian delta. The devastating impact is shown, as Habila says, "After visiting my sister at the hospital, unable to sleep, haunted by the image of burned flesh and the smell of petrol that clung to the hospital walls and corridors" (134). The thing was totally different; people were suffering. They were not able to sleep because of the smell of burnt-flesh. It was that very dangerous; people were injured, and "People get killed" (Habila 224). It was affecting people mentally and physically. The smell of petrol and burnt flesh clung to hospital walls and corridors. Habila questions the people for their misery, "What, you can't stand the smell of oil? Isn't it what you fight for, kill for? Go on," (61) and shows that they are unable to fight for the justice. Those actions and challenges the speaker was involved in were real and ethical struggles.

While depicting the health of people of Nigeria, he says, "Corrosive liquid touched their skins. The doctor also looked away toward the water, lost in some detail of the ruined, decomposing landscape" (Habila 60). Corrosive liquids are the most dangerous. Its touch on the human body can cause skin disorders. The doctor also stayed away from water. Corrosive liquid could represent wounding, savagery, or suffering. It shows that the detachment of liquid was a cruel thing to the human body; the decomposing landscape was an ecological change due to human harmful activity and natural decay in the landscape. The decayed land is "Something organic, perhaps humans lay dead and decomposing down there, its stench mixed with that unmistakable smell of oil" (Habila 10). It's referring to the organic loss of nature and its affected surrounding. The mixture of organic decomposition and industrial oil both destructed the physical environment and the human body, it was a killing smell, "almost fidgeting with it, unable to sit still" (Habila 69). They got physically nervous; they couldn't afford pain; they were unable to sit and unable to handle their pain. Habila's concerns about people as well as the environment and oil companies and their attacks in Nigeria, damage of Nigerian delta are notable observations.

The environmental devastation affected animals too, "Behind one of the houses we found a chicken pen with about ten chickens inside, all dead and decomposing, the maggots



trafficking beneath the feathers” (Habila 9). Here, we observe how decomposing things impact people; everything depends on health and wealth, and domestic animals are also important to the people. The human activity created harm to nature, and the effect on the common community of the country was that ten chickens directly died; the reason was the decomposing of oil and how it affected nature and animals.

### **Conclusion**

Helon Habila, in his novel, *Oil on Water*, very clearly emphasised the realistic portrayal of the present victimisation of unfair treatment and despoliation of the Nigerian delta by colonial forces in the form of oil mining companies. The oil excavation processes by companies intentionally waste social and environmental degradation in the delta. Overall, *Oil on Water* is a potent investigation of how the financial desires impact people and nature. In the novel, Rufus is possessed by these desires; Habila’s objection is the rude behaviour of oil companies working in the Nigerian delta, its direct way to do ecological corruption, violence, and degradation. Theme of destruction is used to illustrate the wide themes of inhumanity and enslavement, in addition to the result of the oil industry on both the environment and the lives of the people in the Nigerian delta a horrible one, Habila identified the real pain of the Nigerian delta.

The depiction, ‘dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and silk with oil; dead fish bobbed white-bellied between tree roots’, points how creatures also get hurt on the cause of environmental disaster and oil spillage. People depend upon nature, but oil companies did this harm and destroyed nature and animals. Habila focuses on different kinds of pollution—water, soil, and air and he talks about the damages to the ecosystem in the delta. *Oil on Water* interconnects environmental and social justice concerns to depict the devastating consequences of unchecked oil extraction in the Nigerian delta.

Habila always raised his voice against injustice, violence, exploitation, and ecological degradation of the Nigerian delta oil corporations, which was killed the real happiness of Nigerians. They want social justice; they emphasize for the interests of nature and of indigenous people. They are very much close to the nature. Habila’s final concern is that everyone has the emotional attachment with the nature; he urges not to damage or harm everybody’s property; we should respect nature; otherwise, it will affect everyone. If we destroy nature, the upcoming generation faces the problem and it will be a huge loss to people.





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