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Literature as Resistance: The Pragmatics of Ecological Advocacy in ‘Oil on Water’ by Helon Habila

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the linguistic representation of environmental and human degradation in Helon Habila’s “Oil on Water,” a novel that interrogates the socio-ecological impact of oil exploration in Nigeria’s Niger Delta. By employing Critical Discourse Analysis and the Appraisal Framework, the study exposes how language not only reflects but also shapes the perceived reality of ecological destruction and social conflict. The analysis highlights how linguistic strategies in the novel depict the multifaceted relationship between the indigenous communities, the Nigerian government, and multinational oil companies, presenting a landscape marred by exploitation and marginalization. The research identifies the use of vivid descriptive language, metaphor, and narrative perspective to evoke a sensory experience of the Niger Delta’s plight. It illustrates the oil companies and government as neocolonial actors, revealing a complex interplay of power dynamics where the local population is trapped in a cycle of violence and ecological devastation. Habila’s work emerges as a form of literary militancy, advocating for social and ecological justice through a portrayal of the Niger Delta’s disrupted social structures and ravaged ecosystems. Through a close reading of “Oil on Water,” the paper argues that literature serves as a potent tool for environmental advocacy, with the potential to influence public perception and policy. Habila’s narrative technique and linguistic choices function as a call to action, aligning with ecocritical discourses that prioritize environmental sustainability and community autonomy. The study underscores the critical role of language in environmental literature, demonstrating its capacity to engage readers and prompt reflection on the urgent issues of ecological degradation and human suffering.

I. INTRODUCTION

“The blood of the dead ran in the rivers, and the water was so saturated with blood that the fishes died.... The land was so polluted that even the water in the wells turned red. (Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*, 129)

This study scrutinizes the intersection of language, literature, and environmental crisis in the Niger Delta of Nigeria, a region long embattled by ecological degradation and social conflict due to oil prospecting activities (Iheka 2021). Historical accounts trace the onset of this degradation to the early 20th century with the Nigeria Bitumen Corporation and subsequent expansive operations

by Shell-BP (Steyn 2009; Ejobowah 2000). These activities, often resulting in irreversible damage to the local ecology and livelihoods, have disrupted human settlements and decimated flora and fauna and led to a profound destabilization of aquatic ecosystems (Afinotan and Ojakorotu 2009). Uncompensated and largely ignored, the plight of the Niger Delta has incited various forms of resistance (Eyinla and Ukpo 2006; Afinotan and Ojakorotu, 2009). This resistance bifurcates into violent and nonviolent streams—the former epitomized by armed militancy and the latter by cultural expressions that vividly articulate the region’s environmental and human suffering (Iheka 2021). Egya (2017) introduces the concept

of “literary militancy” to describe how cultural productions—music, film, literature—become instruments of advocacy and defense for the region’s aggrieved communities and landscape.

Helon Habila’s “Oil on Water” (2011) stands out as a literary piece that confronts the exploitation and marginalization perpetrated by oil corporations and the Nigerian state. Through his narrative, Habila unveils the obscured realities of oil politics and the multilayered exploitation in the Niger Delta (Habila 2011). While “Oil on Water” has attracted lots of scholarly attention, there remains a lacuna in the linguistic investigation of the text. The present study intends to fill this lacuna. The pivotal questions guiding this investigation are: How does the language of “Oil on Water” reflect and construct the realities of the Niger Delta crisis? In what ways do linguistic choices in the novel reveal the complex relationships between the Nigerian military, militants, local communities, and the environment? Can a deeper linguistic and socio-cultural analysis of the text enhance our comprehension of the crises’ multifaceted nature? By anchoring the analysis in African Ecocriticism, Petrol Fiction, and the role of literature in environmental advocacy, this article aims to illuminate the nuances of ecological discourse within Nigerian literature. Employing Critical Discourse Analysis and the Appraisal Framework, the study dissects the cultural politics of language and representation within “Oil on Water.” This linguistic methodology reveals the complex network of significations and exegeses encompassing the Niger Delta predicament, thereby enhancing our comprehension of the socio-political and environmental narratives interwoven within the text. The methodology commences with an overview of African Ecocriticism and Petrol Fiction within Nigeria’s literary realm, highlighting literature’s pivotal role in environmental discourse. It then transitions to a focused linguistic and socio-cultural examination of “Oil on Water,” unraveling the layered representations of the crisis. The present study aims to illustrate how language can aid our comprehension of the Niger Delta crisis.

The discovery of oil in Nigeria in 1958 marked a watershed moment, positioning the nation as a key player in the global energy market. However, this boon was shadowed by ecological and environmental repercussions. Shell, commanding

a 47 percent stake in Nigeria’s oil industry, has historically aligned with government forces, leading to the exploitation of the Ogoni peoples’ lands and resulting in severe oil spills that have ravaged the environment. Robyn Dixon highlights these spills as catastrophic, contributing to the Niger Delta’s distinction as one of the most polluted places on earth (2011). The United Nations corroborated this dire assessment in 2011, citing over seven thousand oil spills in the region from 1970 to 2000.

Such environmental neglect by multinational corporations and Nigerian governments spurred the Niger Delta’s inhabitants to protest against this de facto environmental warfare, which has eroded both the land and the spiritual fabric of their community. Ken Saro-Wiwa, a vanguard in this movement, was executed for his outspoken criticism against the environmental desecration of the Niger Delta (1992). His death did not quell the resistance; instead, it evolved into more militant and sometimes violent tactics against the petroleum industry, as chronicled by Byron Caminero-Santangelo (2014). Amidst this backdrop, scholarly attention has turned towards ecocriticism, particularly within the African context. Ecocriticism explores nature’s representation in literature, intersecting literary works with environmental concerns. Eminent scholars like Douglas, Monsul, Iheka, and Egya have delved into African ecocriticism, which addresses the portrayal of natural phenomena like floods, climate change, and biodiversity in literature. Sule Egya contends that African ecocriticism is emerging as a distinct field, informed by the continent’s unique natural, cultural, and social dimensions, especially those in sub-Saharan Africa (2020).

African ecocriticism is gaining momentum, with works such as Iheka’s “Naturalizing Africa” and Okuyade’s “Eco-Critical Literature” highlighting the literary discourse’s growing sophistication. This branch of criticism intertwines ecological poetry and fiction with anthropological narratives, emphasizing the interconnection of the natural and human realms that is distinctive to African understanding (Egya, 2020). Helon Habila’s “Oil on Water” exemplifies the genre of petrol fiction, a term coined by Amitav Ghosh in 1992. This literary domain scrutinizes the intricate relationship between oil and literature, reflecting on the societal impacts of petroleum. Petrol fiction has come to encompass narratives that address

the devastating dependency on fossil fuels and envision futures beyond oil dependence. Habila's novel vividly portrays the human and ecological toll of multinational oil companies' operations in the Niger Delta, aligning with the ecocritical ethos that contends with the consequences of a petro-economy (Macdonald). As African ecocriticism and petrol fiction continue to develop, they provide vital platforms for engaging with the environmental and social challenges posed by the exploitation of natural resources. Literature, in this vein, not only critiques the present but also paves the way for imagining a more sustainable and equitable future.

Environmental crises have emerged as pressing themes in contemporary literature, offering a resonant platform for advocacy and awareness. Within African narratives, this resonance is particularly profound as works grapple with the continent's pressing ecological challenges. Helon Habila's "Oil on Water" epitomizes the literary articulation of environmental issues, spotlighting the oil exploitation crisis that beleaguers the Niger Delta and its people. This narrative serves not only as a reflection of the marginalized and impoverished peoples of the Delta but also as a critical voice against the environmental degradation they endure (Abianji-Menang, 2021).

The history of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta is a tale of marginalization, exploitation, and socio-ecological upheaval (Watts, 1995; Pirzadeh, 2021). Multinational oil corporations, often in collusion with the federal government, are implicated in the destruction of both human and non-human entities within this region (Egya, 2017). The appetite for petrodollars has catalyzed a cycle of violence, where local militias and federal soldiers are embroiled in conflict while oil companies continue to release toxins into the environment, resulting in profound suffering and death among the local communities.

Helon Habila's "Oil on Water" meticulously documents this socio-ecological upheaval, characterizing the oil companies as predatory forces that exploit the region's resources through political patronage and brute force (Pirzadeh, 2021). The novel becomes a vessel for highlighting the reckless endangerment of both humans and the environment by these entities, and Habila's narrative technique effectively conveys the direness of the situation (Edebor, 2017). The portrayal of mutilated and injured inhabitants serves as a stark representation

of the violence inflicted on the environment and its people, tying them together in a shared victimhood (Egya, 2017).

The interplay between literature and media in environmental advocacy is critical, underscoring the power of storytelling in highlighting ecological disasters. Literature often complements journalistic efforts, with works like "Oil on Water" bridging the gap between the two disciplines (Iheka, 2021). This synergy is crucial in portraying the complex realities of environmental conflict and advocating for change. The narrative's linguistic techniques are pivotal in advocating for environmental issues. By employing specific terms of effect and lexical items that negatively appraise the actions of oil companies and federal soldiers, language becomes a potent tool for representation and advocacy (Biber, 2006; Bednarek, 2006). Through a linguistic analysis of Habila's descriptions, we gain insights into the narratives that shape environmental and climate discourses in Nigeria, further contributing to climate justice discourse (Edebor, 2017).

Habila's "Oil on Water" raises awareness of the ecological crisis, influences public perception, and drives policy change toward environmental justice. The novel, supported by scholarly discourse, underscores the urgency of addressing ecological issues and highlights the transformative power of literature in the global fight for environmental justice. This power inspires change and contributes to a more environmentally sustainable future, demonstrating that literature is indeed a critical medium for environmental advocacy.

As the Niger Delta struggles with the consequences of oil exploitation, literature like "Oil on Water" stands as a testament to the role of narrative in environmental advocacy. It portrays the sociopolitical milieu, mirrors real-world advocacy, and ultimately influences the efforts toward environmental justice. The combined academic and literary endeavors underscore the significance of storytelling in not only reflecting upon but also catalyzing critical discourse and action in the face of environmental crises.

II. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically focusing on the discursive constructs within Helon Habila's "Oil on Water." The data consist of narrations and dialogues extracted from the novel that pertain

to the socio-political and environmental crisis of the Niger Delta. The data were systematically collected through a close reading of "Oil on Water," identifying passages that directly address the socio-political and environmental crisis. Special attention was given to scenes and dialogues that encapsulate the thematic essence of the novel, with a particular focus on the descriptive passages that elicit the ecological and communal panorama of the Niger Delta. The engagements among individuals demonstrate the dynamics of authority, for instance, those encompassing members of the indigenous community, delegates of oil corporations, and governmental authorities. Internal monologues that reveal the psychological and emotional states of the characters in relation to the crisis.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) explores how texts and spoken language reflect, perpetuate, and challenge social inequalities, power imbalances, and forms of dominance within societal and political frameworks. Its relevance to literary studies emerges from its ability to dissect and interpret the power dynamics and ideologies within literature. Norman Fairclough, a key figure in the development of CDA, offers insights into the relationship between language and power in "Language and Power" (1989) and "Media Discourse" (2011). His work underscores how literary texts, much like media discourses, can perpetuate or challenge social inequalities.

Critical discourse analysis as a discourse analytical approach relies on discernments from social and political aspects of the material world (Van Dijk, 2001). It focuses on untangling intricate structures of the production and reproduction of social and political inequalities knitted into routine text and talk. Van Dijk (2001) notes that critical discourse analysis explores the complete context of text and talk. Fairclough (1995: 132) holds a similar view of critical discourse analysis, noting that it aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events, and texts and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations, and processes; to investigate how such practices, events, and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony.

One can extrapolate from Fairclough's position that a critical discourse analyst must look beyond intra-textual analysis and embrace inter-textual analysis, relating and situating linguistic findings with/in socio-cultural and political contexts that produce such a text under consideration. Fairclough's framework is tripodal. It incorporates analyzing spoken and written texts/discourses, discourse practice, and discursive events as instances of socio-cultural practices. The utilization of Critical Discourse Analysis within literary criticism enriches our understanding of the complex socio-political subtleties interwoven into literary creations. It reveals the dynamic interaction between the written language and the extensive fabric of its historical and cultural context, offering a multi-dimensional viewpoint for deciphering the narratives of literature and their subsequent impacts on societal frameworks. The research adopts Fairclough's three-part framework in the analysis of the present study.

In this study, the researcher synthesizes the principles of critical discourse analysis with the appraisal framework to investigate how speakers express their perspectives, beliefs, judgments, and attitudes. Different scholars use varied terminology for this concept: Biber (2006) calls it 'stance,' while Hunston & Thompson (2000), along with Bednarek (2006), refer to it as 'evaluation.' However, I align with Biber's terminology, as he defines 'stance' as the lexico-grammatical expression of a speaker or writer's viewpoint. Biber (2006) and Biber and Finnegan (1989) observe that stance encompasses a text's lexical and grammatical articulation of judgments, feelings, or commitments. Hyland (2005) adds that stance allows writers the liberty to assert their authority and identity in their arguments or to distance themselves by concealing their involvement. This can be seen as a strategic positioning of the writer, either aligning with or disassociating from their arguments.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Discursive Construction of the Niger Delta and its Environmental Crisis

Excerpt 1

It turned out this wasn't a village at all. It looked like a setting for a sci-fi movie: the meager landscape was covered in pipelines flying in all directions, sprouting from the evil-smelling, oil-fecund earth. The pipes crisscrossed and interconnected endlessly all over the eerie field. We walked inland, ducking under

or hopping over the giant pipes, our shoes and trousers turning black with oil. The old man took me to the edge of the field and pointed into the distance (38).

Excerpt 2

I looked outside at the forest and the abandoned boats on the water, the few thatched huts, and I thought, what could fate possibly want with her on these oil-polluted waters? The forsaken villages, the gas flares, the stumps of pipes from exhausted wells with their heads capped and left jutting out of the oil-scorched earth, and the ever present pipelines crisscrossing the landscape, sometimes like tree roots surfacing far away from the parent tree, sometimes like diseased veins on the back of an old shriveled hand, and sometimes in squiggles like ominous writing on the wall. Maybe fate wanted to show her firsthand the carcasses of the fish and crabs and waterbirds that floated on the deserted beaches of these tiny towns and villages and islands every morning, killed by the oil her husband was helping to produce. (192)

Excerpt 3

THE NEXT VILLAGE was almost a replica of the last: the same empty squat dwellings, the same ripe and flagrant stench, the barrenness, the oil slick and the same indefinable sadness in the air, as if a community of ghosts were suspended above the punctured zinc roofs, unwilling to depart, yet powerless to return. In the village center 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 stench mixed with that unmistakable smell of oil. (10)

In Excerpt 1, Helon Habila uses vivid, descriptive language to set a scene that contrasts sharply with a traditional village. Words like “scifi,” “meager,” “evil-smelling,” and “oil-fecund” create a lexical field related to decay and dystopia. The phrase “flying in all directions” suggests chaos and a lack of control, while “crisscrossed and interconnected endlessly” evokes a sense of entrapment. The sensory details (“evil-smelling,” “oil-fecund earth”) engage the reader, creating a strong, negative image of the setting. Biber’s stance can be identified in the writer’s expression of their perspective on the landscape. The choice of words like “evil-smelling” and “oil-fecund” carries a negative judgment, reflecting an attitude that is critical of the environmental state of the village. The depiction of the landscape as belonging to a “sci-fi movie” and the description of the “eerie field” further convey the speaker’s subjective evaluation of the scene as otherworldly and negatively affected by industrialization.

The narrative voice describes a transformed landscape, suggesting environmental degradation due to industrial activities. Besides this, the metaphorical language (“pipelines flying,” “covered in pipelines”) symbolizes the invasive and dominating force of industry. Regarding discursive practice, the text may be interpreted as a social commentary, critiquing the impact of industrial exploitation on natural landscapes. Moreover, the manner of description also implies a sense of loss, not just of the natural environment but of traditional ways of life that the word “village” connotes. The description implicitly critiques the broader societal and economic systems that prioritize industrial development over environmental protection and community well-being. It reflects and possibly challenges the social values and norms that allow for such environmental and cultural degradation. In this excerpt, we see the author’s stance as one that is critical and reflective of larger sociocultural issues, utilizing the descriptive passage to engage with themes of industrialization, environmental degradation, and the loss of cultural landscapes. The excerpt is not merely descriptive but serves as an entry point for discourse about the tension between development and conservation.

Excerpt 2 provides a descriptive panorama of an environment affected by oil pollution. The imagery used — “abandoned boats,” “thatched huts,” “oil-polluted waters,” “forsaken villages,” “gas flares,” “oil-scorched earth,” and “deserted beaches” — paints a vivid picture of neglect and ecological disaster. The metaphors of diseased veins and ominous writing on the wall further intensify the grim portrayal of the landscape.

The narrative voice in the excerpt reveals a critical and contemplative stance through the use of emotionally charged language. Terms such as “forsaken,” “exhausted,” and “diseased” indicate a strong disapproval of the environmental degradation. The reflection on fate’s intentions for the subject, “her,” in such a desolate setting, adds a layer of poignancy and personalizes the impact of the ecological devastation. The text uses metaphorical language to convey the depth of environmental damage caused by the oil industry. The descriptive elements serve as a form of social commentary, alluding to the larger narrative of industrial exploitation.

This narrative excerpt can be interpreted as a method of enhancing consciousness regarding

the ecological predicaments afflicting the vicinity, employing literary techniques to evoke an affective reaction from the reader. The writer's choice of language reflects a discursive strategy to foreground the stark reality of the landscape's transformation due to oil exploitation. The text critically engages with the sociocultural implications of the oil industry, implicitly questioning the cost of economic gain against the backdrop of environmental and social loss. It also invokes a reflection on the individual's place and responsibility within these socio-environmental issues, as exemplified by the mention of the "oil her husband was helping to produce." Through this analysis, it becomes clear that the excerpt from Habila's "Oil on Water" uses rich, descriptive language to express a critical stance on the ecological consequences of the oil industry. The text not only depicts the grim reality of the polluted environment but also prompts readers to consider the broader implications of such industrial activities on local communities and ecosystems, as well as the complicity of individuals within these systems.

In excerpt 3, at the level of vocabulary, the excerpt uses vivid, descriptive language ("ripe and flagrant stench", "barrenness", "indefinable sadness") to evoke a strong sensory experience. The choice of words like "ghosts", "punctured", and "decomposing" suggests decay and neglect. Noticeable also is how the narrative employs past tense, creating a sense of recounting a lived experience. The use of active voice ("I bent", "I peered", "I reeled away") places the narrator at the center of the action, emphasizing their personal experience and reaction.

The narrator conveys a sense of certainty about their observations and experiences. Words like "indefinable sadness" and "unwilling to depart, yet powerless to return" suggest a definitive perception of the atmosphere and condition of the village. Besides this, the text is rich in affective expressions. The narrator's revulsion ("slapped my face"; "reeled away") and the overall gloomy and oppressive atmosphere of the village convey a strong emotional stance of despair and discomfort. The narrator implicitly evaluates the conditions of the village negatively. Descriptions of the environment as "ripe and flagrant stench" and "barrenness" indicate a critical view of the state of the village, suggesting a sense of decay and neglect.

Habila's Portrayal of Environmental Degradation and Human Suffering

Excerpt 4

I told them of the dangers that accompany that quenchless flare, but they would not listen. And then a year later, when the livestock began to die and the plants began to wither on their stalks, I took samples of the drinking water and in my lab, I measured the level of toxins in it: it was rising, steadily. In one year it had grown to almost twice the safe level. Of course, the people didn't listen, they were still in thrall to the orange glare. When I confronted the oil workers, they offered me money and a job. The manager, an Italian guy, wrote me a check and said I was now on their payroll. He told me to continue doing what I was doing, but this time I was to come only to him with my results. I thought they'd do something with my results, but they didn't. So, when people started dying, I took blood samples and recorded the toxins in them, and this time I sent my results to the government. They thanked me and dumped the results in some filing cabinet. More people died and I sent my results to NGOs and international organizations, which published them in international journals and urged the government to do something about the flares, but nothing happened. (153)

Excerpt 5

There are countless villages going up in smoke daily. Well, this place, Junction, went up in smoke because of an accident associated with this vandalism, as you call it. But I don't blame them for wanting to get some benefit out of the pipelines that have brought nothing but suffering to their lives, leaking into the rivers and wells, killing the fish, and poisoning the farmlands. And all they are told by the oil companies and the government is that the pipelines are there for their own good, that they hold great potential for their country, their future. These people endure the worst conditions of any oil-producing community on earth, the government knows it but doesn't have the will to stop it, the oil companies know it, but because the government doesn't care, they also don't care. And you think the people are corrupt? No. They are just hungry, and tired. (87)

In excerpt 4, Habila provides a narrative of environmental neglect and the consequences of industrial activities. The language used—"quenchless flare," "livestock began to die," "plants began to wither," "toxins in the drinking water"—paints a grim picture of ecological degradation and its impact on community health. We can see the narrator's stance in the language used to describe the situation. The use of words like "dangers," "toxins," and "people started dying" expresses a clear critical perspective on the environmental crisis and its handling by the authorities and the oil company. The phrase "in thrall to the orange glare" suggests a community blinded by the immediate, yet deceptive, benefits of industrial presence,

ignoring the long-term consequences.

The text conveys a narrative of warning and ignorance, highlighting the failure of the community and authorities to heed the narrator's warnings about environmental pollution. The choice of technical terms like "level of toxins" and "safe level" adds authenticity to the claims and underscores the gravity of the situation. The narrative serves as a discursive means to challenge the actions of the oil company and the inaction of the government and community, despite clear evidence of harm. The discursive strategy includes documenting scientific evidence and appealing to higher authorities, revealing a pattern of neglect and suppression of information.

The description critiques the broader societal values that prioritize economic gains from oil over public health and environmental integrity. It reflects the social realities of communities living in resource-rich areas, often exploited and left to deal with negative externalities. The analysis demonstrates how the text uses a personal narrative to convey a critical stance on the environmental and health crises caused by oil exploration. The narrator's efforts to alert the community and authorities, and the subsequent disregard of the evidence, serve as a critique of the systemic failure to protect the environment and public health.

In excerpt 5, Habila uses language that is evaluative and emotionally charged ("villages going up in smoke", "leaking", "killing", "poisoning"). This choice of words serves to highlight the severity of the destruction and suffering. Besides this, at the level of grammar, there is a noticeable use of present continuous tense ("are told", "endure") suggests that the issues are ongoing. The active voice implicates the oil companies and the government directly in the perpetuation of the problems.

Habila uses the excerpt and the text as a whole to advocate for the community, providing a voice to their struggles. The discourse is constructed to engender sympathy and raise awareness of the injustices faced. Further, he uses the text to invite the audience to question the narratives provided by authorities and corporations and to consider the plight of the marginalized community from their perspective. The text presents a critical examination of the prevailing narratives surrounding advancements and growth that are typically linked to the extraction of petroleum. It

highlights the discrepancy that exists between the perceived advantages and the tangible consequences experienced by nearby communities. Additionally, it offers a critique regarding the insufficient determination exhibited by political entities in tackling these concerns.

The narrator's use of definitive statements ("the worst conditions of any oil-producing community on earth") indicates a strong epistemic stance, suggesting that they are presenting facts rather than opinions. The emotive language ("suffering", "hungry", and "tired") reflects the speaker's affective stance of empathy towards the community and disapproval of the situation. There is a clear evaluative stance against the oil companies and the government, with accusations of neglect and lack of care. The community is depicted not as corrupt but as victims of circumstance, which is an evaluation that shifts the moral responsibility onto the authorities. The excerpt is a powerful indictment of the impact of oil pipelines on local communities, using strong evaluative language to highlight the contrast between the supposed benefits of resource exploitation and the harsh reality experienced by those living nearby. The speaker employs a factual and affective stance to critique the inaction of authorities and corporations, and to defend the actions of the local people as a response to dire conditions, thus aiming to reshape the discourse around resource extraction and its socio-economic consequences.

Representations of Multinational Oil Companies and the Nigerian Government

Excerpt 6

Their rivers were already polluted and useless for fishing, and the land grew only gas flares and pipelines. But the snake, the snake in the garden wouldn't rest, it kept on hissing and the apple only grew larger and more alluring each day. And already far off in the surrounding waters the oil company boats were patrolling, sometimes openly sending their men to the village to take samples of soil and water (43)

Excerpt 7

And all they are told by the oil companies and the government is that the pipelines are there for their own good, that they hold great potential for their country, their future. These people endure the worst conditions of any oil-producing community on earth, the government knows it but doesn't have the will to stop it, the oil companies know it, but because the government doesn't care, they also don't care. (103)

Excerpt 8

The list was long—but, the lawyer said, if the elders would consent to the oil company’s demands, sell the land . . . A politician, who introduced himself as their senator, came all the way from Abuja and assured them that their situation was receiving national attention, it was in the papers, and he was going to fight for them to see that their chief was returned safe and sound. With him were two white men, oil executives. The villagers chased them away. Others came, but they were all liars, all working for the oil companies, trying one way or another to break the villagers’ resolve. (44)

Excerpt 6 presents a stark image of environmental degradation and the allure of wealth juxtaposed with the exploitation of resources. Habila employs metaphorical language, with “the snake in the garden” alluding to the Biblical story of temptation and fall, symbolizing both the lure of wealth from oil and the insidious nature of its extraction process. Words like “polluted”, “useless”, and “patrolling” carry negative connotations that highlight environmental damage and the aggressive behavior of the oil companies. At the level of grammar, the text uses present tense, conveying an ongoing, persistent problem. The anthropomorphism of the snake adds a mythological dimension, suggesting that the issues are not only physical but also moral and existential.

Habila has crafted the narrative to reflect the intrusion and disruption of natural life by the oil industry, using imagery that is familiar and evocative to invoke a critical perspective. This is a metaphor for the exploitation of natural resources and the ethical dilemmas faced by the communities living amidst oil exploration. The metaphor of the Biblical serpent positions the oil companies as tempters, offering wealth while bringing destruction, reflecting on the broader themes of greed and moral corruption that often accompany discussions of resource exploitation.

The narrative voice seems to speak with authority on the conditions of the rivers and the activities of the oil companies, suggesting a stance of knowledge based on observation or experience. The use of Biblical allegory imbues the text with an affective stance of warning and moral censure, emphasizing the gravity of the community’s situation. The excerpt evaluates the impact of oil exploration negatively. The metaphoric “snake” and the “apple” symbolize the dual nature of the industry as both a source of desire and a harbinger of harm, thereby critiquing

the enticement of short-term gains over long-term well-being.

The use of Biblical allegory in this excerpt serves to frame the discourse around oil exploitation in terms of moral and ethical considerations, rather than purely economic or environmental ones. The narrative is constructed to evoke a sense of loss and the dangers of succumbing to temptation, as represented by the “apple” of oil wealth. Habila uses this metaphorical language to draw the reader into a deeper reflection on the consequences of industrial activities, and to question the true beneficiaries of such ventures.

Excerpt 7 highlights a critical and somewhat cynical view of the relationship between oil companies, the government, and local communities affected by oil production. The language used (“endure the worst conditions”, “doesn’t have the will to stop it”, “don’t care”) is straightforward and emphasizes neglect and suffering. It portrays a bleak situation for the local community, which is juxtaposed with the supposed benefits of the pipelines. The use of the present tense suggests that the issues are ongoing, while the active voice implicates the oil companies and the government directly in the perpetuation of the problems.

The excerpt conveys a message that challenges the dominant narrative promoted by the oil companies and the government, suggesting hypocrisy and a lack of genuine concern for the local populace. Habila uses the excerpt as a commentary on the exploitation of resources and the marginalization of communities, potentially influencing the perceptions of readers about resource extraction and corporate responsibility. The narrative critiques the socio-political discourse that frames industrial development as inherently positive, exposing the dissonance between official rhetoric and the lived experiences of the community. The narrator presents the conditions of the oil-producing community as a known fact, suggesting a strong epistemic stance that these are the “worst conditions” and both the government and oil companies are aware of them. The emotive aspect is subtle but present; the word “endure” conveys a sense of ongoing hardship and resilience, while “don’t care” implies a moral judgment on the part of the oil companies and government.

The excerpt contains a clear evaluative stance, critiquing the government and oil companies for their inaction and lack of concern. It positions the reader

to view the plight of the oil-producing community as a result of willful neglect. This passage employs a direct and confrontational style to challenge the narratives provided by the government and oil companies about the benefits of oil pipelines. The choice of words paints a stark contrast between the promised “good” and the harsh reality faced by the community. The use of the present tense and active voice emphasizes the immediacy and agency of the stakeholders involved. By presenting the situation as both known and unaddressed by those in power, the text critiques the systems of power that allow for the exploitation and suffering of vulnerable communities. This analysis reveals the text’s role in advocating for social justice and environmental ethics, questioning the priorities and responsibilities of those who profit from natural resources.

In excerpt 8, Habila presents a scenario involving a local community’s confrontation with the interests of an oil company and the role of political figures in this interaction. The language used in the excerpt brings this to the fore. The language here (“the list was long”, “demands”, “chased them away”, “liars”) is indicative of conflict and resistance. It conveys a sense of betrayal and exploitation, with the community being asked to concede to demands that seem extensive or unreasonable. The use of past tense narrates a specific event that has occurred, indicating a history of interactions between the villagers, politicians, and oil executives. The active voice in “chased them away” showcases the agency and assertiveness of the villagers.

The text seems to have been crafted to highlight the struggle and resilience of the villagers in the face of external pressures and manipulation. The juxtaposition of the villagers’ actions against the assurances of the politician and the presence of the oil executives underscores a narrative of distrust and defiance. Habila uses this to illustrate grassroots resistance against powerful entities. It may also serve to reinforce or challenge readers’ views on the complexities of corporate and political interactions with local communities. The excerpt speaks to broader issues of land rights, corporate exploitation, and political patronage in the context of resource extraction. It critiques the common narrative of development and progress often used to justify such extractions, instead illustrating the discord and resistance that can arise.

The narrative voice seems to have a clear

understanding of the villagers’ perspective, suggesting that the villagers’ skepticism and the label of the outsiders as “liars” are based on a grounded belief in their deceitful intentions. Emotions conveyed through words like “assured” and “chased them away” indicate a strong affective stance of frustration and distrust towards the oil executives and the politicians. The villagers’ rejection of the politician’s promises and their actions against the oil executives reflect a negative evaluation of their motives and credibility. Habila uses the excerpt to invite the reader to sympathize with the villagers’ plight and question the integrity of the external actors. By portraying the villagers as actively resisting, the text comments on the power dynamics inherent in land and resource disputes, drawing attention to issues of autonomy, exploitation, and the complexity of political promises in the face of economic interests.

IV. CONCLUSION

“Oil on Water” by Helon Habila serves as a poignant narrative that vividly captures the desecration of the Niger Delta’s environment and the consequent human suffering. This paper has meticulously analyzed the representation of environmental degradation and social disintegration in the text, emphasizing the multifaceted role of language in shaping and reflecting these realities. Habila’s narrative is not merely a recounting of events; it is a powerful indictment of the neocolonial forces embodied by multinational oil companies and a negligent government. The novel brings to the fore the stark reality of ecological destruction—a landscape littered with the detritus of oil exploitation and communities caught in the throes of poverty and violence. Through Critical Discourse Analysis and the Appraisal Framework, this study has highlighted Habila’s skillful use of linguistic devices to critique the power dynamics and exploitative practices that perpetuate the region’s strife. The linguistic texture of the novel unveils a deep-seated resistance to the environmental and cultural erosion inflicted upon the Delta, challenging readers to reconsider the narratives of development and progress that often accompany resource extraction. “Oil on Water” emerges as a form of literary activism, where Habila’s commitment to environmental and social justice is intricately woven into the fabric of his prose. The novel serves as a testimony to the unwavering determination of the inhabitants of

the Niger Delta and emphasizes the urgent need to address their concerns, as it chronicles the region's deterioration. The text, thus, transcends its literary boundaries, influencing not only the discourse on ecological advocacy but also inviting a broader engagement with the ethics of environmental stewardship and community agency. This study underscores the urgent need to acknowledge and address the human and environmental costs of industrial activity, as portrayed through the powerful medium of literature.

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