SECTION B:

Literature
Oily Tears of the Niger Delta: Perspectives on Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*

By
Ikechukwu Emmanuel Asika PhD
Department of English
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam
asikaikechukwu@yahoo.com
+2348038679214

Abstract

Oil no doubt, ranks highly as one of the most important commodities in the entire world today and it is also the largest resource for man’s demand for energy. The dependency on oil is so heavy that one can hardly wish to imagine the economy of the nation without these oil wells and their revenue to the country. But this is not without devastating consequences on the environment and people of Niger Delta, a situation that is invariably affecting the rest of the nation. Helon Habila in his novel, *Oil on Water* delves into the monumental problems of oil politics and the devastating wreckages of oil exploration and exploitation in the Niger Delta regions. The novel “ambitiously tackles the collision between the oil companies, the people of the delta whose lands are exploited and ruined, the military who patrol the region, the militants or freedom fighters who are there to disrupt business as usual, and the media who are supposed to observe and record the ‘truth’.” This paper forays into the Niger Delta oil politics, exploitation and degradation from various perspectives unveiled in Habila’s novel. The study adopted a tripartite approach: The government in one side, the oil companies at the centre, the militants and the Niger Deltans at the other side of the divide while dissecting the oil politics in the region and its attendant violence and degradation as faithfully captured by Habila’s *Oil on Water*. The method of analysis is mainly textual with sociological approach as the theoretical anchor. The study concludes with possible ways of uniting these rather opposing fronts towards a holistic peace, much-desired progress and efficient distribution of the oil dividends even in the face of its present decline in the oil market.

Keywords: Exploitation, Niger-Delta, Pollution, Degradation, Kidnapping, Oil wealth
Introduction
The novel, *Oil on Water*, is one of the insightful literary works that touch the very core of the problems and situations of oil and oil exploitation in the Niger-Delta regions which invariably affect the whole nation. The issue of oil and the attendant exploitation, degradation and agitation emanating from it is of serious concern and will continue to receive attention in the hope that the nation would find a lasting solution to this rather ‘unfortunate’ development in order to usher in the much desired peace in these oil regions.

Helon Habila, in the novel, fearlessly delves into the issues of exploitation and oppression by the government and oil companies as a result of oil discovery which has come to characterize the Niger-Delta regions. The writer displays genuinely, how a writer is the moral conscience of the people, a patriotic member of his society who must speak out the truth on issues that oppress and dehumanize them. Helon Habila is fearless and bold, if not he would not have delved into a sensitive issue like the oil politics in the Niger-Delta regions. The writer like an umpire, examines the various sides of the warring and conflicting factions in the face of the oil wealth on which the economy of the nation has largely depended on ever since its discovery. He unveils several hidden truths and untold stories linked to the activities of the oil companies and government in their bid to exploit the oil wealth of the nation. This is a situation that has brought pains, suffering, degeneration and gnashing of teeth to the people of Niger-Delta, who suffer from various maladies in the face of the continued degradation and destruction of their environment.

In the novel, the writer takes us on a journey into the hinter-lands of the Niger-Delta regions. Described as once peaceful, tranquil and idyllic communities whose major source of livelihood is fishing and farming, we are made to encounter the issues that destroyed the once peaceful communities; issues that brought violence, death, degradation and backwardness to the Niger-delta regions. The oil, as could be deciphered from the tone of the novel, brought more harm than the good it was intended on the people of the regions and the nation at large. In place of peace, enviable prosperity and rapid growth expected from these rich oil regions, we see backwardness, retarded growth as we are made to be part of an environment marred and ruined deplorably as a result of oil exploitation and the environmental pollution. We are exposed to a ‘doomed’ set of people in their desolate communities. These people are bereft of vision and paper work on how they would survive and live above the myriads of pollution, degradation and degeneration that have come to characterize the regions even as the government continued to intensify efforts on how best to exploit and harness the resources of the people and increase barrels of production to boost the economy.

The title of the novel itself is symbolic. Oil and water are two kinds of liquids that are not expected to mix as they repel each another, except when forced together under a combustible atmosphere. The title of the novel which suggests a situation where oil sits comfortably on water points only at few ideas: abnormality, pollution and an unfair situation capable of bringing nothing good other than regrets, hardship, and destruction. The title captures succinctly and pictorially, the ugly situation of pollution and degradation of the Niger-Delta regions as the author tries to engrave on our minds, the image of oil, thick black oil that coats and settles defiantly over a once crystal and life-giving water. It is important that whenever we enjoy the products of crude oil and its economic
benefits, we should think of the people, the regions on whose waters, the waste products of the oil settle on. We should think about an environment that is almost beyond remedy and we should feel for a people that live and thrive in poverty, backwardness and have nothing but tears, exploitation, violence, oppression, chaos and death to show for their oil wealth.

It is this rather ‘unfortunate’ situation that triggered off lots of abnormal and sordid activities in these regions largely in the bid of the Niger-Delta people to raise their voices, decry their sorry situation and engage in a struggle to fight back and demand justice and compensation for the long years of exploitation and negligence. In the opening of the novel, we are faced with a kidnapping case. Kidnapping as a vice is a prevalent menace in the Niger-Delta regions. It is one of the ways the aggrieved people of the Niger-Delta extort money from the oil companies and take back some fractions of what government and these companies have taken from them for so long with impunity. As shown in the novel, many groups engage in the kidnapping business. The oil workers, especially the white expatriates, are always their target. The novel, *Oil on Water* unfolds with a kidnapping case which unarguably was the writer’s choice to twist the plot of the novel. The wife of James, a white man who works for one of the oil companies had been kidnapped. In response to this development, Zaq and Rufus, two journalists were hired to lead a delegation to the militant group and ascertain whether the kidnapped woman is still alive in order to pave way for negotiation for the ransom to be paid. It was this journey that led Zaq and Rufus into the very heart of the creeks, the communities and the militants. It was through them, in the course of their task and struggle to locate the white woman that we learnt a lot about the activities perpetrated in the regions. It was a suicide journey they embarked on a mission which Rufus narrowly escaped alive and Zaq lost his life in the process, not to the militants but to the unfavorable conditions they faced on many occasions which did not augur well with his already deteriorating state of health. In the end, it wasn’t just the white woman that the two journalists discovered; it was the truth about the various activities on the side of the government, the oil companies, the militants and the Niger-Delta people which necessitated a tripartite foray into the issues of oppression, exploitation and degradation in the Niger-Delta regions.

**The Government and Oil Companies in the Myriad of Socio-Economic Deterioration of the Niger-Delta**

This section of the paper centres on the activities of the government and oil companies in the exploitation and oppression of the Niger-Deltans. Helon Habila in the novel locates the many problems of the region to the evils and insensitive nature of the government coupled with the exploitative mindset of the oil companies. Their presence in the region is simply to amass wealth and maximize profit with little or no concern about the indigenes, the owners of the oil they exploit and the environment they pollute. From issues gleaned from the novel, one realizes sadly, that the government was only interested in the oil wealth of the people and not in their welfare and wellbeing. The oil companies on their own part compete among themselves on who dominates the regions and have greater production level with focus on profit and not on the health, environment and socio-economic well-being of the Niger-Deltans. From the testimonies of Doctor Dagogo-Mark, lots of revelations about the dispositions of the government and the oil companies towards
the people are made. Doctor Dagogo Mark was the doctor responsible for treating the soldiers and he knew in his heart, the stories, the travails and predicaments of the Niger-Deltans when they were still at its nursery stage, a developing state which the oil companies and the government could have tackled, if they had the well-being of the regions at heart before it degenerated and culminated to a national crisis. Doctor Dagogo-Mark in his narration, reveals to Rufus and Zaq how he had foreseen from his small laboratory, the problems of pollution, death and unhealthy living that were inevitably going to arise from the oil exploitation in the region and how he had taken his discoveries first to one of the oil companies to warn them about the dangers of the gas flaring and pollution on the environment and lives of the people. That was at the very early stage when proper measures could have been carried out to checkmate the extent of the dangers and damages of the oil on the environment and the people. But the oil company did what was typical of them which is to suppress the truth and shut up any voice that dared to decry their activities and tell the people the truth about the consequences of oil exploration in the regions. The oil company rather than paying attention to the doctor’s discoveries and begin to implement his suggestions early enough to manage the looming crisis, they on the other hand did the opposite by offering the doctor money and included his name in the payroll of the company just to ensure that the result of his research was never in the public domain and that was how his further researches were suppressed to the benefit of the oil companies as against the lives and environment of the people. The Doctor reports his encounter sadly thus:

... 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... when I confronted the oil workers, they offered me money and a job. The manager, an Italian guy, wrote me a cheque 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 to him only with my results. I thought they would do something with my results, but they didn’t (92).

The above revelation from Doctor Dagogo-Mark is a serious indictment on the oil companies who cared less about the environment and health conditions of the people whose oil they exploit. All they did was to pay him off and this is the style and trend. The leaders of the people were either paid off to keep silent in the face of danger and serious health issues or they were framed up and convicted for any crime they deemed fit just to see the leaders out of the way. It is not much of a secret to reveal that this crime is perpetuated with the full support of the government whose sole attention is the oil wealth produced by these companies and not in the means of production and the aftermath of these in the lives and environment of the people. The Doctor’s further revelations indicted the government in the conspiracy and confirmed that they are partners in the crime of exploiting the people. Doctor Dagogo-Mark further reveals the glaring but disheartening realities thus:

... 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 fears, but nothing happened. More people fell sick, a lot died... Almost overnight I watched the whole village disappear, just like that. I feel angry at the oil company, and I also feel angry at myself. I was their doctor, I should have done more than I did. Well, since then I’ve become something of an itinerant doctor. I go from community to community and I try to create awareness of the dangers lurking in the wells and in the air above... (93).

Though the doctor feels guilty as if he were some sort of co-conspirator in the quest to exploit his people and usher death to them having accepted the money offered to him by the oil companies and other of his inactions, nevertheless, he is not fully to be blamed because in reality there was little the doctor could have done in the face of the desperation on the part of the government and oil-companies who are determined and bent on exploiting the oil of the Niger-Deltans, regardless of its aftermaths. Again, the doctor did the much he could which was to warn the oil companies, and later the government even to the extent of reaching out to some other NGOs in the hope that they could force the hands of the government and the oil companies to do the needful for the lives and environment of the people. The fault rests heavily on the government and the oil companies who turned deaf ears and blind eyes to the travails of the people which gradually escalated to more deaths, increased hazards and alarming pollution that seemed hopeless as it is today. The later actions of the doctor seem to exonerate him from further blames and heap them all on the shoulders of the exploiters– the government and the oil explorers. The doctor had carried out sensitization talks from one community to another intimating them on the dangers lurking in the oil wealth beneath the womb of the earth. It was only a matter of time before the doctor and the rest of them accepted the glaring reality that they are all trapped in the regions. The level of pollution in the air continued to claim the lives of the people who on daily basis are exposed to the toxics and particles in the air. Later in the novel, the environmental pollution made Zaq very sick that he was at the verge of dying. The doctor felt for him but there was little or nothing he could do to help him. He had seen several cases like that, and he was helpless too, just like Zaq. His state of utter helplessness and that of the people was enshrined in the few words of advice which Doctor Dagogo-Mark could muster for Zaq while he was dying. His utterances reveal their sheer surrender to the menaces and hazards of the environment they live in. Rufus voices out thus:

He put a hand on my shoulder. I’m sorry about your friend. I’ll talk to Major... take your friend to another doctor. Get a second opinion, but that won’t really help much, I’m afraid. I’ve seen this happen many times in this area. A man suddenly comes down with a mild headache, becomes feverish, then develops rashes, and suddenly a vital organ shuts down. And those whom the disease doesn’t kill,
the violence did. Sometimes I wonder what I’m doing here; I tell you there’s more need for grave diggers than for a doctor... (93).

The government rather than launching initiatives that would salvage the environment of the people and empower them to escape the alarming rate of poverty rather resorted to use of violence and intimidation. Their villages and towns were destroyed by oil spillage and pipeline vandalizing, their homes and farmlands burnt, their rivers polluted and their aquatic lives destroyed even as poverty, diseases and ill-health live with them. Rufus once tries to draw James attention to this situation which the government and the oil companies continue to ignore. According to him:

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 vandalize the pipelines that brought nothing but suffering to their lives, leaking into the rivers and wells, killing the fishes 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 and you think the people are corrupt? No. they are just hungry, and tired... (107).

It is with great sadness that one turns over the pages of the novel, *Oil on Water* as one encounters more bitter and disheartening situations that have become part and parcel of the lives of the Niger-Deltans. The more pages one turns, the more one turns to other ugly sides of humanity and it is not in doubt, just like Rufus laments that the Niger Delta regions endure the worst conditions of any oil-producing community on earth. One is left to ponder the crime committed by these communities to deserve such hardships, torture and oppression and the discovery that their only crime was having large quantity of crude oil deposited by nature in their land. At every attempt of the people to raise their voices and decry their ugly situations, the government rallies the soldiers and like hunting dogs, they are released after the people to intimidate and force them to the dictates of the government and the oil companies. The writer describes yet another scenario in the novel thus:

…They are here! The soldiers are here! They came out of the shades and houses and passages, wielding whips and guns, occasionally firing into the air to create more chaos. A man ran out of a hut and came to face with a soldier; he raised his hands high in surrender as, in a single motion, the soldier reversed his rifle and swung the butt at the man’s head. The man fell back into the doorway and the soldier moved on to another target. I was saved from a broken jaw, or a cracked skull, because I was
still on the ground trying to regain my wind (12).

The writer further depicts another scene where the soldiers tortured some alleged militants that were captured. Petrol is poured all over them and they are forced to swallow it as they lay soaked in the petrol. The Major, the leader of the soldiers intimidates them in these words:

What, you can’t stand the smell of oil? Isn’t it what you fight for, kill for? Go on, enjoy. By the time I’m through with you, you’ll hate the smell of it, you won’t take money that comes from oil, you won’t get in a car because it runs on petrol. You will hate the very name petrol….You want resource control? Well, control this. How does it feel? This will teach you to kidnap innocent children. This will teach you to terrorize innocent villages… (55).

This is one incident among many others that replete the novel. The villagers are threatened, abused and intimidated. Their homes are ransacked on daily basis by the soldiers in search of the militants and their communities know no peace but killing, violence, brutality and all other forms of atrocities all because oil was discovered in their region and the government and oil merchants are hell-bent on exploiting it. As clearly seen in the novel, the people of the regions did not only have to contend with poverty, pollution and hazards, they have to cope with the increasing and unending menaces of the soldiers sent to drown their voices and force them to conformity, daring to speak out and cry in loud voices that enough is enough.

Environmental Degradation and Exploitation of the Niger-Delta Region: An Eye Witness Account

Having discussed in details, the conspiracies of the government and the oil companies to exploit and impoverish the region, this section of the paper examines the level of pollution and degradation of the Niger-Delta environment. This is from more or less an eye witness report of one of the characters created in the novel. This is thesis and antithesis that in the end form the synthesis of this study. Helon Habila in the novel, Oil on Water, draws our attention to the plight of the Niger-Delta regions described as the poorest region in the country and by extension the poorest oil producing region in the world. It is therefore a situation of anti-climax when one realizes that it is the same region of the country that produces the unimaginable wealth that keeps the country running and afloat. The oil of the Niger-Delta region has for years remained the envy of other non oil-producing countries and has proven to be the heartbeat, the life-wire of our nation. The oil boom of years ago placed Nigeria on the world map not just as one of the rich oil-producing states but one of the greatest economy in Africa and the world and one of the most economically viable nations. Though ironically and unfortunately too, it is the oil wealth of the Niger Deltans that provided the massive wealth the leaders are amassing, looting and stashing away in foreign accounts to the shame and pity of the rest of the world who like onlookers watch the sheer display of corruption, unpatriotic acts and insensitivity. While this good news of oil is well known across the world, the bad news is that the people of Niger Delta wallow in abject poverty, pollution, and backwardness and they live in a world where the future is uncertain and the hope of their survival largely not in their control. This is a result of the oil which has
become rather a curse than a blessing it was intended to be. This situation is well captured and presented by Habila in his novel. The writer had taken time to give a little historical insight about the people. From his expositions, we gather that the Niger-Deltans though they have not always been rich, are peaceful and prosperous farmers and fishermen. Theirs was a small village with their own communal sense of existence. Through the narratives of Chief Ibiram, the pathetic story of the people was told. The Chief narrates to Zaq and Rufus the historical realities of the people thus:

Once upon a time they lived in paradise he said, in a small village close to Yellow Island. They lacked nothing, fishing and hunting and farming and watching these children growing up before them, happy. The village was close knit, made up of cousins and uncles and aunts and brothers and sisters, and though they were happily insulated from the rest of the world by their creeks and rivers and forests, they were not totally unaware of the changes going on all around them: the gas flares that lit up the 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 ... (38).

Doctor Dagago confirms this reality when he narrates to Zaq and Rufus his experiences in the early years he was posted as a doctor in the region. He told them thus:

It was a small village. At first I was lonely, and daily I thought of nothing but how to work my way out of that posting, but I soon grew fond of the place and the people.... I set up mobile clinics in my base, I held educational classes in churches and schools, talking to teachers and pastors and community leaders. But I soon discovered that the village chief discontent was not over their health, they were remarkably healthy people, actually. One day an elder looked me in the face and said, ‘I am not ill. I am just poor. Can you give me a medicine for that? ... We want the fire that burns day and night...’ (91).

Doctor Dagago was referring to the years before oil was discovered in the regions. From his narrative, we gather that the people were healthy, peaceful and happy. Finally, oil was discovered in the region and the villagers thought it was an answer to their prayers. They were happy, unknown to them that the oil was to signal the destruction of their once peaceful life and idyllic environment. Chief Ibiram continues to narrate their story, pathetic in many dimensions:

One day, early in the morning, Chief Malabo called the whole village to a meeting. ... they had made an offer, they had offered to buy the whole village, and with the money and yes, there was a lot of money, more money than any of them had ever imagined – and with the money they could relocate elsewhere and live a rich life. But Chief Malabo had said a no, on behalf of the whole village he had said no. This was their ancestral land, this was where their fathers were buried.
They’d been born here, they’d grow up here, they were happy here, and though they may not be rich, the land had been good to them, they never lack anything… (39).

That was Chief Malabo’s resolve but the oil companies had continued to woo the people and soon they began to sell their lands and Chief Malabo was arrested for no cause and he died in prison. The oil companies erected their rigs, pipelines and gas flares. That was the beginning of the pollution of their rivers and environment. Chief Ibiram summed his feelings of despair and agony which represents the agonies of many people in the region in these words:

…. They sold. One by one. The rigs went up, and the gas flares, and the workers came and set up camp in our midst, we saw our village change, right before our eyes. And that was when we decided to leave, ten families. We didn’t take the money. The money would be our curse on them, for taking our land, and for killing our chief. We left, we headed northwards, we’ve lived in five different places now, but always we’ve had to move. We are looking for a place where we can live in peace. But it is hard. So your question, are we happy here? I say how can we be happy when we are mere wanderers without a home? (40)

This is touchy but real story that saw to the pitiable state and condition of the people of Niger-Delta. That is the story of their exploitation, their untold hardships and environment degradation. Today the environments of the Niger-Delta are in a total mess. Their rivers are corrupted by oil pollution, and their farmlands contaminated by oil spillage and flare. Their environments are in continual threat of the gas flare, acid rain among other health and environmental hazards with life threatening consequences. Above all, they are poor, very poor that they are described as the poorest region in the country and the most deplorable oil state across the whole world. Rufus and Zaq during their tour as they journey into the creeks to discover the militants who kidnapped the white woman, the wife of James, and to possibly take home some messages to the oil company, saw the Niger-delta environment in full glare. The writer documents what they saw in the pictorial description below:

The village looked as if a deadly epidemic had swept through it. A square concrete platform dominated the village centre like some sacrificial altar. Abandoned oil drilling paraphernalia was strewn around the platform; some appeared to be sprouting out of widening cracks in the concrete, always side thick clumps of grass…(8).

All around the abandoned villages are images of ruin, desolation and abandonment. There was no life, no hope and no significant future. The writer goes further thus:

…. 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 on the air, as if a community of ghost were suspended above the punctured zinc roofs, unwilling to depart, yet
powerless to return. 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 stench mixed with that unmistakable smell of oil… (9).

As the story progresses, we continue to see and be part of the pathetic situation of the oil-producing regions due to oil exploration. Through the eye witness report of Rufus, we continue to feel with great pains, the rape of once peaceful community and the agonies oil had brought to them. The discovery of oil in the Niger-Delta saw to a series of untold tales of hardship, spillage and from one tragedy to another, like some plot of a gory movie, unceasingly, without end. The writer captures the young journalist, Rufus, as he recounts further thus:

So, yes, there was an accident, a fire. An explosion in the barn with the 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, including John’s father. They say he died trying to save my sister Boma, and if it wasn’t for him, she’d have died. My father was imprisoned. He doesn’t smoke any more since that day. My mother returned to her parents’ village, where she still lives. And as my sister burned, and my family disintegrated, I was in Lagos listening to lectures… No, it was not a pipeline accident, as I told the white man, as I wrote in my published piece. But it might easily have been one, like in countless other villages … (3).

Though the explosion was not directly linked to the oil companies but the devastation of farmlands and rivers forced many people into illegal and hazardous oil bunkering businesses. This is the situation that brought about the fire, an incident very familiar to the people in the region. All around the communities were images of oil-polluted waters, the forsaken environment, the gas flares, the stumps of pipes from exhausted wells and the ever present pipelines, criss-crossing the landscape, carcasses of dead fishes, crabs and water birds, float on the deserted beaches and burnt farmlands and bushes littered the forsaken environment. Rufus reports thus:

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 ever smelling, oil – fecund earth. The pipes criss-crossed and inter-connected endlessly all over the eerie filed. Oil rigs. So why haven’t the militants bombed the pipelines here? Because the oil companies pay them not to do so. Or perhaps the oil companies pay the soldiers to keep the militants away. Or that yes… (OW, 34).

Thus, came the story of the Niger-Deltans and the emergence of the militants who took
to arms to fight for their regions and defend their lands. This is the situation that dealt a heavy blow on the targeted oil profit by the nation, a situation that presently generates concern as the heat continues to escalate even as the oil wealth is still in the hands of a privileged few.

The Niger-Delta Militants at a Crossroad in the Struggle for Socio-Economic Emancipation

Helen Habila in the novel, *Oil on Water* also draws attention to the activities of the militant groups in the Niger-Delta areas and from the disposition of the writer, he seems to be making a case for them. From the exposition on the level of exploitation, monumental decay and environmental degradation, it seemed only natural that militancy was inevitable in the Niger-Delta regions. Militancy seemed the natural and only forceful way through which the Niger-Deltans could demand for what is rightfully theirs. Arguably, it is the environmental disaster, poverty and backwardness that forced many of the youths to take up arms to survive on whatever ransom they could get from their kidnapping ventures and continue threats on oil wells and property. This was why Rufus’ guide in the novel, begged them to take his son away from the creeks and give him a better life in order for him to escape the temptation of joining a militant group to fight for whatever that seemed right to them. He pleads with them in these words:

But see, wetin he go do here? Nothing. No fish for river, nothing. I fear say soon him go join the militants, and I no wan that. Na good boy; I swear, you go like am. Intelligent Im fit learn trade, or driver. Anything. But intelligent boy, Im fit read and write already even though him school don close down, but Im still remember how to read and write (36).

The man expresses the fear of frustration that repletes the region, the lack of gainful and meaningful way of survival which in turn forces the youths to pick up arms for several ulterior motives. Part of the reasons is to defend their land even though the underlying motive is to enrich their coffers and earn a living from the massive wealth buried in their regions. It was only a matter of time before different kinds of militant groups emerged from the creeks with visions and orientations almost in conflict with that of the others. But their target was the same, the oil workers, mostly expatriates and oil pipelines which the oil companies pay them heavily in order to protect. The rise in the level of militancy which slowed down oil production and affected in some ways the much expected revenue from oil proceeds made the situation in the Niger Delta very volatile, dangerous and worrisome too. The writer did not skip this development out of his narration but rather made it an integral part of the story from which we can arrive at a well informed opinion about the turbulence in the regions. Habila writes about the militants thus:

The militants always concealed the locations of their camps, because their life depended on that, and on the ability to pick up their tents and more with the first hint of trouble from the federal patrols that were in constant war with them. Whenever they invited the press to view hostages, or to give lengthy interviews about the reasons for fighting the government, they did so in a village or on a
deserted Island far from their camps what was certain, though, was that they always returned to the pipelines and oil rigs and refineries, which they constantly threaten to blow up, thereby ensuring for themselves a steady livelihood (7).

The militants in trying to survive, kidnap oil workers in order to force out the oil money from them. Sad enough, this move seems to bring more harm than intended good as it exposes the Niger-Delta to new risk, danger and environmental threats. It only brings more suffering to their already pathetic situation. The irony of it all is that many unsuspected criminals and elements had taken up arms and parade themselves in the guise of freedom fighters to extort money from the oil companies. Even ordinary villagers plan and stage manage kidnapping situation just to make money. This is the situation in the novel when Solomon connived with Bassy and Jamabo to kidnap Isabel Flooder, the wife of James. It was this unwarranted kidnapping that fuelled Salomon’s rage and hatred for his master who was sleeping with his proposed wife, Koko that brought Zaq and Rufus into the picture and revealed all that we now dissect and discuss. It was this amateur kidnapping and the task to reach the wife of James and confirm that she was alive that led the two journalist, Zaq and Rufus into a suicide mission in which only Rufus made it alive in the end. This is the level the militants degenerated and deviated from their original course which does not in any way promote the well being of the Niger-Deltans. Professor, the leader of one of the militant groups which seemed the most educated of them all tried to justify their activities in the creek and condemn other amateur militant groups and their ill-motives thus: … Kidnapping is not for amateurs, they make a mess, people get killed, and when they do the papers have a field day. They call us barbaric, and it spoils business for everyone (203). Through the personality of the professor, we obtain a glance on the militants and their activities. They were fighting to defend their lands and force the government and oil-companies to do what is right for them. It seemed only proper that they were fighting for what is rightfully theirs. They were marching violence with violence while demanding for a better distribution of the wealth of the regions and a better living standard and safe environment for the people. It was a serious war and the professor had told Rufus their plans in all lucidity:

… We are going out on an operation; you may have noticed the whole camp getting ready. By this time tomorrow, one of the major oil depots will be burning. I want you to write about it, tell them I am responsible. I can’t tell you more than that, but I can tell you the war is just starting. We will make it so hot for the government and the oil companies that they will be forced to pull out. That is all I can say for now (208).

The level of boldness and sheer alacrity with which the militants conducted their activities leaves much to be admired. As new militant groups emerge, so does the scramble for space, soul and resources of the Niger-Delta crude oil continue and ironically, it is this same poor Niger-Delta people and economy that suffer it all. But the militants see things from an entirely different perspective. They believe that their cause is a just one and so unconcerned. They carry out their violence, kidnapping and destruction while daring the entire security paraphernalia of the nation to do their worst.
While trying to justify the activities of the militants in the creeks, the professor spoke out bluntly:

… We are not barbarians the government propagandists say we are. We are for the people. Everything we do is for the people. What will we gain if we terrorize them? I am speaking for myself and my group of course. I am aware that, out there, there are criminal elements looting and killing under the guise of freedom fighting, but we are different. Those kind of rebels, they are our enemies. That is why we are letting you go so you can write the truth…. Tell them about the flares you see at night and the ‘oil on the water’. And the soldiers forcing us to escalate that violence every day. Tell them how we are hounded daily in our land. Where do they want us to go, tell me where? Tell them we are going nowhere. This land belongs to us. That is the truth… (209).

The perception of the militants about their cause as revealed by the writer conflicts with the societal as well as the views of the international community on militancy. Without the militants that sprang up from the creeks, the business of oil exploitation would have gone as usual without care for the people of the region. Yet, their activities are not free of blemish. Kidnapping and destruction became a venture through which these militants enrich their pockets and that of their sponsors. Their actions did not in any way better the lots of the impoverished Niger-Delta people but rather increased their fears and struggles and heated up their environment the more. I think what Habila did was to play the role of an observer, a fair umpire who only spoke out what he saw. The judgment is largely ours to make and that is a part of the artistic ingenuity of the writer that made his creation sublime and engaging and opens a conversation not ending with this paper.

Conclusion

The title: ‘Oil on Water’ is an apt summary of the realities of pollution in the Niger Delta regions and the very reason we should anticipate more bizarre and gory tales of violence likely to emerge from these regions as long as a drop of oil is still left to be explored. Sadly, the fate of Niger Deltans in many ways is unfamiliar to many other oil regions of the world. It is this situation that makes the novel not just a monumental artistic work but a clarion call to all concerned, to save the soul of a region, a people even when we are far away from them. In conclusion, it is necessary to affirm that this paper is not a historical report and an attempt was not made to explore much of the historical realities of the Niger-Delta people. What this paper has done is to look at the situation in the Niger-Delta from a purely literary perspective as exemplified in Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*.

Through a tripartite approach, the paper examined the role of the oil-companies, the government and military in one hand, the Niger-Delta people and their loss of means of livelihood and a safe environment and the militants who have taken up arms to protect their people and environment. From the aggregate of the views and expositions so far, it is only logical that a larger portion of the blame which have triggered myriads of violence and all other forms of socio-economic destruction going on in the regions, should be apportioned to the government and the oil companies. This is as a result of their inactions and insensitivity
to the plights of the people they were exploiting. The government and oil companies have neglected the regions for so long and failed to do what is expected from them even from the day the first drop of oil was explored in the regions. One can argue that the huge resources spent by these companies in bribing the various militant groups to stay off the oil pipelines and the ransoms paid for kidnapped oil workers and other forms of bribery to the leaders of community could have gone a long way in ameliorating the problems of the community. The government and these oil companies should begin to channel their thoughts in this positive direction. Again, more action oriented approach should be adopted to clean the Niger Delta environment. This is what must now do, irrespective of what it would cost to make life better and safe again for the Niger-Deltans.

On the side of the militants, even when one must condemn their actions in its entirety, it is important to note that their actions are a largely human-like. A proverbial saying has it that the firewood in a town cooks foods for the particular town. One would expect the wealth in the region to enrich the people of the region but the reverse became the case as clearly seen from the novel and other sources where untold stories of the travails of the Niger-Deltans offend our senses. It is only normal for people to resort to self-help and pick up arms irrespective of the manner they went about it. If one does not wrestle against those that have made a lane in his father’s compound, the lane will only in a matter of time, widen to a road. This sums up the violence emanating from the region though it is still necessary to condemn the idea of one taking laws in one’s hand in a civilized world of today.

Therefore, a ceasefire is largely needed on the side of the militants, especially at this point in time other criminal elements have infiltrated the struggle to loot and plunder the region. This is a total deviation from the freedom the early militants sought for their people. The militants though fighting a just cause should ceasefire and see what the government offers. No matter what happens, we are optimistic that the children of the next generation will definitely inherit a better environment than their fathers, all accruing from the proceeds of the oil courtesy of the bravery of the militants. It is time to do the right thing. Proper sensitization on the dangers of pipeline vandalism and destruction of oil wells should be carried out as these impoverish the regions and the country the more. We recall the amnesty programme which many thought would provide lasting solution to violence in the region but the governments’ inability to keep their promises have forced the militants, the Niger-Delta Avengers back to the creeks with new demands. The governments should do more than they are doing even as they just launched a clean-up programme for the Niger-Delta. More is needed. This paper ends with a call on the warring sides to save our oil wealth before the oil finally dries up even as its value continues to dwindle on daily basis in the international market.

Works Cited


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