BOOK REVIEW OF HELON HABILA'S *OIL ON WATER*

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INTRODUCTION

Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* by takes us into the proverbial *Heart of Darkness*. What or who brought the darkness? A major criticism of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is its description of the "Natives". They are rendered as a single threatening dark mass devoid of agency, devoid of voice. But then, here is a story where one gets to hear it from the inside from Conrad's voiceless dark mass. This time, the story is rendered in all nuances and complexities, engaging at every turn. When did the "darkness begin? Question that draw us into the story in Habila's *Oil on Water*.

In the oil-rich and environmentally devastated Niger-Delta, a British oil executive's wife has been kidnapped. Two journalists – a young upstart, Rufus and once great, now disillusioned veteran, Zap-are sent to find her. In story rich with atmosphere and taut with suspense, *Oil on Water* explores the conflict between idealism and cynical disillusionment in a journey full of danger and unintended consequences. As they navigate polluted rivers flanked by exploded and dormant oil wells, they must contend with the brutality of both government soldiers and militants. Assailed by irresolvable versions of the truth about the woman's disappearance, dependent on the kindness of strangers of unknowable loyalties, their journalistic objectivity will prove unsustainable, but other values might yet salvage their human dignity. There is a mythological and dreamlike nature to *Oil on Water.* Two men, an old washed – out alcoholic journalist and his young protégé in a canoe, paddled along by an old man and a boy in a search of white woman. The three men and the boy in the canoe appear as if from thin air on the foggy dilapidating landscape. They glide along the labyrinthine, tributaries of the delta. The image is dream-

like. On the surface of the water, a layer of petroleum refracts and reflects glints of light, but the dark opaque surface hides much mystery beneath. In the horizon behind burned out trees, gas orange glow. This landscape is somewhat post-apocalyptic but this is not a film set some time in the future.

This is the Niger Delta this is now. Who is the woman they seek? Or perhaps better still who are these men and the boy? Suddenly, surreal spaces in the middle of so much devastation: a pristine island, and a shrine occupying the entire water front. A sculpture garden – giant sculptures some facing east with smiles, women and children milling around in white robes, protectors of the island. The leader, a gentle figure of a man, why did he bring his supplicants here, then the militants, master of the waterways, they know every turning every shallow, every rapid. The plot is intriguing, but the old man and the boy will guide the two journalists and us through these mysterious spaces towards the revelation behind these imageries and how they are related to this landscape and the landscape to them. And of course, who is the white woman, how did she get here?

Discussion:

***OIL ON WATER:* A RECONSTRUCTION OF HELON HABILA'S SYNTHESIS OF THE DELTA CRISIS.**

Helon Habila has not ceased to fascinate whoever cares to read his works with his brash, impetuous style. Like Adichie, his contemporary, soothing language precedes the layered depths of information that lie underneath the stories they tell. The wooing discourse opens up their works to deeper perception and interpretation. In *Oil on Water,* a non-linear narrative, Habila presents fragments of a lager narrative using multiple perspectives that reflect the varied visions of the fictional Niger Delta. The background of the setting covers Agbuki Island, Irikefe and

Jesse Junction. The latter two areas were places that went up in smoke succumbing to burning from oil stealing from pipelines associated with vandalism. In effect, *Oil on Water* provides the back story, the underlying causes of the suffering of the people living in these areas that are blessed by natural deposits of oil. Under normal circumstances, one would expect that prosperity will follow the discovery. However, the opposite is the ease. Even sleep the natural balm of a normal day's work is denied people of Irikefe because of flaring in the oil drilling process. As normal life is disrupted, abnormal behaviours erupt and some of the people resort to extortion, and kidnapping for monetary gains. This is what some of the environmentally deranged people do as a means of hitting back at their perceived enemies. The world comes to a standstill as the drama that ensues has everybody apparently chasing red herrings, while the truth lies hidden form the undiscerning. It is left to be unveiled by those who seek truthfully behind the scene and all the drama to dig into the back story unearth and causes.

When the story begins, two journalists are on a journey to the remote creeks of Irikefe in search of Mrs. Floode, the missing wife of a British oil worker in Port Harcourt. However, what the reader discovers in the end is not what the journalists Zaq and Rufus set out to find – Mrs Floode – but indeed, as Rufus puts it: "The meaning of the story" (5). In other words, the reconstruction of the story: events leanding to the woman's disappearance, the people connected on it, the flora and fauna of the setting ad how the people in the area are coping with challenges in their life, a life that has been made particularly difficult because of the new found oil. The reader is confronted with the unravelling of the non-linear plot and the varied visions that are thrown up as fragments of the larger narrative. Habila's diction and idiolect reveal the complexity beneath the labyrinths of creeks, dense mangroves, rain forest vegetation, rivers, and streams and canals that dot the region, the effects of flaring, oil spills and

vandalising of pipe lines. The people's moods and disposition provide the clues to the underlining causes of unwanted happenings in the region. Oil exploration has left the place bedevilled by environmental challenges, gully and coastal erosion, soil degradation, declining fertility, industrial and solid waste population, oil spillage, contamination, gas flaring and air pollution. It repays study to note and concur with Onyema's observation that 'the appealing situation of gross exploitation by foreign oil companies using sophisticated equipment to extract the oil while the people in habiting the area ironically live in stone age squalor" (3) is actually part of the cause of the miser in the area. In essence, true appalling conditions fuel the emotions and motivate the actions of the disgruntled people in the region. Therefore, suggesting that it is the dynamics of the setting and the complexity of the issues that are playing out.

Habila shows how given the circumstances prevailing, a plethora of human foibles such as greed, lust, love and revenge come to play under various guises. With his choice of words, diction his idiolect, appropriately interspersed with Nigerian pidgin, Hablia treats us to plausible diction in the work in a manner that is comparable to the way Adichie uses Igbo language in her works. Ultimately, the novel reveals to the reader the essence of literature itself, as a medium for teaching us about life, effects of frustration and how complex human nature can be. The study lays bare the complexities that have resulted from the natural terrain, due to oil drilling and what the oil venture has visited on the people in whose land these things are taking place.

Habila's *Oil on Water* exposes a lot about the ecological devastation and impoverishment in the region due to oil exploration. It also draws attention to the effects of the political turmoil in the Delta region:

> how the lack of opportunities results in making the youths to become restive, militant, and how in a hid to seek for survival they resort to vandalizing oil wells, rigs and refineries which they

> constantly threaten to blow up as their own way of attracting compensation in monetary terms, or vandalizing in order to sell off the products to keep body and soul together (7).

Papa Michael sees no purposeful future for his son Michael, he pleads with Zaq to carry him away when returning to Port Harcourt to find him something useful to do there (35), the story (38) appears to support Maier's allegation of connivance. It is shown how chief Melaho's negotiations with oil men and politicians back and forth, to convince his compatriots to relocate after accepting monetary compensation. He ends up being arrested, accused of supporting the militants and plotting against the federal government and threating to capture foreign oil workers. A senator representing the region appears in the village with two white oil executives. Melabo is reported dead after some days and the oil companies' moves in claiming Melabo signed a contract with them before dying, and had sold to them all his family land. And be paid handsomely. But if they delayed they would risk their land being devalued. These conditions caused ten families to leave without taking any money, to find a place where they could live in peace (40). One find that in Habila's novel, it is the quest to find Mrs. Floode, that unearths the manner in which the oil companies stormed the region. So one gets the full picture and "real story" as Zaq puts it under the camouflage of the search for Mrs. Floode.

Oil on Water exposes, to some extent, the manner in which the oil companies stormed the region, how oil exploration reduced the living conditions and sustain ability of life through fishing arid agriculture to almost zero levels as corroborated by Okoroegbe (181), although neglect of the region, by the Federal Government and the environmental degradation is reported to have all started before Nigeria's independence, it was not until Saro-Wiwa attempted to right the wrongs of the Ogoni (Niger Delta) people, and was executed in 1995, an action that escalated the youth

restiveness and militancy started in the 1990s that the issue was brought squarely under the view of the Nigerian government and the international radar (Osague). This study lays bare the complexities that have resulted from the ecological devastation and impoverishment of the region due to oil exploration. It also draws attention to the ethnic and political turmoil in the Delta region and more importantly also comments on the factors reported to have fuelled the unrest in the region.

In essence, it shows how the underlying forces of human nature (greed, lust and revenge) drive the actions of the men and women in the novel, ad by implication, how this plays out their life. The lengths that people go through to settle scores; the drama that this plays out in life, and how literature, in capturing these events, provides some appreciation and understanding of life in essence, *Oil on Water* portrays how the life, values and culture of a people are irrevocably changed by environmental degradation; how stress and discomfort (shown in the lives of Tamuno, Papa Michael, Chief Ebiram, Ani alias Professor, Mrs Floode, Salomon, greed in Jumabo and Bassey, frustration in Papa Michael, Salomon, lust in Mr Floode), trigger or contribute to the kidnap of a Briton, Mrs. Floode; and ow as a result, the quest for her search is embarked upon by the astute journalists, Zaq and Rufus, his assistant. It is the quest for Mrs Floode that provide both the story and the "Meaning of the Story". one discover that the problem the kidnapping generates and the other related activities merely leads to the real issue: the frustration generated within the people of the area and those living there, that was brought about in first place by oil drilling activities, Mr Floode, an expatriate, leaves his native home, separated from his wife to take up a job as a top level oil worker. Koko, a local girl who cooked and cleaned for Mr Floode described as "not pretty but had a sexuality about her" is drawn to Mr. Floode, living out in Africa, its wife in Europe accompanied with the hazards of oil spills and perpetual flaring, referred to as the fire of Pentecost" (92).

This flaring was a fire that burnt day and night, keeping the village perpetually lit day and night, hence depriving the inhibitants of the normal rest and recuperation provided by nature at night. “Livestock began to die, and plants began to wither on their stalks and the level of toxins rose steadily in their blood samples” to a point that “Made them need more grave diggers that doctors” (92), because of the resultant multiple deaths. Some people deserted the villages and were turned to wanderers in their own land looking for healthier spaces to live. The novel portrays how the life, values and culture of a people irrevocably. Changed by environmental degradation. For example, the conditions bred the likes of Ani Wilson, (alias Professor), a Secondary School dropout, who under normal circumstances, would have grown up as a normal child, completed his education and found a job to be useful citizen. Ani, however, metamorphoses into rebel in the swamps and specializes in kidnapping foreigners for ransom. The peculiar circumstance in the region ended up, unfortunately, turning him into “a ackstreet thug and bully” for militant related activities. One is told that he was “Jailed at fifteen, became party thug of his local chairman, at twenty-two was convicted for murder and imprisoned for life. He broke out of jail at thirty”, and now remained in the swamps as a pro environmentalist in the end, he joined a rebel group that he parades himself under various guises. Meanwhile, his real motive all along is to beat the oil exploreres at their game and his preoccupation was merely his strategy for survival. His is the typical story of one militant. There could be many more like him or worse that the conditions prevailing had spawned.

Another casualty is Boma. Her story is the cost of oil drilling on the life of a young woman. She is reduced to live alone without a husband. Her life dreams truncated and her face marred for life and condemned to a pin and sheer agony. Boma’s story is that of a female victim. She is the sister of the narrator, Rufus. During a typical occurrence of an explosion,

while her brother, Rufus was away in Lagos pursuing his journalism career, their father had died, trying to save her as she got trapped in a fire incident. Part of Boma's face was a "Scabrous mess," damaged, burned and scarred. Her eyes were constantly red, watery and "her check curdled" (100), sometimes when sorrow overwhelmed her she just sat and cried. She got kicked out by her landlord because she could not pay the rent after her husband lost his job. Her life completely derailed, she went to stay with her brother, Rufus, as her husband, formerly a mail sorter, now unemployed, spent his time hanging out in backstreet bar rooms with other unemployed youth to play cards and drink all day; always complaining about the government, full of anger: "The kind of anger that often pushed one to blaspheme or to rob a bank or to join the militants" (100), by this time, many of her brother's (Rufus) friends, and people he went to school with were dead. Others were in the forests with the fighters (Militants), while some lucky ones had made millions from ransom money and relocated elsewhere. This is the type of life that descended upon many youths in the oil producing areas. This was their life. This was what oil had doled out to them. The discovery that was meant to user in wealth and turned into a curse and was eating them up.

Oil drilling the area, as alleged by Maier and also as portrayed by Habila's characters in the novel, also brought about many curious alliances between people of the Niger Delta, oil workers government representatives and contractors (38-40), who all in a bid to dupe the villager's collaborated together and sent them packing out of their ancestral lands to allow for oil platforms to be easily raised on the land. The impression created is that unknown to many of the inhabitants, some of their own kith that unknown to many of the inhabitants, some of their own kith and kin had betrayed them. Men they chose locally to represent them in talks with government representatives and some crude politicians

within the nation chose to pursue personal monetary interests and sold both family land and lands belonging to the community to the multinational oil workers and pocketed the money. Many people lost their lands in this manner with ten families reduced to become nomads, as they were forced to leave their ancestral homes and head northwards, now cursed to live of nomads in different places, since, they usually found out that they had to be on the move almost always to find a place where they could live in peace (40) the situation had left a considerable number of them displaced and unhappy as they had been reduced to wanders without a home. That is ow the rigs went up. The gas flares, now a constant decimal raged and oil workers came to set up camp in their midst (40).

Oil on Water is about the dynamics of the setting of the fictional Niger delta, the complexity of the issues at hand in the region and it is also an attempt to paint the scenario under which oil politics is played out in the Niger Delta. According the Maier, oil drilled from the region earns Nigeria a large percent of the foreign exchange Nigeria relies on to run the country but in spite of the fact that the drilling has gone on for over fifty years, the region does not appear to have gained anything from the natural resources that is maintain the whole country in terms of infrastructure, good roads, hospitals or event schools for the inhabitants.

In conclusion, Darah describes the area in his work *Revolutionary Pressure* as “Oil rich but economically and politically colonized Niger Delta”. The location lacks basic amenities, and compared to other non-oil producing areas in Nigeria, it has been very poorly treated. Onyema corroborates Maier’s claim in her observation that:

> an appalling situation of gross exploitation by foreign oil companies using sophisticated machinery and modern equipment to extract the oil while people inhabiting the area ironically live in the stone age squalor” (3).

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