Environmental Concerns in Contemporary African Fiction: An Ecocritical Study of Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* and *Oil on Water*

By

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A Dissertation submitted to the Department of English and Literary Studies, Bayero University, Kano, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Master of Arts in English (Literature) degree.

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DECLARATION

I, Fatima Umar (**SPS/12/MEN/00048**), hereby declare that this dissertation was wholly researched and written by me, and that I have appropriately cited all materials utilised in the research. The work is new and has not been submitted to any authority anywhere for any purposes previously.

Signature…….. Date……

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CERTIFICATION

This dissertation, titled "Environmental Concerns in Contemporary African Fiction: An ecocritical Study of Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* and *Oil on Water"* by Fatima Umar meets the regulations governing the award of Master of Arts in English(Literature) of Bayero University, Kano.

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APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been read and approved as meeting the requirements for the award of a Master of Arts in English (Literature) degree in the Department of English and Literary Studies, Bayero University, Kano, Nigeria.

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Representative of the post Graduate School:

Signature……

Date……..

DEDICATION

This project research is dedicated to my beloved children:

Aisha, Zahra, and Amina

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Contents

Abstract

The study examines the representation of the environment in contemporary African fiction, analyzing the following two novels by Helon Habila, *Waiting for an Angel* and *Oil on Water*. The goal of the study is to assess the extent to which contemporary African fiction is responding to the developing coalition between literature and ecological preservation. Adopting an ecocritical framework in the analysis and a library research methodology, the study found that both novels, albeit in slightly different ways, present rich depictions of the environment imbued into their plots, setting, the development of characters, and thematic concerns. In this light, the study concludes that, unlike the situation a few decades ago, contemporary African fiction writers have embraced the call of global green – the infusion of environmental message into their literary texts.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

One of the greatest paradoxes about modernity is its positive, as well as negative, contribution about the future of the human race. Literature, as a mirror of reality, tries to reflect the diverse characteristics that define the modern era, conveying in form and content what defines the contemporary world. While on the one hand modernity has brought a lot of advancement to mankind especially in the areas of science and technology, on the other hand, it signals some sorts of destructions, which Modernist thinkers, such as Samuel Beckett, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, Joseph Conrad and Virginia Woolf, have tried to reveal. This paradoxical nature of modernity – its being progress, as well as destruction – is what makes literature's response to it pessimistic (Butler, 2010:53-55).

In December 2015, world leaders gathered together in Paris, the French capital, in order to find political and economic solutions to another serious problem confronting the universe as a result of technological advancement: climate change (Davenport and Harris, 2015). Emejiru and Izzi (2015:1) define climate change as "a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods." Considering literature's need to represent society, climate change becomes a crucial subject of literary interest that is projected globally, especially to enlighten man on its effects. This has even given birth to a framework for literary

interpretation (ecocriticism) to deal with the relationship between literature and the environment. Part of what the Paris conference agreed upon was that everything should be done to ensure that the world's average temperature does not rise above the pre-industrial level, mainly through taking steps to end the fossil fuel era (Goldenberg and colleagues, 2015).

It is the critical concerns with how the environment is negotiated in literary texts that is referred to as *ecocriticism.* According to Farmer (2009:48), the term "ecocriticism" simply means:

> …the study of the relationship between literature and the environment… But it's also looking at how natural settings are represented in literary works. This can be ways in which environment affects plot and character, how nature is used as metaphor, or how characters respond to place in literary works. I think it's important to say that it's not only about rural or wilderness setting. An environment of asphalt and concrete can also invite an ecocritical response. Also, how writers respond to environment crisis. The best way to go about the study of ecocriticism is to look closely at the role setting plays in literature.

This *sense of place* approach to ecocriticism is anchored upon the need to examine the context-specific environmental representation in any literary text. Nigeria is one of the leading producers of oil in the world. The continuous crisis in the Niger Delta region of the country attracts the attention of writers and critics, with the hope of providing a solution to the contemporary problem. In this light, the study examines Habila's novel, *Oil on Water* in relation to this issue. The same writer's novel, *Waiting for an Angel*, is a reflection of an ecological crisis depicted through poverty and political brutality. The text is also examined in order to appreciate the role of the environment in the progression of the plot, the establishment of thematic concerns, as well as the fates of characters.

Aduaka (2014:3) describes *Oil on Water* in the terms: "There is a mythological and dreamlike nature to *Oil on Water*". About his film project, "Oil on Water", he declares:

> With *Oil on Water*, I want to explore, cinematically, the ecological disaster sweeping through our time, across the globe. This is the singular most important problem staring humanity in the face today. One that we must all come to terms with in order to re enforce our search for a way to continue to exist on this planet.

Ursprung (2013:48) begins by reviewing the statistics on oil and its use, first globally. According to the writer, over the last century, approximately one billion barrels of oil have been used. In the specific case of Nigeria, she charts the history of Nigeria in oil pollution:

> Oil drilling has been going on for more than fifty years in the Niger Delta, and the same poorly-guarded pipelines still crisscross the land. Gas flares hiss day and night, sometimes less than three hundred metres away from settlements. Gas flaring is the cheapest method of clearing the oil of the gas associated with its extraction. The inhabitants have no choice but to live with the noise, the constantly flickering light, and the soot which settles on their skin and their mucous membranes, as well as on the fields and in the water, thus entering the food chain with severe consequences for the health of the population: cancer, miscarriages, babies born with birth defects. The average life expectancy in the Delta is now forty-one.

The picture reflected here does not stop there. This is because farming and fishing have almost been brought to a total stop; oil spilling and frustrated populations always at the mercy of the government, global capitalists, militants, corrupt military officials and soldiers, corrupt local leaders and common rascals are among the common issues of the environment. This is not different from what Habila depicts in *Waiting for an Angel*. According to Duraiappah (1998:2619):

> The poor have traditionally taken the brunt of the blame for causing society's many problems. The most recent

> accusation directed against them is that they cause environmental degradation. The general consensus seems to be that poverty is a major cause of environment degradation.

It is primarily against this background that *Waiting for an Angel,* a novel set in the overcrowded city of Lagos, will be analysed in this study. The need to enlighten man on the damages he causes to the environment, which will further generate further consequences that affect him, his environment, and other living organisms surrounding him, makes this ecocritical study relevant. There are important reasons for such ecocritical studies. As the modern man claims superiority over his environment, plundering its resources, his ignorance of the threat such actions pose to the universe has finally become bared. According to Releigh and Urdal, (2008:27):

> Climate change is expected to alter the availability of fresh water, the productive capacity of soil, and patterns of human settlement. The most dire predictions warn that climate change may greatly increase the risk of violent conflict over increasingly scarce resources such as fresh water and arable land.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, man began to realise that there are disastrous consequences attached to his obsession with progress and his blind submission to scientific and technological development, for these may soon lead him to rendering the planet uninhabitable. An insightful alteration of acuity, thought, and culture is needed, so that forceful measures may be taken to check the man-spread degradation of the earth. In all, this change is to be made from an *anthropocentric* set of values to *ecocentric* ones (White, 1996).

Ecocriticism, therefore, can be described as a response of literary study, as well as analysis of what can be described as *ecological consciousness*. Coined in 1978 by Reuckert

(1996:105) in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An experiment in Ecocriticism," he considers it as "the application of ecology and ecological concept to the study. Cheryll Glotfelty (1996:xviii) in her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, defines ecocriticism as the careful study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, an earth-centered dimension to the study of literary texts:

> All ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world. Ecocriticism has as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman.

It is this standpoint that will be used in analysing environmental concerns, as expressed in two novels by the Caine Prize winning Nigerian writer, Helon Habila, which are *Waiting for an Angel* and *Oil on Water*.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

This study is anchored upon the assumption that science and technology are in a constant strive to conquer and transform the natural world. This problematic has necessitated the need for the creation of epistemological conceptions to halt the hazardous impacts of human activities on the environment, notably through science and technology, and to find ways of addressing the adverse effects that have already been created. Literature, both as theory and as a creative venture, has managed to join the ranks of other disciplines in this regard. While some work has been done in ecocritical analysis of African writing across genres, the extension of this endeavour into the Habila oeuvre is currently inadequate. Most of the attention in ecological criticism has focussed on *Oil on Water*, with the other

novels, such as *Waiting for an Angel*, receiving less attention. Furthermore, where *Oil on Water* is ecocritically examined, the analysis is given a global dent. This study is, therefore, the first to examine Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* through ecocritical lenses, as well as an addition to the limited assessments of *Oil on Water* with a local *sense of place* focus. Ecocriticism lends a literary voice to the search for solutions to the global environmental crisis. The study is conducted as an exploration of the responses of contemporary Nigerian writer's depiction of the issues of climate change.

1.3 Significance of the Study

In 2007, Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson acknowledge in *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory* (2006:681) that "ecocriticism is a fairly new branch of African literary criticism" though "potentially one of the most vibrant areas of critical discourse" Interestingly, all four critical essays in the anthology acknowledge the Niger-Delta crisis, as well as Ken Saro-Wiwa's ecoactivism, as crucial dimensions of the evolution of African ecocriticism. However, none of the essays mentioned does an actual analysis of any specific texts. Hence, the present study becomes significant in that it provides an interpretation of the chosen texts using the ecocritical yardstick.

1.4 Research Methodology

This research is desk oriented. Materials shall be drawn for the study from primary and secondary sources. The primary texts are Habila's two novels, *Waiting for an Angel* and *Oil on Water*, while the secondary sources are library-based. Relevant internet resources will also be utilised.

1.5 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this research is to apply ecocritical insights into the analysis of the selected texts, in order to assess them as a response to the global ecological crisis in contemporary African fiction. Other objectives are:

1. To illustrate the correlation between human engagement and the environment as depicted in literature.

2. To illustrate the extent of ecological commitment in contemporary African fiction.

3. To illustrate the nature of the poetics adopted by Habila in his approach to ecocritical writing.

1.6 Research Questions

In order to achieve its set objectives, this study asks the following research questions:

1. How is the correlation between human engagement and the environment represented in creative writing?

2. To what extent does contemporary African fiction respond to the global ecological crisis?

3. Where Habila adopts ecocritical techniques in his novels, *Waiting for an Angel* and *Oil on Water*, what poetics govern his approach?

1.7 Scope and Limitation of the Study

This study will be limited to the study of Helon Habila's two novels: *Waiting for An Angel* and *Oil on Water*, using ecocritical lenses. This is due to the concerns that have been raised about the ignorance among artists and activists regarding the negative effects of the oil

industry on the Nigerian condition and due to the large silence on the study of ecocritically relevant texts. The study will pay specific attention to the novels' plots, characters and characterisation, setting and thematic preoccupation, with primary emphasis on environmental suggestions, subject, and consequences.

1.8 Theoretical Framework

The theory adopted for this study is "ecocriticism", a field of literary school united in the common idea that "human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (Glotfelty 1996:xix). It focuses on the literary renderings of human experience in a naturally and a culturally defined world: the joys of plenty, sorrows of lack and deprivation, hopes for harmonious existence, and the fears of loss and disaster. Ecocriticism has a clearly defined agenda, therefore, which is to represent the consequences of human interactions with the natural world, both on the environment and on humans themselves. Ecocriticism is a relatively new field of enquiry, but it offers a broad and unique vision of life and the place humans occupy in nature. In ecocriticism, positions reveal themselves as persons. So the voice of ecocriticism speaks from the standpoint of the culture of the speaker, of their particular place or context.

Although environmental criticism (or ecocriticism) is synonymous to nature activism, there is a substantial difference in the way environmental literature or writing suggests a greater range of reference and genres (Buell 2005:142). More importantly, environmental writing differs from nature writing, in approach, not limiting itself to the description of the natural world and/or history, but also discusses environmental issues, such as pollution, urbanization and other forms of human intervention and their impact on the environment

and landscape (Murphy 2000:5). In other words, there will be no environmental literature without human beings making contact with nature and creating consequences. This is crucial to the idea of *sense of place* in the context of literary criticism, which is a contemporary environmental movement that emphasizes the fact that human behaviour and ethical deliberation takes place within the context of local communities, both human and bioregional (Kowalewski 1994:16). The strength of the place is so great that environmental writing can be taken from the rural areas – that are somewhat privileged in this movement – and transplanted into urban settings since these do not exist separately from the land, natural history or consciousness, and they are equally inhabited by people as well as other non-human species (Buell 2005:144). This idea of sense of place is crucial to this analysis especially in dealing with *Waiting for an Angel* which has a dominantly urban setting.

There are diverse approaches on the poetics of ecocriticism, among the major and other proponents of the approach being Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, Harold Fromm, William Howarth, William Rueckert, William Slaymaker, Lynn White, Eva Ursprung, Brandon K, etc.

In their approach, for instance, Brandon (1998:xii) and his colleagues hold the view that the biocentric world view is important in an ecocritical approach, which involves "an extension of ethics, a broadening of human conception of global community to include nonhuman life forms and the physical environment". Therefore, ecocriticism links nature to its literary representation, be it serious non-fiction or traditional fictional work of art. As Garrard (2004:4) suggests that the early works of ecocriticism included Romantic poetry, wilderness narrative and classical nature writing.

Nature in general has always been one of the most influential sources of inspiration for art

(be it poetry, prose or painting). But most of all, it has always been the place to live for every single living organism inhabiting the planet. In human history, one can observe not only this dualism of art and nature, but there is one general category – culture – which stands as a main counterpart to nature when considering the role of humanity on this planet. Garrard (2004:179) specifies the field which occupies itself with this particular dichotomy: “Ecocriticism is essentially about the demarcation between nature and culture, its construction and reconstruction”.

Buell (1999) sees the literary study as “a site of environmental-ethical reflection, and the study of the construction of all modes of environmental discourse” (Massey 2009:28).

Fromm (1996:35) looks at what has happened to man's appreciation of his relationship with nature as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution. Man has reached a mental guarantee of domination of nature, and this is captured by Fromm as "modern man's own peculiar mythology: The Myth of Voluntary Omnipotence." It has become "the contemporary form of the Faust legend, a legend which in all of its variants ends the same way". Fromm’s conclusion is that man refuses to open his eyes and see that his well-nurtured body and Faustian will are connected by fine tubes – a “life-supporting system" – to the earth.

Howarth (1996:69) sees the ecocritic as “a person who judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its spoilers, and reversing their harm through political action”.

In spite of the diversities in the field of ecocriticism, there are uniting grounds. Glofelty (1996: xix) suggests that:

> Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the

> fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world…. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman)

Since the ultimate goal of modern ecological work is to find a way of preventing man from destroying the natural ecosystem that he is a part of (Reukert 1996:69), programmes of action have been thought up by ecologists to achieve this goal. Reuckert (1996:109) notes further that:

> In literature, all energy comes from the creative imagination. It does not come from language, because language is only one vehicle for the storing of creative energy…. We need to make some connections between literature and the sun, between teaching literature and the health of the biosphere.

Therefore, the goal of ecocriticism is to advance the causes of these connections. There is an African dimension to ecocriticism, as William Slaymaker (2007:684-5) in "Ecoing the Other(s)" suggests:

> Environmentalism and ecologism threaten to dominate global economic policies in the new world order enforced by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Westernized world financial and scientific centers will define sustainability, biodiversity, population control, and land responsibility.

This implies that soon, it would become impossible for any nation to become a significant part of world affairs, if it fails to recognise the affairs of ecological wisdom. The world leaders' forum on climate change held in Paris is an important step towards creating this global order. However, there have been concerns by African intellectuals that ecocriticism

would just turn out another postcolonial trick by the global community led by the West to subject Africans to Western ideals and perspectives. Slaymaker (2007:685) notes:

> Because global ecologism and environmentalism as cultural prerogatives are suspects for many black and white cultural critics, it is not surprising that the movement's reception in the black African literary world has been meager.

However, there are exceptions to this refusal to go green in literary criticism, notable examples being Lindfords, Osundare, Maathai, Mazrui, etc (Slaymaker 2007:665-8). Santangelo (2007:704) posits that:

> The ultimate goal, of course, remains to make African literature and its study relevant to environmentalism in Africa by helping us think and rethink the meaning of environment and environmental degradation, as well as their relationships with humans and human history.

Overall, ecocritics are concerned with the effects of the changing scientific paradigms and findings that are partially clarified by historical studies and critiques of concepts of ecology, whether scientific or popular. This study's choice of theoretical framework is based upon the call by Caminero-Santangelo (2007) for African literature and criticism to broaden more towards ecological reflections. The study, therefore, is a response of the need to make ecocriticism more relevant in African literary criticism, especially from a sense of place perspective.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This chapter establishes a review of existing literature on ecoriticism with emphasis on African writing, and Helon Habila and his writing to date, in order to consider what other scholars and critics have expressed about the writer, his novels and ecocriticism itself.

2.1 The Roots and Rise of Ecocriticism

Garrard (2004:1) traces the roots of modern environmentalism in general to the publication of "A Fable for Tomorrow" in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). The movement has since matured in several disciplines before its arrival into literary discourse. This late maturity of environmental concerns in literary studies is a paradox, because, as Garrard(2004:2) notes:

> The founding text of modern environmentalism [*Silent Spring*] not only begins with a decidedly poetic parable, but also relies on the literary genres of pastoral and apocalypse, pre-existing ways of imagining the place of humans in nature that may be traced back to such sources as Genesis and Revelation, the first and last books of the Bible. *Silent Spring* initially suggests that the mythical eco-catastrophe of the fable might be supernatural, and emphasizes this by including an epigram from Keats' poem 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', in which the magical power of a beautiful woman blights the environment: 'The sedge is wither'd from the lake, / And no birds sing.' But then the fable

> concludes: 'No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves.'

Although the actual roots of ecocriticism as a discipline date back to a long time prior, the institutionalisation of the field into mainstream literary criticism and scholarship can be attributed to a simple mail exchange between Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm in the late 1980s (Fromm 1996: ix), when the former, then a postgraduate student, had contacted the latter, a professor, with a proposition. This resulted in the world's first session on ecocriticism at the Modern Language Association convention in 1991 (Fromm1996:x). This literary critical concern with the environment merges the field of critical studies with what is, in fact, "the most pressing contemporary issue of all, namely, the global environmental crisis" (Glotfelty 1996:xv). Glotfelty argues that the reason why ecocriticism made such a late arrival into the literary hall of fame was because criticism had become completely involved in scholarship, neglecting the actual realities of the physical world beyond the fences of universities. He further observes that the situation was worsened by the fact that the few critics and scholars with interest in the relationship between the environment and literature had largely kept an aura of isolationism, each working separately, with no communal framework. No one read the works of others, nor were interests brought together to form underlying philosophies. Glotfelty (1996: xvii) notes that it was in the mid-eighties, that things began to change fast:

> In 1985, Frederick O Waage edited *Teaching Environmental Literature: Materials, Methods, Resources,* which included course descriptions from nineteen different scholars and sought to foster "a greater presence of environmental concern and awareness in literary disciplines." In 1989 Alicia Nitecki founded *The American Nature Writing*

> *Newsletter*, whose purpose was to publish brief essays, book reviews, classroom notes, and information pertaining to the study of writing on nature and the environment. Others have been responsible for special environmental issues of established literary journals.

Glotfelty (1996: xviii) makes clear that although the field of ecocriticism is distinguished by its focus on the "relationship between literature and the physical environment", there is no clear-cut delimitation of the discipline's exact concerns. The core uniting principle is an understanding "that human culture is connected to the physical world" (Glotfelty (1996:xix). In addition, there is the problem of terminology. In the classification, one comes across such terms as *green branch of literary study, literary ecology, ecocriticism, environmental literary criticism, green cultural studies, enviro-criticism,* etc (Glotfelty, 1996:xx). Irrespective of what name it goes by, the field is, overall, concerned about: "the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human action are damaging the planet's basis life support systems" (Glotfelty, 1996:xx). The core idea therefore, is that ecocriticism is not just a critical approach but also a matter of ethics.

White's (1996:6) "The Historical Root of Our Ecological Crisis", blames the West for creating a technological culture that is at the heart of the ecological disaster that the age is battling with. She writes that:

> One thing is so certain that it seems stupid to verbalize it: both modern technology and modern science are distinctively *Occidental.* Our technology has absorbed elements from all over the world, notably from China; yet everywhere today, whether in Japan or in Nigeria, successful technology is Western. Our science is the heir to all sciences of the past, especially perhaps to the

> work of the great Islamic scientists of the Middle Ages, who so often outdid the ancient Greeks in skill and perspicacity…. Today, around the globe, all significant science is Western style and method, whatever the pigmentation or language of the scientists.

In "Nature and Silence", Manes (1996:15) posits that everything in nature is equal, arguing that "Nature *is* silent in our culture". Arguing for the urgency of ecocriticism, Manes states that "we require the language of ecological humility that deep ecology, however gropingly, is attempting to express" (Manes, 1996:17) as a resourceful way to tackle the human arrogance that altered the silence of nature, where originally, as insisted by humanism, "there was no ontological difference between *Homo sapiens* and the rest of the biosphere" (20) and threaten the environment.

Byerly, in "The Uses of Landscape" (1996:53) argues that man is by nature sensitive to art and beauty. He argues that there is in reality no such thing as a wilderness. Man coined the myth in order to guarantee and be satisfied with his superiority. According to him, there is nevertheless, an "aesthetic dimension" to the "wilderness myth" and this has "affected our management of public lands". The ultimate aim, he captures in the position that "The anesthetization of landscape permits the viewer to define and control the scene". Man merely keeps ordering and reordering land for production and for consumption, which is everywhere we look in our supposed progress, we see a "symbol of the vulnerability of nature to the forces unleashed by technology" (Byerly. 1996:62).

Howarth in "Some Principles of Ecocriticism" (1996:73) charts a course for the modalities of conducting ecocritical investigations. Ecocriticism, he argues, should adopt the cardinal ecological principle that was rooted in a spirit "that changed species from resources into

partners of a shared domain" (Howarth, 1996:73). Howarth further argues that, ecocriticism adopts technique from education, postmodern criticism, humanism, cultural criticism, reader response criticism, autobiographical writing, feminism, and poststructuralism; and it makes efforts to link up the natural sciences, geography, the social sciences, history, and ultimately literature and media studies.

Evernden's "Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy" (1996:92), opens with a decrying of the minimal concerns given the environment in the humanities. He states:

> It is a matter of considerable concern to me that the sector of society we designate as the Arts and Humanities seem to play so minor a role in the environmental movement…. This is unfortunate, I think, and explains in part the one-sidedness of environmentalist arguments and their tendency to contain the seeds of the movement's destruction.

Buell (2005:12) expresses amazement over the late arrival of such an important theory as ecocriticism, long after several fields had developed coherent methods for relating with the environment. He argues:

> At first sight, the belatedness and e*liminality* of the recent environmental turn in literary-critical studies seems strange. For creative art and critical reflection have always taken a keen interest in how the material world is engaged, absorbed, and reshaped by theory, imagination, and *technology*. Humankind's earliest stories are of earth's creation, of its transformation by gods or by human ingenuity's "second nature", as Cicero first called it—tales that frame environmental ethics in varied ways. In at least one case they may have significantly influenced the course of world history.

In “Literature and the Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”, William Rueckert (1996:111) provides fresh views on ecology that are adaptable to literary studies. Literature is a creative energy, not a language; hence, it is a creature, like plants. All works of literature are by this understanding, “plants among us”. He argues further that “if poets are suns, then poems are green plants among us, for they clearly arrest energy on its path to entropy and in so doing, not only raise matter from lower to higher order, but help to create self perpetuating and evolving system”. In all of this, therefore, the work of the artist is to seek and arrest man’s tragic flaw of anthropocentricity, which drives him to “conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate, and exploit every natural thing” (Rueckert, 1996:113).

Ecocriticism has already acquired branches of its own, among them *ecomarxism* and *ecofeminism*. Particularly, ecofeminism examines the relationship between feminism and the environmental movement. When feminist literary discourse meets with ecocritical discourse, then ecofeminist literary criticism emerges. According to Garrard (2004:23):

> If women have been associated with nature, and each denigrated with reference to the other, it may seem worthwhile to attack the hierarchy by reversing the terms, exalting nature, irrationality, emotion and the human or non-human body as against culture, reason and the mind. Some ecofeminists, especially those promoting ‘radical ecofeminism’ and goddess worship, have adopted this approach. Thus, for example, Sharon Doubiago asserts that ‘ecology consciousness is traditional woman consciousness’; ‘Women have always thought like mountains, to allude to Aldo Leopold’s paradigm for ecological thinking. (There’s nothing like the experience of one’s belly growing into a mountain to teach you this)’.

What this reveals is that, for ecofeminists, women and the environment are and have long been victims of man's domination and abuse; therefore, collective suffering fosters unity. Thus, it is only natural that feminism and ecocriticism should merge forces against man's brutalities.

2.1.1 Ecocritical Concerns in African Literature

According to Nixon (2005:253), writing in "Environmentalism and Postcolonialism," the split between the two fields remains, despite their unifying concerns, due to four reasons. To begin with, postcolonialists have always highlighted hybridism and cross-culturation. Ecocritics, on their part, have a history of being pulled towards discourses of spotlessness: virgin wilderness as well as the preservation of "uncorrupted" last great parts of the earth surface from infringement by man in his quest to dominate. Secondly, postcolonial criticism is largely concerned with displacement, while environmental literary studies seem to give greater priority to the literature of place (setting and its impact on character, plot, thought, etc). A third reason, according to Nixon, is that over the course of time, postcolonial studies has tended to promote discourse on the urban/cosmopolitan and the international/transnational divide.

Postcolonialists are typically critical of ethos of nationalism. On the other hand, ecological literary discourse appears to have risen within a national scaffold. Fourthly, postcolonialism has devoted significant attention to digging up and reorienting appreciation of the past, especially the misrepresentations of cultural issues relating to the colonised world by colonial intellectuals and men of letters. Within much environmental literature and criticism, on the other hand, history is subdued or lowered in the search for timeless, isolated moments of close association with nature.

In "Eurocentrism and the African Flora and Fauna", Asika and Madu (2015) analysed Obinkaram Echewa's novel *The Land's Lord* from both ecocritical and postcolonial standpoints. In the critics' view, the colonialists did not only abuse the African man during their rule, but equally ravaged the African environment. An interesting dimension to Asika and Madu's (2015: 41) argument is that man and nature are in reality, at war, since both affect each other negatively. They write:

> Environmental degradation, air pollution emanating from environmental abuse, oil spillage, industrial emissions, toxic and nuclear wastes are among the major examples of man's constant abuse of nature which threatens his continual survival and existence in the world. All these are becoming serious global issues which literature has identified itself in the struggle to provide the much needed balance and complimentarily existence between man and his environment. On the other hand, nature is also often perceived in some extreme circumstances to be detrimental to man's survival. Natural occurrences like earth quake, hurricane, eruptions, floods, tornadoes among other adverse effects of nature are part of the negative abuse of man by nature. These are part of the changing circumstances human beings will continue to fashion out ways to cope with.

One point to note about ecocriticism is that it has a political coloration, like other famous analytical approaches, such as socialist realism. According to Garrard (2004: 3):

> Ecocriticism is, then, an avowedly political mode of analysis, as the comparison with feminism and Marxism suggests. Ecocritics generally tie their cultural analyses explicitly to a 'green' moral and political agenda. In this respect, ecocriticism is closely related to environmentally oriented developments in philosophy and political theory. Developing the insights of earlier critical movements, ecofeminists, social ecologists and

> environmental justice advocates seek a synthesis of environmental and social concerns.

Slaymaker (2007:683) argues that ecocriticism took shape in the 1980 and its impact on Africa up to 2001 (the time he was writing) was largely a white South African affair. While a great deal of African writing, says Slaymaker, no doubt falls under the class of "nature writing", there is, however, not much significant ecological concern raised. Nature is merely presented in the sense of environment as milieu, what shapes character, rather than as a place or life under attack in warfare with the conquering man. The focus on the environment, Slaymaker (2007:684) claims, in much of Black African writing and criticism, is largely geared towards a postcolonial function, "as pastoral reminiscences or even projections of a golden age when many of the environmental evils resulting from colonialism and the exploitation of indigenous resources have been remediated". He states that Black African critics and writers:

> … have traditionally embraced nature writing, land issues and landscape themes that are pertinent to national and local cultural claims and that also functions as pastoral reminiscences or even projections of a golden age when many of the environmental evils resulting from colonialism and the exploitation of indigenous resources have been remediated. A review of any number of bibliographies, literary histories, and anthologies of black African literature and criticism in the past several decades will bear out this intense interest in the local recapture of a violated nature.

In the view of Slaymaker (2007:684), African writers were reluctant to embrace *ecocrit* and *ecolit* because they viewed it with suspicion; it was merely another attempt to impose "white" ideals, they perceived. These fears are not completely unfounded, argues Slaymaker. Yet, he remarks that the vast amount of writings on ecocriticism from Asia,

notably Japan, should have been enough to justify the global character of the new movement. In any case, it would only be wise for Black Africans, like everyone else, to join in the ecological spree of "environmental justice, as a global paradigm, will be used when decisions are made about production, consumption of resources, and pollution caused by modernization, industrialization, and population growth.

In spite of all the fears, Slaymaker (2007:689-90) admits that exceptions exist to the general suspicions, notably in the writings of Bernth Lindfors and Niyi Osundare, as well as in the ecoactivism of the likes of Ken Saro-Wiwa and Wangari Maathai.

In "Different Shades of Green" (2006:698) Santangelo highlights the significant growth in ecoactivism in Africa since the 1990s, made even more attractive by the martyrdom of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Wangari Maathai. He writes:

> In the past fifteen years, African environmental activism has been brought to the world's attention through the martyrdom of Ken Saro Wiwa and more recently, by the awarding of the Nobel Peace prize to Wangari Maathai. These figures point not only to the ways that Africans have mobilized against environmental degradation, but also to the grave environmental problems faced by Africa which have become, especially in conjunction with social problems, a significant threat to its present and future-well-being. Ken Saro-Wiwa's leadership also suggests that African writers can play a significant role in environmental causes. Just as they have in other forms of social activism ….

These, says Caminero-Santangelo, express the heightened level of environmental concerns on the continent. Acknowledging the call made half a decade earlier by Slaymaker for

African writers and critics to embrace the global call for green writing, Caminero-Santangelo, nevertheless, complains against Slaymaker's Anglo-American (restrictive) determination of what counts as 'global'.

Caminero-Santangelo (2006) raises other issues. There is an anthropocentrism in literary studies, for instance, in Marxism and poststructuralism, which ecocritics are uncomfortable about. Ecocritics desire to see a set of critical criteria that seeks in literature a side-by-side representation of humans and nature, rather than a representation of the environment as a tool for attaining the social, political, economic, and security objectives of man (Caminero-Santangelo, 2006: 699-700).

Like Slaymaker, Caminero-Santangelo (2006:703) argues that recent studies on African environmental history has postcolonial motivations, for, he argues, it "could be read as reinforcing a romantic perspective on anticolonial struggle and indigenous societies by suggesting that colonists, post-independence governments, and conservation agencies have … missed the *right* ecological perspective…" (Caminero-Santangelo 2006:703). In the final analysis, he states that all effort must be made towards raising greater environmental consciousness in African literature and criticism.

Nfah-Abbenyi (2006:708) in "Ecological Postcolonialism in African Women's Literature" laments the degree to which people have diminished in their appreciation of the environment, and the diversions caused by "ideological, cultural, political, or economic" disparities (Nfah-Abbenyi, 2006:707). Positing that women's lives are the worst affected by trends (from precolonial, to colonial and to postcolonial), Nfah-Abbenyi decries the loss of the glorious past when earth/land was the woman's domain. She contends that it is the postcolonial urban environment especially, that snatched from the woman this glory (Nfah-

Abbenyi, 2006:708). She analyses a number of women's texts, among them Wereweri Liking's *Ella sera de jaspe de corail,* Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Mottherhood,* Calixthe Beyala's *The Sun Hath Looked Upon Me* and *Your Name Shall Be Tanga,* Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike,* Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *A Question of Power,* and Tsisi Dangarengba's *Nervous Conditions.* In all of these, she finds that cosmic order rests in a harmonious living, not only between men and women, but also between men and women on the one hand, and the environment on the other.

Since the publication of Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson's anthology in 2006, important developments have ensued in African literary criticism concerned about the environment. Emmanuel Olaniyan (2013) for instance, examines from an ecocritical perspective the traditional Yoruba chant, *Ijala.* Olaniyan's analyses identifies tremendous level of concern in the chants about the safety of land, the sky, water, vegetation, weather and climate, and other elements of nature and the environment.

Likewise, Ayinuola (2013) in her thesis entitled "The Natural Environment in The Selected Poems of John Keats and Niyi Osundare: An Eco-Critical Perspective" analyses a British Romantic poet of the 19th century side by side with a Nigerian one of the Postmodern era, again evidencing that ecocritical literature came long before the 20th century.

2.2.3 Helon Habila and His Writings: Critical Responses

Habila writes in a generation that can be identified as the *Third Generation* of African writers, as well as *Contemporary African Writers.* Of these writers, Edoro (2008:24) states:

> For these writers, their formative years are steeped in circumstances that exposed the deep contradictions that define the Nigerian nation and the writer's role as intellectual. Maybe it is this historical particularity that

> engenders their aversion for totalizing conceptions both of the writing subject and of the collective.

These vibrant writers, who mostly appeared towards the end of the twentieth century, include the likes of Chimamanda Adichie, Aliyu Kamal, Abubakar Gimba, Aisha Ahmed, Razinat Muhammad, Chris Abani, Pius Adesanmi, Abubakar Adam Ibrahim, Izuu Nwankwo, Promise Okekwe, etc. Habila himself has stated briefly his writing intentions in a speech entitled "Each Alone: Writing as a Way of Seeing" (2012:16-17) that:

> We look at the poor and we pretend that they are actually not so unfortunate; that they may be lucky not to have our burdens: no mortgages to think about, no car payments to worry about. In fact, we begin to convince ourselves their tears are actually tears of joy, not sadness, and we might even begin to feel sorry for ourselves. And yet, not one of us will change places with them….
> How can literature act to increase our vision, to enlarge our sympathies? And this is where I want to make a link between literature and truth….

Ede (2013:13-14) acknowledges Helon Habila as the writer whose emergence as winner of the Caine Prize in 2001 brought about a global rise in interest in contemporary Nigerian writers. Thus, he argues, because of Habila, "The year 2001 then marks the beginning of an international privileging of themes of an exotic Africa beloved of Western anthropology and the ascendance of prose over any genre in New Nigerian writing". This recognises Habila among the most important contemporary prose writers in Nigeria who encouraged the global recognition in contemporary Nigerian prose.

Akung (2012:150) focuses on Helon Habila's second novel, *Measuring Time.* In his view, Habila conducts in *Measuring Time* a reexamination of Nigerian history in order to put things in proper perspective. Aspects given new historicist treatment include history,

culture, politics, and military rule. Akung concludes that Habila as a writer and citizen uses his writing medium to retell Nigeria's history with a view to properly situating blame where it ought to rest for the country's failings.

Yeibo Ebi, & Tamunotonye Alababra (2011:1064) investigate the use of sound devices in depicting stylistic meaning in Helon Habila's *Measuring Time.* Although adopting a linguistic analytical yardstick, the study primarily examines the use of figures of speech and presents the novelist's brief biography as follows: Helon Habila was born 1967 in Kaltungo, Gombe State of Nigeria and educated at the University of Jos, Nigeria and the University of East Anglia, England. He teaches creative writing at the George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia in the U. S. A. where he lives with his family. Habila is a young writer whose first book, *Waiting for an Angel,* was awarded the commonwealth Writers prize for new writing (African region 2003) and the Caine Prize (2001). In 2002, he won the Muson Poetry in Nigeria. He was the first Chinua Achebe Fellow at Bard College (2005), a William B. Quarton Fellow at the University of Iowa International Writing programme and the John Farrar Fellow at the 2003 Bread Loaf Writers. He co-edited the British Council's New Writing 14 with Lavinia Greenlaw.

Uwamsomba(2014:198-199) examines Habila's two novels, *Waiting for an Angel* and *Measuring Time*. The critic points out important aspects of *Waiting for an Angel* in which Habila highlights issues relating to the environment. Uwasomba writes:

> In fact, this claustrophobic environment, as seen in the dingy tenement and the entire Poverty Street affects other characters in the novel. The heat in Poverty Street is such that everybody is gasping for breath. There are no trees in the streets. It is not only human beings that feel the negative impact of the heat. The entire environment is affected – dogs, chickens and other domestic animals feel the warmth. Poverty Street is one of the many decrepit, diseases – ridden quarters that dot the entire

> setting of the novel set in Lagos, Nigeria. Apparently, because of the inhuman condition of the environment, Lomba only lived there for one year. Hence, Brother (his real name is Mohammed) tells Kela: "Here na so so heat full everywhere. Heat and Soja. If the heat no kill you, soja go harass you" (Uwamsomba, 2014:132).

It is important that Uwasomba relates the unbearable heat on Poverty Street to the "static, sterile, immovable and demobilized" setting of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (Uwamsomba, 2014:199). What makes this association relevant is that Modern drama was also a reaction against the prevailing damage on the universe, by the modern scientific and technological progress. These same factors have caused the ecological crisis; hence, the need for ecocriticism.

Gorton (2010) reviews Habila's *Oil on Water*, highlighting the circumstances leading to the creation of the text as the battle for oil profits and the destruction of the environment in Nigeria's Niger Delta region. Gorton writes that the major urge leading to the writing of the story was probably traceable to 1995, when renowned Nigerian author and environmental activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, was arrested. Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, he says, is set against this background in order to draw attention to the condition. He states that "Habila's storytelling conveys the destruction suffered by the environment and its inhabitants. The feel is of quagmire, oil drenched and polluted" (Gorton, 2010:10).

Adopting a Marxist view, Bangudu (2011:25) focuses her analysis in search of features of social alienation, political alienation, and economic alienation in the characters in *Waiting for an Angel* paying attention to plot and themes, particularly focusing on the Poverty Street setting. She writes that:

> The portraiture of the military in Waiting for an Angel is foregrounded in the deprivation and destruction of the masses in Poverty Street with its squalid slums, its sewers, its huge craters on the road and the heap of filth

> and dirt of Egunje Road. Rotteness and dilapidation demarcate the landscapes of Nigeria during the military days in the 1990's. Poverty Street is overcrowded, dirty, stinking, sparsely and poorly furnished and unconducive.

Fagbayi (2011:25) examines the aesthetics of resistance in *Waiting for an Angel* and Ojaide's *The Activist,* The latter novel is also set in the Niger Delta region. She writes:

> The Niger Delta, used to have a very good landscape that was both aesthetic and resourceful. It was a paradise rich in farm produce like yams, vegetables and fruits. The rivers had various sea food that the people fed on, but now, with oil exploration, 'the oil companies are pouring poisons into them, giving the natural sustainers of the people a final death blow' (Ojaide, 24), hence famine.

In *Waiting for an Angel*, Fagbayi (2011:44) observes that Habila fuses fact with fiction and parachutes among his characters to reflect Ken Saro-Wiwa.

Arguing that Helon Habila's fiction corrects the limitations of history, Anyokwu, in "Inheritance of Loss" (2008:4) states that "in Helon Habila's fiction, we encounter a strong sense of history".

Filipova (2015:67) examines Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide,* focusing on their literary reaction to this global sense of place. In Filipova's (2015:67) view, "environmental responsibilities and political action in times of global environmental crisis are still bound to particular places", evidence of which she finds in both Ghosh's and Habila's novels. In her view, the novels:

> … offer an alternative ontology of place which accounts for both local and global social relations of place, opposes the categories of abstract calculation, and calls for new forms of ethical relationality: an

> ethics of entanglement which implies an understanding of culture and place as "something nature does"…. Filipova (2015:67)

Similarly, Anthony (2012:173-174) narrates the actual historical events in the '80s and '90s which apparently influenced Habila's writing in *Waiting for an Angel.* The critic then takes up the novelist's narrative technique. He states:

> One of the best literary weapons of Habila in *Waiting for an Angel* is his ability to use words to create mental pictures in the minds of his readers. For instance, a playback into Poverty Street does not only reflect a micro of the Nigerian society, but brings to the fore of the reader the abject poverty that is synonymous with people who live in slums and ghettos as depicted in the street and symbolised in the characters of Brother, Hagar, Joshua, Nancy etc.

Lundmank (2012:9) generally analyses the way women attain political power in Habila's *Waiting for an Angel.* He highlights the importance of the Lagos setting in determining the role of each of the four female characters discussed. All the characters analysed make important decisions about their lives that are tied to their locality. For instance, Lundmark (2012:9) states that Rachael:

> As she comes from the northern part of the country where women were even more restricted than in the urban areas of the south …, it would be easier for Rachael to keep her traditional lifestyle in Lagos than up north. She appears to be on good terms with her brother and his entire family, so the reason for not wanting to travel north is not a family issue. Probably the problem is the prejudice against women without children among the rest of the society. Although she is a strong woman, that may be too much to handle, even for her.

Like Lundmark (2012), Fredriksson (2012) examines some women characters in Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*, focusing, however, on Janice, Hagar, and Alice and positing her arguments on the factors that hold them back, rather than what makes them powerful politically, as argued by Lundmark (2012). The major factor holding back Habila's female characters, and by extension Nigerian women, is the limitation placed upon them by men, argues Fredriksson (2012). For instance, with regard to education, Fredriksson (2012:4) states that "since marriage is an important part of Nigerian culture, women's education is not valued the same as men's education. Education for women, in general, is looked upon as a waste of time, as women are destined to marry at an early age and raise a family".

McCain's "Writing the Angel" (2007) is a rich study that focuses on the conditioning of the writer within his society, and how creativity becomes a tool for escape and self-liberation. Habila traces the peoples' agony to the military and their unwholesome intervention in governance, she argues:

> While the undernourishment of the kids playing in the gutters is not directly caused by the military, the conditions caused by the military contribute to this poverty. The money that goes to bribe a soldier for petrol likely increase the cost of public transportation. The money that goes for a petrol bribe or to higher public transportation costs might have been the money that parents need to buy food or kerosene to cook that food. The mongrel dogs whose carcasses lie in the gutters breeding disease have likely been killed by a driver speeding on the side of the road to avoid the traffic gnarled by petrol queues. The lack of funds to keep businesses running under the infrastructural decay

> results in widespread unemployment: lethargic winos on the street…. (16-17)

McCain (2007:19) further refers to the way Habila captures images of the houses on Poverty Street, symbolical of the wider Lagos and Nigeria and sums up Habila's concerns in *Waiting for an Angel:* "The lack of hope is bred in an environment". This again is a pointer to the basics of locality in ecocriticism.

Imre (2012:3) places *Oil on Water* among "the very best petrofictions being produced today which understand oil as a core element of our societies". She also notes that *Oil on Water* seeks to "frame moral lessons about the consequences of human interference into Nature". The novel, she deduces, provides further evidence that:

> Oil is a substance whose impact has left its traces everywhere. The twentieth century would not have been the same without a source of energy easy to store and transport—one with a huge energy output per unit of fuel and which forms the basis of all manner of other substances (from plastics to lubricants) without which it is hard to imagine life on the planet today. That oil plays an important role in our lives in ways that we might not have believed—or have wanted to believe—is a fact that seems, at long last, to have become a conscious part of our social imaginaries. There is certainly no other commodity that commands public attention like oil, from news about the consequences of oil spills to expressions of growing concern about the environmental impact of our CO2 economies.

DeLoughrey et al (2015:12) situate their analysis of Habila's *Oil on Water* within the context of postcolonial environmental concerns, seeking in ways to decolonise the ecology. They observe that Habila's work adopts an"official" journalistic voice. The novel, they argue, presents to us generic negotiations on how mainstream narratives regarding the environment are framed, drawing particular attention to the power relations and structural

inequalities that they cover. Literature in this light, say DeLoughrey et al (2015:12), is important in the sense that, as Edward Said suggests, "because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, the land is recoverable at first only through the imagination".

Shija (2015:5) discusses *Oil on Water* along with two other texts, Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist,* and Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow,* all three of which he describes as "fictional works… which… appear to celebrate instead of lamenting the existential tragedy of the Nigerian man". Shija (2015:7) specifically states of *Oil on Water* that the novel "tells us about the desecration of the environment and the economic exploitation of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, a situation which has given rise to militancy in the area; even while admitting that the novel increases "ecocritical consciousness in literary discourse".

Describing the plot of *Oil on Water* as a "Conradian journey", Aspden (2010) captures the essence of the story as depicting "brutal mechanics of our lust for oil". Aspden (2010) states:

> *Oil on Water* lays bare the real-life tragedy of the Niger delta, in which petrodollars warp human relationships as surely as leaking crude poisons birds and fish. A village that accepts an oil company payout, Rufus discovers, is initially jubilant. TVs and fridges appear in impoverished homes, presided over by the uncanny orange flare "that burns day and night". But then livestock, crops and finally villagers begin to die, while the survivors are bought off with do-nothing oil company jobs, join militant groups or turn to kidnapping for profit. The only community to escape this fate is an island inhabited by a white-robed animist cult who reject oil money – though even they survive only under the patronage of a shadowy militant leader. (theguardian.com)

Aspden posits that in Habila's *Waiting for an Angel,* the hero, Lomba, is also a journalist like Rufus in *Oil on Water,* and like Habila himself once was. This journalistic link, she notes, is a pointer to the concerns of Habila about the risks of the journalism profession in modern Nigeria, an environment in which political forces and before them military demigods could silent free speech at will.

Another review of Habila's *Oil on Water* is Bernadino Evaristo's (2010), which opens with a lamentation on the "chasm which exists between Nigeria's multibillion dollar oil revenue and the standard of living for most Nigerians…." Tracing the discovery of oil in the country in the 1950's, the review runs to the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995. Evaristo (2010) states that the atmosphere in *Oil on Water* recalls Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*:

> Habila's prose perfectly evokes the devastation of the oil-'polluted wetlands. Animals lie decomposing, drowned in oil, the poisoned river water is foul and sulphurous, abandoned villages have an 'indefinable sadness in the air, as if a community of ghosts were suspended above the punctured zinc roofs' and always in the distance, in the darkness, are the burning flames of the toxic gas flares that many villages crave because of the short-lived prosperity they bring. (theguardian.com)

Evaristo finds it interesting that in *Oil on Water* the ironical joy with which communities receive news of oil discovery on their land, unknown to them what devastation it will cause the environment. In his view, *Oil on Water* is a novel that "brings to light overlooked story of environmental and human rights abuses."

In Nancy Oakes' (2013) review of *Oil on Water*, she enumerates the key environmental concerns highlighted in the novel: the sufferings of the traditional owners of the lands and waterways which have now "been changed, exploited, and in many cases, damaged beyond

repair". Oakes sums up her analysis thus: "While the subject matter is disturbing on many levels, Habila's writing is stunning, conveying a real sense of human effects of the changes wrought by the oil industry there." Oakes notes that Habila spares no detail in describing the environmental devastation in what she calls a "depressing novel."

Friedrike Knabe (2011) describes *Oil on Water* as "confidently crafted and absorbing," in interesting parts that chronicles human ambitions, tragedies, and failures, but also of love, friendship, and perseverance of the human spirit. Habila, she says, perceptively guides his different narrative strands into a story that raises broader political and social concerns in the rich, yet fragile, environment of the Niger Delta, that is slowly being devastated by the greed of oil and money.

According to Kirkus Review (2011), *Oil on Water* presents a graphic account of a nation ruined by the extraction of natural resources. To this reviewer, the Niger Delta is described as a land "where beauty and subsistence have fallen victim to ecological nightmare."

David Auerbach (2014) expresses great disappointment with previous reviews of *Oil on Water*, which he says would not have convinced him to read the novel "since they treated *Oil on Water* as only the total sum of its political, post colonial and racial content." One particular review that Auerbach finds fault with is Evaristo's (2010), especially in that reviewer's conclusion that the novel "brings to light this overlooked story of environmental and human rights abuses." This, says Auerbach, appears to praise the work of a journalist rather than of a novelist.

While admitting that political undertones form an aspect of Habila's writing, Auerbach remarks that Habila "could have written a journalistic article in a fraction of the time had

he just wanted to communicate what Evaristo makes of this novel." To Auerbach, the most beautiful aspect of *Oil on Water* is the novel's chronology. He states:

> Rufus' journey from the city to the wilderness of the Delta clearly plays on *Heart of Darkness,* and one of Habila's main feats is completely rearranging Conrad's schema. Instead of a strict linear trip into "darkness" and back again, Habila uses Irikife as a fragile balance point in dividing two wretched worlds: the Delta in which oil companies and the military wreak havoc while the rebels fight with them, and city life in Port Harcourt where the oil executives sit and make their deals and where Rufus' sister has suffered tragic events. (harvard.edu)

On the whole, the general observation about the critical response to Helon Habila's writings is that his first two novels, *Waiting for an Angel* and *Measuring Time* have received more critical attention than the more recent, *Oil on Water.* In addition, studies have generally concentrated on issues of style, social reality, history, and feminism. Though with limited reviewers, *Oil on Water* has been examined more often in relation to environmental degradation. However, no critic has attempted to study *Waiting for an Ange*l using ecocritical lenses. This study intends to fill in this vacuum, and adds to the limited materials on *Oil on Water*, as well as in the criticism on Habila as a whole.

CHAPTER THREE

URBAN SETTING AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHARACTER AND PLOT: HABILA'S *WAITING FOR AN ANGEL*

3.0 Introduction

This chapter analyses Helon Habila's novel, *Waiting for an Angel* through ecocritical lenses. The focus of the analysis will be discovering the author's attitude towards the environment, by examining the relationship between the setting and ecological perception. The main focus is on setting and its effect on character, plot and thematic focus based on an established approach to ecocriticism. Hence, this chapter adopts an approach that examines how setting shapes events and characters in the novel.

3.1 Synopsis

Waiting for an Angel is a novel that reflects the chaos and cruelty experienced by Nigerians in the 1990s under the tight rule of military leader Gen. Sani Abacha. The story is set deliberately to reflect Nigerian society of that time in a way that highlights social, political, economic hardships, in addition to security threats to lives and property. Generally, the novel's narrative moves back and forth, opening with Lomba's life in prison and ending with the climactic events leading up to his arrest in the first place. *Waiting for an Angel* is primarily about the life of this young man, Lomba, from northern Nigeria who comes to Lagos to attend university. In his early days at the university he has his fortune

divined by a beach fortune-teller. After his roommate Bola's family dies, and then the military suppresses student demonstrations, the university "began to look like prison" (Habila, 2007:112) to Lomba. He drops out of school with the zeal to write a novel in his untidy tenement on Morgan Street (metaphorically nicknamed Poverty Street). Pushed by the need for employment, he becomes a journalist covering arts for the *Dial* magazine. Soon, Lomba's neighbour is attacked by soldiers, and journalists are arrested all over the city and the *Dial* offices are set on fire. Meanwhile, a chance meeting occurs with Alice, his old lover, and the daughter of a general. The love is rekindled, but she has already promised to marry another military man on whom she is dependent for her mother's cancer treatment. Lomba's personal life is caught in the nightmare of appalling political assassinations and media repression.

After meeting the Morgan street activist Joshua, he becomes convinced of the need to deal with politics in his writing, rather than stay restricted to the arts. Lomba decides to participate in a prodemocracy demonstration, basically out of frustration. There, he is arrested and imprisoned indefinitely without trial. So, Lomba, a young journalist, is put in prison by the regime, under charge of attempting a coup against the dictators. While in prison, Lomba "got access to pencil and paper and he started a diary" and begins to enjoy solace in writing love poetry (Habila, 2007:9). Lomba ".. had to write in secret, mostly in the early mornings when the night warders, tired of peeping through the door bars, waited impatiently for the morning shift" (Habila, 2007:9). All this goes to reveal the climate of fear in which Nigerians lived.

In its chaotic order, therefore, *Waiting for an Angel* might be categorised as a Modern novel. There is also no consistent narrative technique, as the narrative voice keeps shifting.

While some chapters are written in the third person, others are narrated by Lomba himself and still others by a secondary school student and friend of Lomba, Kela, who lives near Lomba on Poverty Street and begins to take English lessons from him not long before the fateful demonstration. Through their eyes, the novel paints a vivid image of the immediate environment of Poverty Street and of the wider Nigerian society (Poverty Street is described as "one of the many decrepit, disease-ridden quarters that dotted the city of Lagos like ringworm on a beggar's body" (Habila, 2007:18)), bringing their sounds, sights and smells to life with his rich prose and vivid metaphor. Kela's aunt, Rachael, runs the Godwill Food Centre, a restaurant. From regular customers of the restaurant, and through his English teacher, Kela learns about Nigeria's postcolonial evolution.

Later on in the novel, still in prison, Lomba's life crisscrosses with the Superintendent of Prisons. Thus on the third day in prison, the Superintendent opens the prison door to Lomba and Lomba is glad to see the rays of light and hopes for good fortune. Contrary to Lomba's hopes, the Superintendent however, has come with a different intent:

> "These. Are the. Your papers. I read. All. I read your file again. Also. You are journalist. This is your second year. Here. Awaiting trial. For organising violence. Demonstration against. Anti-government demonstration against the military legal government." (Habila, 2007:18)

The prison Superintendent plagiarises Lomba's poetry to woo another woman. The Superintendant engages Lomba to write poems for him, in return for small favours. Lomba takes the opportunity to send cryptic messages to the woman. Eventually, the superintendent's girlfriend figures out that Lomba is writing the poetry and that he is sending her messages, and she demands to see him. Although Lomba is not released from prison, there's a fifty-fifty chance between eventual release and death in the prison. The

chronological ending of the novel occurs at the end of the first of seven chapters, leaving the end of Lomba's life to the imagination of the reader: his fate hangs in the balance.

3.2 Urban Congestion and Environmental Degradation

The centering of events in Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* in Lagos, a city known for its overpopulation, and particularly in the slums of that city, is a deliberate call Habila makes to the environmental effects of population growth in the midst of poverty and bad governance. The ending of the story in *Waiting for an Angel* with uncertainty in the air both for the protagonist, Lomba, and for the entire universe of the story captures the heart of the crisis in the Nigerian *place*. The novel suggests that things are in a precarious state and the crisis did not have any resolution in the horizon.

Daryl Farmer (2009:48) has argued that ecocriticism is concerned not only with natural settings in the wild or environmental degradation, but more importantly, about the role of setting in the progression and effectiveness of a literary work:

> I think it's important to say that it's not only about rural or wilderness setting. An environment of asphalt and concrete can also invite an ecocritical response. Also, how writers respond to environment crisis. The best way to go about the study of ecocriticism is to look closely at the role setting plays in literature.

Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* is set around the suppression of free speech under military rule in Nigeria, particularly around the era of General Sani Abacha. The atmosphere that Habila portrays in the novel is one of despair and fear. The years leading to Abacha's rule and the duration of his reign were difficult times for Nigerians, for levels of anarchy were unleashed upon the populace by the rulers.

Around the earliest quarter of the year 1993, the country found itself in confusion, following an annulled election that had been conducted and a clear winner, Bashorun Moshood Abiola envisaged. This paved the way for General Abacha's regime to walk in and Abacha's turned out "yet another cycle of repressive military rule that came to be the most perverse of the lot. Abacha's execution of Ken Saro Wiwa, the writer-activist" (McCain 2007:32) was the hallmark of that regime's disregard for the environmental causes. It is this Abacha story that forms the background and setting of *Waiting for an Angel.*

Habila establishes his environmental message in the general setting. He infuses into the general topography, milieu, and sociology of the story an air of desperation, bringing in life historical incidents that make the characters come alive as true Nigerian beings. This deliberate technique, blended with his merger of the real and the fictive in his narrative technique, is what Oppermann (1999:11) notes about postmodern fiction that it "shifts the context to show how language is connected to contexts. In this way the relationship between the real and the fictive world is maintained".

The most inviting aspect of the setting of *Waiting for an Angel* for ecocritical analysis is Poverty Street, treated in the chapters of the novel entitled "Kela", "Lomba", and some parts of "James". The garish description of Poverty Street is an explanation of why what was originally Morgan Street had its name altered in the light of reality, to the naturalistic "Poverty Street". This is the centre of the events in the story, for it is on this street that the novel demonstrates the conditions under which Nigerians were forced to live by the military regime. The opening sentence of the chapter, entitled "Kela" is quite arresting: "At first I thought it was the heat that made them dream on Poverty Street" (Habila, 2007:91).

This sentence is not only an affirmation of the suffocating conditions in shanty towns, but also an accusation of the government that allows the situation to be so, knowing it would heat up the environment.

Worthy of note is that global warming was probably the first physically noticeable change that had drawn attention to climate change. With a rising global population that the world is not ready to deal with, Habila here announces that the growing world population is a time bomb that would inevitably explode. It is important to note that the speaker of the sentence, Kela, does not generalise. This means he is aware that in less populated areas, there is less heat; hence, he situates the problem on Poverty Street.

It is also important that the narrative speaker ties the heat to the poverty, for it comes to mind that on *Wealth Street*, with the controlled population and better infrastructural planning, there would be no heat as the environment is described:

> The mornings were usually cool, but by eleven a. m., the sun was already high in the sky, and by noon, the heat would begin to show its head; it would force the people off the street and back roads, and since the heat was worse indoors, the people would sit out on their verandahs on folding chairs; they would throw open the shop doors and sit before the counters, stripped down to their shorts and wrappers, their bare torsos gleaming with sweat. Gasping for breath, they would stare through glazed eyes at the long tarred road that dissected the street into two. By two o'clock, the tar would start melting, making tearing noises beneath car tyres, holding grimly onto shoe soles. (Habila, 2007:91)

This is a clear picture of suffering and distress. It appears here that the aim is to show these images in order to highlight the ills of the military regime. It seems that the novel is attempting to imply that the ecological disaster is a major cause of poverty and anguish. This signals a warning that unless the environment is made safer, human suffering in general and poverty in particular can only increase. The circumstances that define the ecological disaster can hardly be tackled by ordinary citizens of a society, like the inhabitants of Poverty Street. Dealing with the ecological crisis is a governmental obligation at which the Nigerian government of the day appears to be failing.

The journey and progressive heat of the sun as captured in the passage is also a rich metaphor utilised by Habila to recall the series of repeated coups in the Nigerian nation. These governments, when they came, inadvertently repeated patterns from their predecessors until they were kicked out by other 'messiahs' who would come in and begin the cycle all afresh again. In the 'morning' of these regimes, palliative steps would be ushered in to ameliorate the sufferings of the people by the new holders of power. By the 'midday' of these governments, things would begin to get unbearably hot. Upon their darkness, as their nightfall hangs in the horizon, the citizens would have lost sight of any hope that things would ever get better at all. This creates the right mode for another set of leaders to come in and begin the vicious cycle all over again.

When the editor James assigns to Lomba his first writing assignment for the *Dial*, he says to him: "One General goes, another one comes, but the people remain stuck in the same vicious groove. Nothing ever changes for them except the particular details of their wretchedness" (Habila, 2007:113). Here people are like the trees: they both witness and suffer the hardships caused by the dictators.

The novel also calls attention to the modality of road making in Nigeria. Prior to independence, Nigeria had concentrated on making roads using tar and asphalt, a technology that has now been established to have worrying effects on the environment. If tar holds on to shoes and tyres, making movement difficult, as well as melting and even retaining heat further, Habila suggests that more environmentally friendly mechanisms of road construction ought to be tried.

According to the World Health Organisation (2004:12-28), asphalt has several acute effects on humans and animals. These effects include respiratory challenges, burns, lung cancer, genotoxicity (including mutagenic effects, micronuclei formation and chromosomal aberrations, adduct formation, intercellular communication, and toxic responses) and carcinogenicity. The report further explains that "When asphalts are heated, vapours are released; as these vapours cool, they condense. As such, these vapours are enriched in the more volatile components present in the asphalt and would be expected to be chemically and potentially toxicologically distinct from the parent material" (WHO 2004:4). This is a clear indication, that especially in densely populated areas such as Poverty Street, asphalt should not be used as a road making technology.

The congested urban locality is part of the problem. Due to the large population to be housed, Lagos manages to have shanty places as the Morgan Street. There is harm to the environment in the process. According to Lawanson (2006:4), whose study particularly focuses on rural-urban migration to Lagos, "Urbanization is the root cause of the high rates of environmental degradation, pollution and social delinquency". Poverty Street is merely "one of the many decrepit, disease-ridden quarters that dotted the city of Lagos like

ringworm on a beggar's body" (Habila, 2007:92-3). In such a place are obtainable homes such as Joshua's:

> Joshua taught English and Literature at the secondary school a block away from his house. A room, really. It stood alone, surrounded by blocks of unplastered, unpainted story buildings occupied by noisy working families that hung the washing – underwear, bed sheets, babies' nappies – on the railings before their rooms, and threw their dirty water into the road. A housewife would stand with the empty pail in her hand and absently watch the water break into a million dirty brown crystals before it hit the ground…. The fronts and backs of the buildings were hidden by huge hills of refuse that overflowed and constrained the path to Joshua's room.

There is a case of poor refuse disposal and pollution here. The inhabitants of Poverty Street here are not eco-conscious, as they have neither regard for their own health, nor of the environment. The refuse hills, (both people's and the government's fault) aid the pollution. The noise prevents people like Joshua from a happy living as the refuse prevents them a happy return home by blocking their path.

Habila, obviously, has decided to localise his setting for *Waiting for an Angel* in Lagos, and even there in a ghetto, with the deliberate intention of laying bare the worst potential damage that climate change can cause to the environment and people of Nigeria. Lagos is one of the West African coastal mega cities identified as a high risk area vulnerable to global warming, torrential rainfall and flood. Already, the state has high population growth and various socio-economic activities taking place in the city as a result of rural-urban migration movement to the city in search of job opportunities. In this light, global climate is a threat to the livelihood of the Lagos State residents, Olatunji (2013:8).

Likewise, through making Lagos the immediate setting, the novelist is able to draw to his story impacts from across the nation, since Lagos is Nigeria's commercial capital. As it draws people from across the country, so do economic events in Lagos affect everyone. In addition, by situating the events in the novel during the military era, Habila succeeds in enforcing the consequences of absence of government action to combat climate change.

The military, after all, was always known to have much force and less regard for life. As events in the novel demonstrate, it is the press that is best posited to voice out a call for action. So, localising the setting in Lagos achieves ecocritical wisdom, for although the Niger Delta might be the worst physically affected region of Nigeria in terms of environmental degradation, it is the Lagos press that ultimately shoulders the responsibility to cry out.

According to Lawanson (2006), the overall proliferation of these shantytowns results in the undesirable expansion of the urban centers which "poses a major planning problem as provision and management of roads, drainage and sewage systems among other infrastructure proves very difficult" (p. 5). Furthermore, shantytowns, a consequent of urbanization, cause increases in the incidence of urban poverty, diseases and epidemics, environmental pollution, urban conflicts and crime.

Similarly, one can notice in the story's silences, the cries about the environment. Many of the "rivers and lakes in Jos," (Habila, 2007:96) where Kela comes from, are drying up fast, as is the Atlantic Ocean, where Joshua takes Kela. Habila writes of the Atlantic:

> We sat by the water margin, our legs dipped in its frothy wash. In front of us the water was pale blue, but further in it was a deep indigo, stretching on and on until it disappeared in a white, smoky mist that hung like a curtain between heaven and earth. Its infinite vastness, its restless heaving and roar overwhelmed me.

> Joshua pointed straight at the misty horizon and said somewhere on the other side lay America. (Habila, 2007:96)

The beauty of the ocean, which Joshua uses to explain his philosophy of life, is a reminder of what man may lose if the habits creating the ecological crisis are not stopped and reversed in line with the dictates of ecoconsciousness. The aesthetic of place is celebrated to warn that the waters of the world suffer under the onslaught of man's persistent and ever worsening selfishness.

3.3 Environmental Concerns as Thematic Focus in *Waiting for an Angel*

Habila makes garishly obvious efforts in weaving the story in *Waiting for an Angel* to draw attention to a number of issues, one of which is clearly to present the socio-economic hardship that Nigerians were forced to live under in the repeated seasons of military dictatorships that had plagued their nation. However, this is made with deliberate skill to mark how poverty and bad governance affect not only human populations but also the environment and nature in general.

We are told that on Poverty Street, "pot-bellied, glaucomatous kids… with their high-defined ribs" play in gutters, close to carcasses of dead animals (Habila, 2007:87). Children of school age are seen roaming aimlessly about, like animals, their very beings spelling nothing but suffering and poverty. Here, the environment is clearly untidy and consequently a breeding ground for disease:

> And there were no trees on Poverty Street. The heat would comb the defenceless street unchecked (like the policemen that came after the demonstration), tearing into doors and windows, advancing from room to room,

> systematically seeking out and strangling to death the last traces of cool air hiding beneath chairs and behind cabinets, wringling out moisture from the anaemic plants that drooped in old plastic containers on window ledges. Dogs would bolt out of the doorways, their brains cooked senseless, their tongues lolling out of their mouths like pink sausages, to be run over by cars. The chickens simply folded their heads beneath their wings and died. By five o'clock, the heat, having established its mastery, would begin to lift. (Habila, 2007:91-92)

There is a threat to biodiversity here. The novel challenges man to reflect, look around and sanction not only the military that ensures the people's sufferings continue, but also the entire people. The likening of the heat to the security forces is clearly deliberate: the heat is a dictator just as the military, "strangling to death the last traces of cool air".

However, even the poor of Poverty Street are able to manage to survive, as the following day, "The dazed, prostrate street would totter to its feet, shake the dust and sweat from its pelt, and resume where it stopped" (Habila, 2007:92), but not the flora and fauna as the heat saps away "the moisture from the anaemic plants," hence kills them; it "cooks" the brains of dogs till they find it unbearable and they dash out only to be murdered by cars; and as for the chickens, they "simply fold their heads beneath their wings and die" out of hopelessness and despair (Habila, 2007:91-2).

Here, man holds total responsibility for the ecological nightmare, Habila appears to be saying. The animals and plants gradually disappear, till the few left are collected in zoos, like the "rare multicoloured birds" Lomba posits, to whose rarity means they have gone endangered (Habila, 2007:81) and would soon disappear. Sadly, mankind's evil is again lamented here, for even the few remaining creatures of disappearing specie are kept prisoners to satisfy our limitless thirst for beauty and recreation. Biodiversity is, therefore,

threatened and there is also a call here to pay attention to the threat to our biodiversity. According to Tosic (2006:47)

> Biodiversity is the abbreviation of biological diversity, or diversity of the species in a habitat. Biodiversity is a matter of fact in nature. Owing to planned or collateral interventions of man, a lot of plant and animal species have been eradicated and an equal number of other species have been added to the list of endangered species. Extinction is a natural process but it is alarmingly accelerated because of man's activities. Man is rarely satisfied with the satisfaction of his vital needs, as advised by the Deep Ecology principles. Immoderate economic schemes and constant economic growth are the reason why man often destroys the world in which he lives.

Climate change can affect the well-being of humans either directly or indirectly. For instance, changing the quality of air, water and food can disturb human health indirectly. Climate change will likely discomfort the environmental and social conditions which might lead to social and economic disruptions (Gemeda and Sima 2015:259). In spite of Nigeria being oil rich, there is not enough of petroleum resources for the poor to buy. This shameful condition leads inevitably to deforestation, among other consequences, as the novel further describes the scene:

> … I watched the women come to a halt before a huge billboard. They set to hacking and sawing, pushing and pulling at the [sic] it, and soon the billboard was on the ground; the sensual face of the man holding a pack of condoms bit the dust…They are just gathering firewood. (Habila, 2007:88-89)

When the search of energy sources gets to a situation where billboards in cities become firewood, one can only imagine what would happen to forests, wherever they could be reached.

In addition, there is the water crisis. According to Gemeda and Sima (2015:259), "Climate change also causes scarcity of water resources and severe floods that leads to outbreaks of waterborne diseases. African countries suffer serious health problems because of climate change." In front of Brother's shop, there is a burst pipe, which was "deliberately axed" (Habila, 2007:96). A surface appreciation of this is that some evil person had done the damage, but soon, the reality underlying the axing of the pipe becomes clear, when "Women and children gathered there all day to wash piles of dirty clothes, fetch water, and gossip. This was done amidst "much fighting and swearing" (Habila, 2007:96). It is village life transporting itself to the city, where these families who migrated over would probably have had high expectations.

The "fighting and swearing" is a reflection of what could come in the future, if the damage to the environment is not stopped, as Raleigh and Urdal (2009:27) argue: "freshwater availability, and population density and change are `important factors that many scholars argue have both influenced the risk of con ict in the past and will be strongly influenced by climate change". When people are unable to find basic needs such as food, water and shelter, it can result in extreme competition and violence is an easy recourse for most in the species. The whole scenario is bred by poverty, since "the families were mostly out-of-work drivers, labourers, fugitives convalescing between prison terms" (Habila, 2007:97). The key to any economic happiness for citizens in any nation lies in the availability of

jobs. Employed fathers and mothers can put food on their children's tables, pay school fees, clothe them well, and provide comfortable shelters.

However, where there is unemployment, lawlessness might easily take over. It is out of desperation rather than bad intentions, for example, that the pipe on Poverty Street had been axed. It is also a reminder that unless the core causes of poverty are addressed, ecoconsciousness would continue to remain an unrealized dream, even when "heat" is out to "finish" everyone completely, as Brother laments (Habila, 2007:99). Sadly, the government of the day clearly regarded this as the least of its concerns.

On a street where there are no trees at all, the population is too dense, rubbish and used water are discarded indiscriminately, and where dead animals and gutters serve as decoration, one should not be surprised that there is unbearable heat. The numerous repetition of sweating bodies in the story is a depiction of this condition. Thus, Brother's face is said to have "glistened with sweat" (Habila, 2007:102); Kela narrates how he lay at night "sweating beneath the sheets but unable to throw them off because of mosquitoes" (Habila, 2007:119); and Auntie Rachael is reported to have called Joshua "one hot, sunny afternoon" (Habila, 2007:124). All these are techniques of localising the climate troubles of the time, which the novel adopts to make its point.

The government is pictured as a destroyer of everything that is productive. For instance, the fire they set on the offices of *The Dial* sends off thick smoke straight into the heavens (Habila, 2007:153), clearly damaging the ozone layer in an attempt to prevent free speech. During military rule in Nigeria, the press was as remote as it could ever get from being *free.* The government placed close watch on what the media did, and journalists that dared the regime by making bold criticisms of it were locked up without trial or even killed.

According to Kalejaiye (2009:77-78), the foremost of all those the state regarded as its internal enemies under military dictatorship in Nigeria was the press. He states:

> Other military regimes followed the footsteps of Buhari/ Idiagbon and even surpassed them, in their maltreatment of the press. Under the Babangida and Abacha regimes newspapers/ magazines were proscribed and media houses were shut at will for daring to "inform the public of their dubious activities." As if closing down would not do, arsonists, hired killers and hit squad (Strike Force) were let loose on the press, to burn media houses (arsonists were caught setting Guardian Newspapers office on fire in 1996 or thereabout), kill journalists (Dele Giwa got 'parcelbombed' in 1986 while Baguda Kaltho of the News magazine is still missing till today (2007) about twelve years after he was declared wanted by the police) and to maim (Alex Ibru, the publisher of Guardian newspaper may not have fully recovered from the gun shots he received from the agents of General Abacha). To crown it all, journalists, both males and females, were arraigned before Military Tribunals on "trump up charges" and many of them were jailed.

Part of the thematic concerns of Habila in *Waiting for an Angel* is the inner as well as external peace of citizens of the Nigerian state. The air represented in the novel deliberately attempts to reflect an atmosphere of fear and devastation, an environment totally hostile to free speech and fair journalistic practice. Anything said against the *interest* of the state was treated as treason, the state being first and foremost the military Head of State and his junta.

In addition, the prison warders in *Waiting for an Angel* as in real Nigerian life under dictatorships, maltreat the prisoners and out of annoyance, one prisoner attacks a warder unexpectedly one day, while Lomba is in prison: "Suddenly, the prisoner leaped upon him,

pulling him by the neck to the ground, grinding him into the black, slimy water that ran in the gutter from the toilet" (Habila, 2007:10). The prison condition reflected here is clearly not eco-friendly, as there is a clear disregard for the health of the prisoners.

This is like the outhouse where the inhabitants of Lomba's apartment block on Poverty Street defecate and the faeces can return to the streets, and find a way into the human body, again (Habila, 2007:85). As Harold Fromm (1996:38) points out, the struggle between the necessities of modern life and the environment is the age-old struggle between the individual will and the universe…. The "problem of environment ... must ultimately be seen as a central philosophic and ontological question about the self-definition of contemporary man".

One common theme in the discourse on climatic change vulnerability is that countries, regions, economic sectors and social segments of societies differ in their degrees of vulnerability to climate change (Olufemi and Samson 2012:13). This is due in part to the fact that changes in temperature and degree of rainfall will occur unevenly and that climate change impacts will consequently be disproportionately distributed around the globe. This ultimately is caused by the fact that resources and wealth are similarly unevenly allocated by nature.

3.4 How Ecology Affects Characterisation in *Waiting for an Angel*

Characters and characterization in *Waiting for an Angel* are presented through environmental lenses. Stylistically, the hustle and bustle of Lagos as a metropolis is captured aptly in the novel. Interestingly, the original self-published story in which Helon Habila had included the initial short story "Waiting for an Angel" was entitled *Prison*

Stories. This prison metaphor, as McCain (2008:13) avers, is the essence of *Waiting for an Angel.* All the characters in the novel are essentially prisoners, starting with the protagonist, Lomba, who is found in an actual prison. Lomba's prison life, unfair as it is and meted upon him as a punishment for a crime he has not committed, metaphorically reflects the entire prison in which all other characters in the universe of the novel dwell an unfair state of life forced upon them by bad leadership and socio-economic violence.

Lomba's life – his struggles to acquire an education, the disillusionment that forces him out of that system, the death of his friend, the unemployment, the failed effort to become a novelist, his work as a journalist, his role as teacher and the life of squalor in the ghetto, the demonstration and the prison life – all reflect an environment hostile to growth, personal progress and societal development. The nature of the society shapes everything that happens to Lomba. His fate as a human being is less dependent on his personal character and choices as on what the state chooses to do.

As Lundmark (2012) shows, the women in the story are also essentially prisoners. In addition to being trapped in the hegemony created and supervised by men, they are also victims of various personalised circumstances. Based on the environment in which they dwell, the women have no need of education to become powerful. With or without education, the women have to make extra efforts to gain some niche in the power climate of their society. For instance, we see Janice manage to utilise her romantic relationship with the prison superintendant, Muftau, to gain some influence over him. He is powerful based on his education, but she gains power through romance with him. Being a teacher, one would expect that Janice should not need to be tied to a man who is clearly below her social intelligence. However, the teaching profession in Nigeria, certainly under the

military, did not carry the capacity to make a teacher economically independent. According to Lundmark (2012:7-8):

> Being a teacher in Nigeria during the time *Waiting for an Angel* is set did not carry a high salary. It did therefore not come with a high social status. Many female teacher students used their college degree in education to get into university and study other subjects instead of working in schools. Those who wished to become teachers had four main reasons. The first two had to do with the wish for a higher education and wanting to teach. The third and fourth, however, emphasized the importance of staying close to their husband or husband-to-be. As teachers, they would have had time for their families and no problem in finding a job in the same city as their husbands. It was therefore common for the rural areas to have more female teachers than the rural ones.

In this context, we can clearly understand that Janice is in a prison of social norms and therefore, has no real power to choose what to do with her life.

While Muftau has the power to actually have a direct positive effect on the lives of prisoners, he fails to actually translate that power into action in part due to indifference (he only grants some leverage to Lomba when he needs him to write poems), but also due to fear (he is unable to grant Lomba his freedom or intercede for him with the non-governmental actors). The novel reveals that under the Abacha junta, Nigeria was an "airless prison-like atmosphere" (Habila, 2007:229).

According to McCain (2007:25):

> The state is able to maintain its control over the populace by creating a psychological terror of authority. In exploring this terror that leads to self-censorship, Habila returns over and over to the

> metaphors of the deterministic story told by a sadistic author, from which his characters cannot escape.

While we see Muftau actually keeping others in prison, hence seemingly a free person, the climate of fear also creates an inner prison for him in which case he is like his own inmates a prisoner too. There is no free character in *Waiting for an Angel.*

Auntie Rachael is a disillusioned character who invents happiness for herself by broadening her immediate family to comprise of her regular customers. She manages to win the respect of people around her by virtue of her entrepreneurial skills in successfully running a restaurant. For example, Kela's mother treats Auntie Rachael with esteem. This is solidly based on the latter's independence of spirit and refusal to submit to male domination. She says "Rachael was the most strong-willed and independent person she had ever known – perhaps because Auntie Rachael refused to remarry, even though she had no child"(Habila, 2007:140).

That Auntie Rachael develops an alcoholism problem severe enough to make her nephew, Kela, worry, takes us into another level of the way the social environment of the story affects characters. In Nigerian society, particularly where the consumption of alcohol is not seen as a vice, women's consumption of alcohol is nevertheless frowned at. Coming from the northern parts of Nigeria, the environment of Lagos makes it easier for Auntie Rachael to indulge in alcohol consumption. Only her nephew who has recently arrived Lagos finds this too shocking though. Rachael's alcoholism is of course a reflection of a depressed personal life. According to Lundmark (2012:9):

> A drinking problem would be devastating for a female business entrepreneur. Not only would it be difficult to keep the business running, but the customers would also go elsewhere if they found out…. Rachael's addiction might be another reason why she does not

> want to visit her relatives, as it would be impossible to keep her drinking habit a secret while living with them. She's aware of the effect her alcoholism would have on the family's reputation. On the other hand, Nancy mentions that the aunt started drinking only two years ago, when her new fiancé was killed.

From the forgoing, whatever the basis of Auntie Rachael's alcoholism, it signals inner trouble, and could ruin her life and that of her family. In spite of this weakness, we are shown that the folks of Poverty Street treat Auntie Rachael with respect. When she speaks, even Mao listens with attentiveness and respects her views (Habila, 2007:162). The hard time she has lived has made her somewhat of a philosopher. If the planners of the demonstration had listened to her, for instance, things would not have gone awry. She believes that the mere act of staying alive is sufficient resistance against the tyranny of the regime (Habila, 2007:154).

Another character who turns philosopher due to a hard life is Hagar. She is also considerably independent minded. In spite of the hard life she experiences, including being thrown out of her mother's house, she retains her independence of spirit. Another amiable philosopher in the story, Joshua, (who is Hagar's boyfriend) remains determined to marry Hagar even though she has become a prostitute. He states: "Never condemn a man or give up on him because of the road he has chosen – because sometimes it is actually the road that chose him. People can change. People do change" (Habila, 2007:151). This statement very well sums up the lives of the characters in the novel, from Mohammed to Lomba himself: their destinies were shaped for them by the environment rather than by their own actual choices.

On the whole, *Waiting for an Angel* tries to weave into the narrative unequivocal ideas about how the environment can decide the setting of a story, the themes, as well as the lives of characters. The novel reveals a story in which everything is shaped by place. There is hardly any aspect of *Waiting for an Angel* that is not a direct consequence of Nigerian society, particularly of Lagos. The novel raises important issues about the environment, that, when (his efforts in *Waiting for an Angel* is) given ecocritical study, give a rich picture of nature especially to create awareness on the relevance, abuse, effects as well as representation of environment. The plot, the progress of characters, as well as the realisation of thematic concerns, are all tied to the story's rich setting.

CHAPTER FOUR

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS IN HABILA'S *OIL ON WATER*

4.0 Introduction

This chapter analyses Habila's most recent novel, *Oil on Water,* focusing on how the author localises environmental issues in order to draw attention to the process by which the environment is affected. The key aspect to be studied is the novel's setting, with attention on how this affects the plot and character development, as well as its overall thematic concerns of the novel.

4.1 Synopsis

Events in *Oil on Water* unfold in the oil-rich and environmentally devastated Niger Delta region of Nigeria, where the wife of a British oil executive has been kidnapped by the militants. Thus the web of the plot is designed, outlining the crisis that permeates every aspect of life in the region, spurred mainly by the discovery of oil. Two journalists, Rufus and a once-celebrated, now disillusioned and virtually anonymous veteran, Zaq , are sent to find her. In a novel rich with suspense, Helon Habila explores the conflict between idealism and disillusionment in a journey full of danger and unintended consequences. We are made to witness that charade of everyone involved in what has become one of the worst environmental stories of our age.

The novel's central theme revolves around the kidnapping of the British woman by Delta 'militants.' In the centre of it consequently is the reporter, Rufus, as he appears to have the

scoop of his life taking up the investigation to discover her. As the journalists explore polluted rivers, they witness on their journey by exploded and dormant oil wells. In their search for "the white woman," they find they have to deal with the brutality of both government soldiers and militants. They find in their course that the "truth" about the woman's disappearance is vague, like the truth about what exactly is going on in the Niger Delta. But for the kindness of strangers of unknowable loyalties, their journalistic objectivity would have proved unsustainable.

In the end, the white woman is found, but many other realities about the environmental crisis in the Niger Delta region are also found out, making it clear that Habila had in mind much more than telling the story about a missing white woman. The novel clearly set out to locate the multiple levels of culpability in the human being caused upon the Niger Delta environment, and the novel aptly succeeds in making these bare.

4.2 Localisation of Environmental Concerns in Niger Delta Setting

The mismanagement of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria has its roots in the years of military dictatorship. The period captured in the novel analysed in the previous chapter, *Waiting for an Angel*, particularly saw great increase in violence in the region. This period (the 1990s) particularly saw the emergence of different violent groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), the Egbesu Boys, Martyrs Brigade, Coalition of Militant Action in the Niger Delta, Niger Delta People's Salvation Front, Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV), Joint Revolutionary Council and Militant Camps Across the Niger Delta, amongst others. These groups have directed violent attacks against petro-businesses, destroyed oil

facilities and installations as well as intimidated oil workers to quit their jobs. Oil installations and pipelines belonging to the Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), the government-owned oil enterprise, have massively been targeted too (Adoemene 2011:126).

The first obvious environmental attraction in Habila's *Oil on Water* is the title of the novel, which suggests a threat to life, given the suffocating character of oil when it rests upon water. Here, in his choice of title for his novel, Habila sends a signal that he shall be preoccupied with the consequence of Nigeria's oil exploration upon life. The bright, yet gloomy, opening of the novel is remarkable:

> I am walking down a well-lit path, with incidents neatly labeled and dated, but when I reach halfway memory lets go up my hand, and fog rises and covers the faces and places, and I am left clawing about in the dark, lost, and I have to make up the obscured moments as I go along, make up the faces and places, even the emotions. Sometimes to keep on course, I have to return to more recognizable landmarks, and then, with this safety net under me, I can keep on to less certain terrain. (Habila, 2010:3).

The brief glimpse of a "well-lit path" is suddenly replaced with darkness and gloom, which symbolises Nigeria's suddenly opened hopes with the discovery of oil, and the long trek in darkness that almost immediately followed, which still lasts in the country. The deployment of the simple present tense is a useful stylistic choice here, for it reflects the currency of the problem, an ever "less certain terrain" in the Niger Delta region and the rest of Nigeria.

Habila's *Oil on Water* is primarily set in the oil rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria. This is the heart of the nation's economic engine, from where money is literally extracted and the

National Economic Council, comprising the President, State Governors and a number of other officials come together to share the proceeds of oil. It is in the Niger Delta region that Nigeria makes her life keep existing, for nations fail when economic drivers fail. One would expect that a region so important would be a very prosperous one. One could reasonably expect that a society from which so much 'money' is dug would be beautiful and attractive. Sadly this is not the case.

Oil on Water tries to present a perspective of the problem, as well as show the reader the diverse aspects to place blame. However, from government at the federal and state levels, the Delta people themselves, the armed security operators, the oil companies, militants, the international community and so on, Habila's story makes it impossible for the reader to point that there is one single entity that is free of blame. The guilt is ample enough to go around.

The hellish world Nigerians live in is also expressed as a consequence of oil. Paul Collier (2009) thinks that Nigeria would have been better off if it had not discovered oil. This is because oil rendered the Nigerian leadership a failure as captured by Chinua Achebe in *The Trouble with Nigeria.* Since oil came into the economic story, Nigerian leaders who seemed visionary at independence had lost their grip on actual leadership and veered their skills into mismanagement and looting.

The Niger Delta, as showcased in *Oil on Water* by Habila, is surrounded with evidence of what the nation has become. (Imejuru and Izzi 2015:2250-1). The image of a dying environment becomes clear through attacks upon nature by evil-minded groups, who are all selfish, but pretend to be selfless and destroying in the name of seeking solutions to the

problems. The so-called stakeholders that sit around tables to debate and discuss *ways forward* are the actual collective culprits causing and sustaining the problem in the place.

The novel manages to suggest values of an earth bent upon surviving, creating some hope. Thus, when Zaq asks Naman, the priest, if he believes in ghosts, the Priest responds: "Of course we believe in spirits, good and bad. The bad ones are the ones who have sinned against Mother Earth and can't find rest in her womb. They roam the earth, restless, looking for redemption" (Habila, 2010:114). What this implies is that although the path to healing might be a mystery, it does exist.

There seems to be a threat to punish those who cause havoc against the environment for harvesting what they have not planted. The disruption caused to biodiversity by the oil exploration in the Delta region is also depicted in the conversation between Rufus and Gloria, captured below:

> [Gloria] These islands used to be a big habitat for bats; now only a few dozen remain here and there.
> [Rufus]: Why?
> She wordlessly turned and pointed at the faraway sky, toward the oil fields – Gas flares. [she replied] They kill them. Not only the bats, other flying creators as well. (Habila, 2010:127)

The society is clearly losing its flora and fauna, and death is not just a thing that humans experience. Animals are dying too, all thanks to man's greed and insatiable desire to conquer and control the world's resources. When humans kill one another, their bodies go on to kill water creatures that had nothing to do with the fighting in the first place. Habila states:

> …when the blood of the dead ran in the rivers and the water was so saturated with blood that the fishes died, and the dead bodies of the warriors floated for miles on the river, until they were snagged on mangrove roots on

> the banks, or got stuck on the muddy swamps…. The land was so polluted that even the water in the wells turned red. (Habila, 2010:128)

Hence, man's supercilious attitude towards the environment does not end when he dies. When he lives, he controls the environment. When he dies, he kills it with himself. The greed, Habila seems to say, is limitless.

When the militants attack, they cause further damage on the environment, because on top of the constant flares, they send up

> …huge cliffs of smoke and giant escarpments of orange fire rising into the atmosphere, and thousands of gallons of oil floating on the water, the weight of the oil tight like a hangman's noose around the neck of whatever life-form lay underneath. (Habila, 2010:238)

Gas flaring contributes to furthering climate change, which has enormous implications for both Nigeria's and the entire global ecosystem. The burning of fossil fuel, mainly coal, oil and gas – greenhouse gas, has led to warming up the global system. This has led to some scientific problems. It affects human health considerably. For instance it has led to deficiency in human immune system, the skin as well as the eyes. Just as it does to humans, it also affects animals and plants. There is also the problem of acid rain. Climate change is not merely an environmental, scientific, or economic issue; it has become a humanitarian issue as well.

That Nigeria has managed to return to democracy since 1999 would make one imagine that issues as the environment would receive proper attention. In a 2005 interview, Habila complains about the unmet expectations. He laments:

> Things have not changed—the people still are not free, there's still hunger and repression and injustice and unaccountability. I often hear people saying that at least

> we are better than we were under the military—but I disagree. There is nothing like half-way freedom or liberty, it has to be all the way or its nothing. Our problem is that we are too easily satisfied. (McCain 2007:108).

The story told in *Oil on Waters* is highly depressive. However, like Boma, who finds peace at last, there is hope for the society in the future, which may bring back what has been destroyed by man in his environment.

Olatunji (2013:8) notes that in Nigeria, where farming is at all possible, farmers can no longer understand weather patterns and find it difficult to know when to plant. This is as a result of climate change. Declining precipitation in the desert-prone areas and heavy flood in the coastal communities has hindered the economic and productive capacity of farmers and fishermen in particular. It has also reduced the contribution to the national gross domestic product. This negatively impacts the food security in the country, as well as other sub-region. It is this crisis that Habila tries to capture in *Oil on Water*.

Olufemi and Samson (2012) have analysed the threats Nigeria faces from global warming, and drawn interesting conclusions which reflect the scenario painted by Habila here. According to them, rising sea levels threaten Nigeria's coastal regions. The Niger Delta may be the source of oil wealth but its low-lying terrain crisscrosses with waterways and thereby makes it extremely vulnerable to flooding and salinisation. The protective mangroves of these coastlines have been largely lost to human intervention: half of the 15 million population of the city of Lagos lives less than six feet above sea level, especially, Victoria Island and in the front line, along mushrooming slum settlements.

The totality of the environment in which the novel *Oil on Water* is set speaks of nothing except crisis. The physical environment suffers, human societies suffer, and in the end,

Habila emerges a fine handler of localising his environmental concerns in the setting of the novel.

4.3 Presentation of the Environmental Crisis as a Thematic Concern

The heart of *Oil on Water* is the Niger Delta anguish. A writer's thematic concerns are the motives that prod them into creating their art. Habila hints to his readers early on in *Oil on Water* that plot is not the essence of storytelling, but theme. Thus, Zaq tells Rufus that what is crucial is "the meaning of the story, and only a lucky few ever discover that" (Habila, 2010:5-6). Therefore, within the first five pages of the present narrative, the reader is made aware of this particular story's theme.

The entire narration in *Oil on Water* is tied to the environment, to environmental degradation, uncertain weather and climate, oil barn explosion, pipelines accidents, dead fish, oil polluted waters, crime and conflict, decayed matter, receding water and gas flares. That the novelist wishes to call attention to the environment is unmistakable:

> In some places the river was so shallow and the swamp so thick we had to kill the motor and push the boat through, ignoring the cold dirty water that seeped into our shoes and shirts and trousers, and the foul smell that clung to our hair; and the itch on the grime smeared faces. (Habila, 2010:11)

Biodiversity suffers because of what happens to the water and like the deserted communities that have become tragic, the water has also become uninhabitable. As the novel presents deserted villages, it becomes manifest that in this tragedy of souls no longer part of the living world, but unable to properly transmigrate: "a community of ghosts were suspended above the punctured zinc roofs, unwilling to depart, yet powerless to return" (Habila, 2010:10).

Furthermore, "Over the black, expressionless water there were no birds or fish or other water creatures" (Habila, 2010:11). Overall, the environment with its population is in crisis. The Lagos of *Oil on Water* is not different from what is presented in *Waiting for an Angel*, as it now comes across as a city of "open gutters that overflowed with the city's filth" (Habila, 2010:24). Even where there is no oil to be spilled to destroy the environment, corruption fuelled by oil money is depicted as killing societal progress and making sure the streets are unpaved and sanitation conditions harmful.

The great task of depicting environmental concerns does not stop at oil spillage and the gutters; the novel tries to uncover simple daily realities from man's action that affects the environment. While Rufus, the narrator in *Oil on Water*, stands and watches over Chief Ibiram's compound and the women busy in the yard, he catches gaze of this: "the smoke from the hearth rose through the shed's thatch roof and dissipated in the dull, cloudy skies" (Habila, 2010:27). This is a reminder that the ozone layer is gradually being damaged by human activity. The consequence is immediate, as food gets scarce as the narrator states:

> I passed them hauling their canoes out of the shallow water and tying them to the house stilts; others carried the day's catch in plastic buckets and wicker baskets, and from what I could see, it wasn't bountiful. The boy and the girl took from one boat a basket with a handful of thin wiggling fish at the bottom…. Behind them the sun was huge and dying, spilling orange and red and rust on the shallow river and the mangroves. (Habila, 2010:28)

Soon, old man Tamuno explains that there are no longer crabs in the waters because "the water is not good" (Habila, 2010:28). Due to the condition of the water, there is a concern not only about issues of food production settlement, but also about social values and morality, as the old man (Tamuno) express concerns to Rufus and Zak to go away with his

boy (Michael) at the end of their mission. He laments: "But see, wetin he go do here? Nothing. No fish for river, nothing. I fear say soon him go join militants, and I no wan that…" (Habila, 2010:40). Overall, the recklessness with which oil extraction was (and still is) conducted in the Delta of Nigeria appears to be at the heart of Habila's *Oil on Water*.

Habila is also deeply concerned about the killings that have become endless in the Niger Delta region. Militants kill locals, oil workers, media representatives, and government officials. Government forces kill local people and militants. The scenario has turned into a vicious cycle of violence. The killings and destructions amongst the people are over baseless matters as "no one remembers what caused the war" (Habila, 2010:127). From the time oil was discovered, people that had coexisted for generations in harmony suddenly turned against one another. The consequences of the discovery of oil and the arrival of oil money affect the environment and the society in adverse ways. Habila captures the problem thus:

> …when the blood of the dead ran in the rivers and the water was so saturated with blood that the fishes died, and the dead bodies of the warriors floated for miles on the river, until they were snagged on mangrove roots on the banks, or got stuck on the muddy swamps…. The land was so polluted that even the water in the wells turned red. (Habila, 2010:128)

Here, the novel appears to recommend a spiritual dimension to the healing process of the environment they wreck havoc upon. This is not entirely strange. According to Shehu and Molyneux-Hodgson (2014, p. 35), there are people who view climate change as 'natural' hence prescribe theological solutions and strategies for dealing with it. Theological methods of coping with environmental problems include activities such as special prayers and almsgiving to the poor and needy. Persons who hold such points of view regard

spirituality in the form of renewal of religious piety, forsaking of materialism, religious rituals, 'repentance' and charity as solutions to environmental devastation. From their point of view, since God's anger attracted environmental problems, pleasing Him could bring an end to the problems.

In *Oil on Water,* the priests, following the blood bath that damages the purity of the waters, adopt a spiritual formula to cleanse the earth, as "each day the worshipers go in procession to the river, to bath in it, to cry to it, and promise never to abominate it again" (Habila, 2010:128), a formula that the novel implies is tested and trusted. The postcolonial dimension to this methodology is its suggestion that the society should return to African Traditional Religion, as the imported Christian faith practiced in the Niger Delta area is not applauded. This becomes the sure path to ensuring that the land becomes "free from oil prospecting and other activities that contaminate the water and lead to greed and violence" (Habila, 2010:129). It is not just a call to return to nature, then. It is as well a call to return to culture.

The persistent flare of gas in the environment is one of the most disturbing aspects of the environmental degradation highlighted in *Oil on Water*. First seen by the people as "light" and attracting sociocultural, economic, religious, as well as other activities to its 'brightness', the light soon becomes a cause for disaster and destruction, as narrated by the doctor in a conversation with Rufus:

> 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…. When I confronted the oil workers, they… said I was now in their payroll. He [the executive] told me to

> continue what I was doing, but this time I was to come only to [them] with my results. (Habila, 2010:153)

The novelist appears to localise the context and the motif of the novel, when one of the Major's prisoners interrogates and challenges the centering of the reporters' quest on the British woman rather than on the local issues at stake. The prisoner, Henshaw, asks:

> Is that all you want from me, to tell you whether some foreign hostage is alive or not? Who is she in the context of the war that's going on out there, the hopes and ambitions being created and destroyed? Can't you see the larger picture? (Habila, 2010:162-3)

The larger picture in this context is a call for the localisation of focus and interest of interrogating literature from the perspective of local conditions; of not merely repeating global or international issues without centering cause on the people and values most immediately affected by the actions that negatively alter the environment. This Eurocentric chase (the search for a European woman), which brings the reader into life and real contact with the destitute conditions of the Niger Delta people, is in reality a misplacement of priority. People die daily in large numbers, but their lives do not matter to the stakeholders who can change things: government, local leaders, the companies, the military, the international media, civil society organisations, because they are locals.

In *Oil on Water,* Habila laments the environmental crisis from diverse angles. There is the physical violence, the environmental depletion, the governmental neglect, as well as the wanton profiteering of the oil companies. In everything, the greatest victim emerges as the environment of the Niger Delta.

4.4 Characterisation and the Environment: A People's Destiny Shaped by Oil

Habila appears to say in *Oil on Water* that there is a human side to the environmental tragedy that has engulfed the Niger Delta, which, ironically, is rooted in the human element of greed, apathy and even arrogance. Using eagled-eyed journalistic technique, Habila manages to capture the heart of the nightmare of the Nigerian nation in the character of Zaq, an old journalist who like Nigeria, was once the centre of attention and venerated among peers.

However, within the story time, Zaq has lost his place in the scheme of things, and only manages to tug his sickly body along in following Rufus, a young inexperienced journalist who is determined to get to the core of the story. Zaq's helplessness is a reflection of a society that does not reward its true heroes, depicting the hopelessness of Nigerian society, where only thieves and criminals are celebrated eternally. Habila writes:

> We felt drained just standing there, and so we left. We pushed the boat into deeper water and scrambled in. By now Zaq seemed to have lost the energy – and the will – to lift the bottler to his mouth; it lay neglected by his feet, the piss-colored liquid in it sloshing back and forth with the movement of the boat. He sat with his hands spread wide on either side of his seat, holding on for dear life, and with each motion of the boat I waited for the vomit to come spewing out of his mouth, but somehow he kept it down. (Habila, 2010:10)

Obviously, like the Nigerian nation itself, which keeps threatening to disintegrate at every turn of a decade and always manages to hang and carry on its crippled journey, Zaq does manage to get by. Zaq is also a parallel character to Auntie Rachael, Mohammed, and so on in *Waiting for an Angel.* These are characters that have dedicated their energies to building the nation in their respective ways, but are rewarded with penury and a resort to

alcoholism to keep their minds from tearing apart. The death of Zaq at the end of the story definitely sends shivers down one's spine as it tends to suggest that the collapse of Nigeria is inevitable. Whether that would come to pass is hard to say. But one thing is sure: if Nigeria collapses, it would be because of oil.

There are nevertheless characters who manage to hold on with stiff resistance. We see many moments of great personal exertion of rare beauty that suggest hope. One instance is where Chief Ibiram narrates the community's steadiness against the temptation of money:

> Chief Malabo called the whole village to a meeting. Of course he had heard the murmurs from the young people, and the suspicious whispers from the old people, all wondering what it was he had been discussing with the oilmen and politicians. Well, 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 no, on behalf of the whole village he had said no. This was their ancestral land, this was where their fathers and their fathers' fathers were buried…. And just look at the other villages that had taken the oil money…. Their rivers were already polluted and useless for fishing, and the land grew only gas flares and pipelines…. (Habila, 2010:42-3)

The anxiety experienced by the people as they battle the oil companies shows an additional frustration from the betrayal of an uncaring government. The people of course have to deal with a temptation perhaps as alluring as what caused the original sin. Money is said to be the root of all evil. What Habila depicts here is that ignorance is an even worse root of evil than money is. If the people actually knew what would become of their societies, of their beliefs, of their futures if they succumbed to the allurement of easy, fast and plentiful

money, they would have said no. Then the Niger Delta environmental chaos would not have happened.

The elected representatives of the people are *characters* of a kind. They are uncaring, detached, and as much a part of the problem as other consequential characters. Following the arrest of Chief Malabo, for instance: "A politician, who introduced himself as their senator, came all the way from Abuja and assured them that their situation was receiving national attention…" (Habila, 2010:44). The irony in this is inescapable. Senators are supposed to be close to the people, and not "introduce" themselves to the people, because they ought to be a part of them. Sadly, that is not the case in Nigeria's political environment. Once Senators make it to Abuja, they abandon the threshold from which they were launched forward until the next elections season.

The crucial link between environment, setting and characters in ecocritical study is demonstrated in *Oil on Water*. The European or other non-Nigerian characters have powers because of the skills that money accords them, but the people are angry with oil companies; hence, easily turn into crime. On the whole, the novelist's position in *Oil on Water* appears to highlight the negative impacts of Nigeria's romance with oil on the social framework of its population. Simple actions by these people, especially the criminals, among them can have consequences not only for the Nigerian society, but also for the world:

> Isabel Floode, a British woman, had been kidnapped by rebels in the Niger Delta, an attempt to make contact was spoiled by an unplanned military intervention and now it was doubtful if Isabel was still alive. Some oil companies had already stopped sending expatriate workers to the region, and were even thinking of shutting down their operation because the cost was

> becoming higher than they could bear, and this possibility was already causing tension in the oil market, with prices expected to rise in responses. (Habila, 2010:101)

However, one can hardly blame the entire Niger Delta population, even those that resort to crime, because the people have obviously become fed up with the abuse of their kind, of their culture and social framework. There seems to be no hope for getting out of the cycle of social violence and poverty except through crime. Since oil was discovered, the land and the people became mere objects to be exploited by the state and the oil companies. To this end, Rufus states:

> 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…. These people endure the worst condition 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. (Habila, 2010:103-4)

The local leaders are of course not exempted from the treachery. They themselves receive handsome funds, which they channel into private coffers rather than put them to use for the public good. In addition, these leaders fail to enlighten the people on the effects of the damages they do on themselves as well as on the environment entirely. Ironically, the temptation of money appears too strong, luring even the innocent. Journalist Rufus realises an opportunity that presents itself for him to make cheap money, illegally, in the name of environmental concerns.

Contemplating duping Mr. Floode of ₦ 100,000, Rufus finds justification in asking "Wasn't he in my country, polluting my environment, making millions in the process? Surely I was entitled to some reparation, some rent money from him?" In the end, Rufus does not go ahead and implement the fraud, which suggests that the novel highlights this only in order to make bare how irresistible the oil money could get. He has at least experienced what precisely drives some of the militants into crime.

This is again quite similar to Bassey's justification for the kidnapping of Mrs Floode, since "the money came from our oil, so we would be getting back what was ours in the first place" (Habila, 2010:221). Here, those who fight the "war for the environment" (Habila, 2010:226) also have it as the least of their concerns. The oil companies, the government, the local leaders, security agencies and the militants are all part of the problem. It seems the least negatively minded agency is the media, the writing community, with the novelist exempting literature from the abuse of the environment. He makes the writer the champion of the fight for a cleaner environment and the ecocritical being that can be trusted to lead the society out of the gloomy waters.

Sadly as *Oil on Water* reveals, even local journalists are not entirely free from blame in the Nigerian crisis. When Rufus and Zaq go to the graveyard at night to verify the confusion carried out by the militants, they pay no attention to the locals or the Nigerian people killed and their graves actually contain bodies that do not matter. The international media, such as the BBC and Reuters, only become interested in the violence of the Niger Delta region when a foreigner, an Occidental citizen, is kidnapped or killed. (Habila, 2010:100-108).

The digressions and subplots in the novel appear to be a deliberate stylistic technique by the writer to degrade the matter of the white British woman, Mrs. Floode, and foreground

local matters (poverty, violence, political failure, military brutality, environmental abuse). To this end, Habila seems to exempt himself as a writer and literature entirely from the guilt of ignoring the local environment.

According to Emejiru and Izzi (2015:2250) "The effects of climate change will most likely have a major impact on population movement and settlement, whether within countries or across borders" Naturally, where there is devastation of natural resources, migration becomes inescapable; which is why the people of the Niger Delta are depicted as being in constant move, always seeking safer places to live. There is also a concern with atmosphere in the story, which calls attention directly. As Rufus states:

> 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… on these polluted waters? The forsaken villages, the gas flares, the stumps of pipes from exhausted wells . . . the carcasses of the fish and crabs and water birds …. (Habila, 2010:192-3)

Not all hope is lost, however. Rufus explains that there is a "leafy gardenia tree in the center" of Gloria`s compound, suggesting regeneration (Habila, 2010:140). Even the path from the shrine to her house involves walking past huge iroko trees with a "million leaves and branches; further suggesting that rebirth is possible (Habila, 2010:140), even in a land described as "a place for dying" (Habila, 2010:151).

In *Oil on Water*, Habila tries to convey that though the Niger Delta people persistently appear as victims, it should be obvious to the world that they are themselves part of the problem, as they largely harbor the militants who create security risks which engulf everyone else. Similar to them are the chiefs, who receive huge amounts both as bribes and in terms of allocations from government and oil corporations, thus allowing the decay to

go on while they look the other way. Government herself is seen to be culpable, as are her officials at all levels, including soldiers.

Kalejaiye (1999 *cited in* Kalejaiye, 2009:67) observes that the press in Nigeria, though harassed, pursued, bombarded, and intimidated by the successive military regimes and civilian governments of Nigeria, has remained undeterred in the fulfillment of its watchdog roles in the polity. The press was beaten but not intimidated. It was humiliated but not cowed. It was this same press that led the "struggle" for the enthronement of democracy in 1999.

The effect of the environment on characters in *Oil on Water* does not stop on Nigerians but extends as well to the expatriates and their families. Mr Floode comes to Nigeria as an oil executive and abandons his family in the UK. Rufus tells Mrs Floode's story as she rendered it to him:

> She had met Floode at university…. They got married a year after she graduated. The first years were happy ones. He worked for a chemical company in London, but then he got his present job, and that was when things began to change. He was a gifted petroleum engineer and his skills were in great demand. He began to travel a lot, and over the past three years, he had lived in five different countries: Hong Kong, Indonesia, Canada, Netherlands and now Nigeria…. [H]e told her Nigeria would be for only two years, and then he would retire. He was being paid a lot of money to go there because of the dangerous conditions. (Habila, 2010:199)

Well, Mr Floode, it turned out, like it is in Nigeria, and in spite of the growing threats, he remained beyond the promised period. When Mrs Floode decides to join him, she discovers the horror – he was seeing the house help, and she had in fact got pregnant for

him. While dealing with that horror, she is kidnapped by her own driver, Salomon, who is actually a university graduate who accepts a driving job while waiting for the dream job in an oil company. What is apparent is that the Niger Delta environment is toxic, corruptive, and leads to nothing but disaster.

According to Adoemene (2011:126), the Nigerian government has generated trillions of dollars from oil revenue in the last half a century of oil exploitation in the Niger Delta, Yet, in spite of this huge amount of money and the seemingly endless resource potentials of the Niger Delta, the people of the region remain in abject poverty and deprivation of the basic needs of life. Although Nigeria is Africa's leading oil producing zone, the world development report shows that 36.4% of Niger Delta inhabitants live below poverty line and 70.2% of this proportion earn less than $1USD per day with a clear absence of the basic social amenities to make daily life worthwhile.

Yet, this position could be countered. The states of the region have 13% derivation revenue allocated to them from the federation account. They receive handsome monetary and non-monetary benefits from the federal government which other regions of the country do not even dream of. Hence, while one interrogate the federal government over the underdevelopment of the Niger Delta region, one must equally put the state and local governments of the region to question: where have the surplus allocations gone? It is convenient to shove up the blame to the federal government. But, as Habila has pointed out so handsomely in *Oil on Water,* the problem rests as well among the people of the region. They need to look inward as well.

In all, Habila adopts in *Oil on Water* the technique of the writer as witness (Le-Clezio 2008), hence tasks everyone to look within and see how they are part of the problem

themselves, rather than share the blame around and keep themselves exonerated. The journalistic approach, as in *Waiting for an Angel,* appears to pays off: the writer is a mere witness, documenting what is true. Habila leaves it to each reader to decide where they belong in the rationing of blame.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

This study has been concerned with the two novels, *Waiting for an Angel* and *Oil on Water* and the similarities and divergences between the novels especially in their narrative techniques. The novelist presents his story in non-linear ways as the stories flow back and forth, reflecting on the reporters' (Lomba and Rufus) and other narrators' experiences, past and present. Lomba is presented from university days to journalism and jail, making the reader to reorder the story in search of structural coherence. In *Oil on Water,* the plot follows Rufus in his journalistic journeys. Again, as in the case of Lomba in *Waiting for An Angel*, Rufus in *Oil on Water* flows along the river, suffering along with the waters and the people of the Niger Delta. However, while in *Waiting for an Angel,* the reader experiences the story through the voices and perspective of other principal characters, in the case of *Oil on Water,* Rufus is the sole narrative voice.

In *Waiting for an Angel* the setting is Lagos, a city. Poverty Street is a small location where the environment and the people are reflected in suffering. This appears to suggest that there is no distinction between what the land goes through and what the masses feel. The military dictatorship here is torturing not only the people, but also the land. On the other hand, *Oil on Water* is set in Port Harcourt. The equivalence of Morgan Street in *Waiting for an Angel* here is the village of Irikife. Just like action is centralised in Poverty Street, and events move forward and backward, Irikife is central to the story in *Oil on Water.*

Poverty Street and Irikife are seen as the hearts of darkness. There is a contrast in the treatment of the city and rural environment.

While *Waiting for an Angel* is a large city affair, the part of the city depicted is the slum. The effect of setting on character becomes clear as the people act like environmental dictate. The oppressive military junta determines how they live. Press freedom is not guaranteed and households are in disorder. There is disillusionment everywhere. This relationship between environment, plot and character is pertinent to ecocriticism. Similar to what is presented in *Waiting for an Angel,* in *Oil on Water* is an environment of violent conflicts between opposing sides and their claims to oil, land, and control. Here, suspicions permeate and deadly accidents common. These deliberate actions cause environmental havoc.

In both novels, however, Habila renders stories that are not just about economic issues, about the environment, or about bad governance. He also describes actions and inactions that simply define the human condition. In both novels, for instance, there are opportunities to witness the personal troubles of oppressive people the prison superintendant in *Waiting for an Angel* and oil executives in *Oil on Water.* In both cases, the journalist is presented as an important figure capable of redemption.

Reviews of both novels as well as other analytical attempts have dominantly centered on two areas: *Waiting for an Angel* is largely appraised as a novel on the unpleasant social reality experienced by Nigerians under military dictatorship, while *Oil on Water* is largely appraised as the novel that exposes environmental degradation. The present study, therefore, is the first ecocritical examination of *Waiting for an Angel.*

There is at least one character in each novel whose alcoholism is a metaphor of the Nigerian condition. Auntie Rachael in *Waiting for an Angel* represents that disappointment of unmet expectations and a life lived in suffering, She takes to alcohol to save her mind. Zaq in *Oil on Water* lives a glorious life as a journalist, but after his best was taken by the profession, he is cast away broken hearted. He takes to alcohol, and dies in the journey to save Mrs Floode.

There is enough evidence in both *Waiting for an Angel* and *Oil on Water* to support the proposition that Habila's writing conforms to accepted ecological ideas. In the writer's exploration of reality in the Nigerian context, he demonstrates confusion in an ignorant environment that has experienced decay as a result of governmental and individual failings. In *Waiting for an Angel,* Lagos is presented as a city where the environment is the least concern of both government and the governed, as the two engage in its desecration and degradation. On Morgan Street, the clear evidence of poverty is paralleled in the way the environment is treated (rotten carcasses on the streets, unkempt gutters, indiscriminate rubbish dumps that compete with vehicles for the road, pipe water leaks that cause wastage and ensure scarcity of supplies, while aiding the gutters to stay fresh, etc). The women, driven by kerosene scarcity, hack down a family planning advertorial billboard, thereby reminding that people with no food can have no time for birth control; and the consequence is a cycle of poverty, as more births mean more burdens.

Although set in Lagos, Habila takes parts of *Waiting for an Angel* to Port Harcourt to remind the reader about the Niger Delta; just as the murder of Ken Saro Wiwa, the environmental activist and writer, champions the cause of ecoactivism.

The title of the novel, *Oil on Water*, is arresting, for an image comes to mind immediately of how suffocating oil makes life under water, thereby highlighting the message of the book about the threat to our biodiversity. All along in the novel, the story is about ecological degradation from the indifferent governments that reap without replanting in the Niger Delta, to the oil companies that abuse the Nigerian state, its people and environment like the colonialists did in the past and the local leaders who connive with them all to rob the people, even the military that constantly brutalises the people and the militants that hide under the name of activism to commit murder and theft, in *Oil on Water* depicts a society in which diverse kinds of humans murder one another and destroy the environment as well.

With these novels, Habila appears to have situated contemporary Nigerian literature in the right place indeed. An inalienable aspect of globalisation is the concern for the environment. With global warming and climate change threatening to make the future of our children quite risky, Habila does honour to his country in his own time by answering the call for a global green in his writing. This way, he assures that the committed voices of the great writers this nation has produced will continue to sound loudly, until they are heard across the world.

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