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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Oil Rights/Riots in the Niger Delta: Petropolitics and Human Rights Violation in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

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Article History: Submitted-27/05/2019, Revised-22/06/2019, Accepted-24/06/2019, Published-10/07/2019.

Abstract:

Niger Delta has always been a space of conflict between foreign oil corporations and the the region's minority ethnic groups. Competition for oil wealth has invigorated violence between ethnic groups, causing the militarization of almost the entire territory by ethnic mercenaries, military and police forces resulting in the savage rape of the environment and the nation. Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2011) encapsulates these ecological and social conditions in the region produced by the petrocapiatistic forces. The novel, through the protagonist, Rufus provides a complicated picture of the situation in the Delta, as seen from the perspective of the displaced inhabitants, the military, the radical militants and an oil engineer. The paper analyzes how the Delta inhabitants who are already caught up in an oil sacrifice zone are now terrorized by both militants and the soldiers. It also raises the ecological question of whether the 'greenwashing rhetoric' provided by the militants can justify the petroviolence committed in the Delta.

Keywords: Petropolitics, petocapitalism, Human Rights, Niger Delta.

“We thought it was oil, but it was blood.”

- Nnimmo Bassey

High concentration of gas and oil reserves has made the Niger Delta the bastion of Nigerian economy. It provides around 80% of government's revenue and 97% of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings and has been instrumental in determining the political economy of the state. Nevertheless, the political power structure has allowed the western capitalistic forces to

exploit and explore the Niger Delta in large scale with minimum restriction. The oil companies and the irresponsible government machinery together have been damaging the Delta's resources that comprised of the rivers, the mangrove and freshwater forests, the water and wild life etc, along with its oil reserve.

The popular imagination no longer celebrates the heterogeneity of the Niger Delta, its population of 31 million, 100 linguistic communities or the 400 languages spoken. Though it is the second largest freshwater wetland in the world, it is neither defended nor conserved. The Delta is now looked upon as a colossal oil infrastructure with "606 fields, 5284 wells, 7,000 kms of pipeline, ten export terminals, 275 flow stations, ten gas plants, four refineries and a massive liquefied natural gas (LNG) sector."(Watts 639). Presently, Nigeria is the largest oil producer in Africa with a proven oil reserve of 32 billion barrel making it a petrolist state.

The concept of a petrolist state was first put forward by Thomas Friedman in his article, "The First Law of Petropolitics" in 2006. According to him, petrolist states are "states that are both dependent on oil production for the bulk of their exports or gross domestic product and have weak state institutions or outright authoritarian governments."(31) He lists out Nigeria along with Azerbaijan, Egypt, Iran, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Venezuela and several other countries as an example of a petrolist state. All these petrolist states including Nigeria suffer political, social and economic mayhem which could be diagnosed as "resource curse". Resource curse is a term coined by Richard M. Auty which refers to the paradox of the plenty. According to him the "resource-rich countries fail to benefit from a favourable endowment".(1) In fact he states these countries may actually "perform worse than less well-endowed countries" in terms of economic growth, democracy, modernization and development.(1)

However, Michael L. Ross in his book *The Oil Curse*, contends that the resource curse is essentially a mineral curse. According to him, the predicaments observed in the resource cursed countries cannot be initiated by other types of resources, like forests, fresh water, or cropland. "Among minerals, petroleum—which accounts for more than 90 percent of the world's mineral trade—produces the largest problems for the greatest number of countries." (12) Thus the resource curse is essentially an oil curse.

This oil curse was never anticipated by economic, political or social scientists. Ironically, they all believed that the abundance of resource will provide enough and more capital for social, economic and infrastructural development, thereby resulting in progress and prosperity of the nation. As Ryszard Kapuscinski explains “Oil creates the illusion of a completely changed life, life without work, life for free...The concept of oil expresses perfectly the eternal human dream of wealth achieved through lucky accident, through a kiss of fortune and not by sweat, anguish, hard work. In this sense oil is a fairy tale, and like every fairy tale, a bit of a lie.” Thus in reality the abundance of the resource in the Niger Delta tilted the country’s political and economic graph negatively.

The paper makes an attempt to understand the concept of oil as a resource curse that violates basic human rights anchored on Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* (2011). Seemingly, the novel is a thriller filled with adventure and suspense. It narrates the tale of two journalists, Rufus and Zaq who are assigned with the task of investigating the kidnapping of the thirty nine year old woman, Isabel Floode, the wife of a British petrol engineer. However, a careful reading will prove it to be a comprehensive inquiry into the oil curse on the Delta’s people and ecology. As the veteran journalist, Zaq opines “Forget the woman and her kidnappers for a moment. What we really seek is not them but a greater meaning. Remember, the story is not always the final goal.”(5)

Through the narration of their journey, Habila clearly depicts the oil cursed geography of the villages which appeared as if a deadly epidemic had swept over them— “the same empty squat dwellings, the same ripe and flagrant stench, the barrenness, the oil slick, and the same indefinable sadness in the air, as if a community of ghosts were suspended over the punctured zinc roofs, unwilling to depart, yet powerless to return.” (9) The water beneath the dense mangrove swamp was fetid and sulphurous - “dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fishes bobbed white bellied between tree roots.”(9) Even the blades of the grasses by the water bodies were swathed in oil “like the liver spots on a smoker’s hands.”(9).

This slaughter of the environment in the Niger Delta should be comprehended as transpiring in a context where the livelihoods, health, cultural identity and existence of thousands of citizens are intimately associated to the land and water bodies. The ecological mutilation that

has been committed is an outcome of oil capitalism and is a grave violation of human rights. Ironically, it is the Constitution itself that has compromised the welfare of the people and victimized them, while prioritizing the oil companies and their needs. Under Nigerian ruling, resident population has no legal rights to oil and gas reserves in their territory. According to the 1978 Land Use Act, all land is vested in the Governor of the State and it is lawful for the Governor "to revoke a right of occupancy for overriding public interest"(28:1), which includes "the requirement of the land for mining purposes or oil pipelines or for any purpose connected therewith"(28:2C). This provision along with the Petroleum Act and the Oil Pipelines Act has granted power to the government to commandeer land for use by the oil and gas companies without due process or sufficient compensation.

Oil exploration and production is a joint venture in the Niger Delta comprising the state-owned Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) and one or more oil companies. NNPC is the majority stakeholder in the joint endeavor. The rights of the local inhabitants have been denied by the oil companies and that Nigerian government shows no empathy or accountability to the people and are repeatedly denied access to justice.

Thus, numerous human rights are violated by the Federal government and the multinational oil companies including the Right to Water. The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in General Comment 15 drafted in 2002 entitles all human beings this right. According to this everyone is entitled to "to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water for personal and domestic uses."(105) Nigeria as a party to this International Covenant is required to guarantee this right. But the reality is quite different. This is quite evident from the description in the novel.

In the village centre we found the communal well. Eager for a drink, I bent under the wet, mossy pivotal beam and peered into the well's blackness, but a rank smell wafted from its hot depths and slapped my face; I reeled away, my head aching from the encounter. Something organic, perhaps human, lay dead and decomposing down there, its stench mixed with that unmistakable smell of oil. (9)

Habila thereby establishes the strong interdependence between rights of the human and the preservation of ecology. Here, the livelihood of the inhabitants of the Delta has been destroyed. The people of the Delta are mostly fishermen who made “their living on the river that poured its water into the sea”. (108) While staying in Chief Ibrahim’s house, Rufus cherishes the memories of his childhood where they made a living out of fishing.

...the sea was just outside our door, constantly bringing surprises, suggesting a certain possibility to our lives. Boma and I used to spend the whole night by the water, catching crabs, armed with sticks and basket... We usually sold our catch to the market women, but sometimes, to make more money, we took the ferry to Port Harcourt to sell to the restaurants by the waterfront. That is how we paid our school fees.

But the previous sources of livelihood have now become toxic owing to oil spills and water contagion. Article 6, 7 and 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights “recognize the right to work, which includes the right of everyone to the opportunity to gain his living by work which he freely chooses.... The States Parties ... recognize the right of everyone to ... just and favourable conditions of work which ensure ... safe and healthy working conditions....”. But the circumstances in the Delta negate these rights.

Niger Delta Human Development Report, 2006 of the UNDP states that Niger Delta and its rich natural boons “have been subjected to extreme degradation due to oil prospecting. For many people, this loss has been a direct route into poverty, as natural resources have traditionally been primary sources of sustenance.”(135) In the novel, Rufus records that their “rivers were already polluted and useless for fishing, and the land grew only gas flares and pipelines” (39) He brings the reader’s attention to the current condition of the community whose fishing trips include merely “ a handful of thin wiggling fish.”(25)

These human rights to water and livelihood are part of the right to an adequate standard of living under Article 11 of the Covenant. This in turn is correlated to the right to health of Article 12 which is also flouted by the petro capitalist politics . As Doctor Dagogo-Mark in the village opines the Niger Delta has now transferred into a dead place, “a place for dying”.(90) He

informs Rufus about how he had warned the natives and the oil companies about the dangers that accompany the flares in the oil field,

“but they wouldn't listen. And then a year later, when the livestock began to die, and the plants began to wither on their stalks, I took samples of the drinking water and in my lab I measured the level of toxins in it... In one year it had grown to almost twice the safe level... So when people started dying, I took blood samples and recorded the toxins in them, and this time I send my results to the government... More people fell sick, a lot died... Almost overnight I watched the whole village disappear... A man suddenly comes down with a mild headache, becomes feverish... develops rashes... a vital organ shuts down... those whom disease doesn't kill... violence does”.

Consequently, the inhabitants are transformed into refugees in their own land. Rob Nixon calls this form of displacement as “displacement without moving”. Here the populace is being “simultaneously immobilized and moved out of one's living knowledge as one's place loses its life-sustaining features.”(19) It “ refers rather to the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable.”(19) Thus Habila draws the reader's attention to the social violence that is associated with the environmental violence.

This violence on the ecology and inhabitants by the oil industry is perpetuated by the state. The State preferred to overlook this environmental violence regarding it as price to development. This is because environmental violence is not a highly visible act. Rob Nixon identifies the environmental violence raging across the Niger Delta landscape as “slow violence”. Slow violence is “a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.”(2) But the slow violence leads to the exclusion of the local inhabitants and refuses them the advantages of petro modernity.

The segregation and marginalization of the community in turn created a troupe of militants who sabotage the oil industry. In the novel, the conflict between the military and the

militants are represented by the Major and the Professor simultaneously. The Major consider the militants as terrorists who wreck the development of the Delta. Even the innocent inhabitants of the Delta are not spared from his aggression and cruelty. “We watched as the Major berated the men in a loud, but surprisingly passionless, voice. - You call yourself freedom fighters? To me you are just crooks and I will keep hunting you down and shooting you like mad dogs. This country is tired of people like you.”(53-54). At the same time, the Professor claims that the militants “are not the barbarians the government propagandists say we are. We are for the people. Everything we do is for the people, what will we gain if we terrorize them?’. (209) Thus, while the Major views the militants as the perpetrators of trouble in the Delta, the Professor argues that they are products of the social and economic disruptions in the Delta.

The text, the author, the narrator and the reader mostly tend to sympathize with the Professor. The author clarifies that the Professor “wasn’t a mad man who shot people for fun... he used to work for an oil company, and one day he grew disgusted with the environmental abuse and became a militant to fight for change”.(96) Habila through his narrator Rufus emphasizes this sympathetic standpoint when he speaks to the oil engineer James Floode and delineates the reasons for militant resistance.

I don’t blame them for wanting to vandalize the pipelines that have brought nothing but suffering to their lives, leaking into the rivers and wells, killing the fish and poisoning the farmlands. And all they are told by the oil companies and the government is that the pipelines are there for their own good, that they hold great potential for their country, their future. These people endure the worst conditions of any oil-producing community on earth, the government knows it but doesn’t have the will to stop it, the oil companies know it, but because the government doesn’t care, they also don’t care.(107-108)

Yet, the narration does acknowledge the ethical complications in the fight of the militants against the state and the oil companies. Though at certain points the Professor is depicted as an environmental hero, on close scrutiny his status is not much different from that of the state or the capitalists. Rufus does realize that the rebels are as cruel and ruthless as the soldiers. Thus the local residents of the village “fear the militants more than the army”. This conflict is not just

between the military and the militants, but is more complex, due to the existence of more rebel groups who are hostile to each other. Yet the militants do believe that their battle “will make it so hot for the government and the oil companies that they will be forced to pull out.”(208-209). But the victims of the vicious war are the innocent people of the Delta. Therefore one could conclude that the land and the inhabitants are equally terrorized by the government, oil companies and the militants.

Thus the novel *Oil on Water en bloc* points to the violation of the right to life per se. Ken Saro-Wiwa articulates this clearly in his work, *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy*. The predicament of the Ogoni country in Nigeria is the plight of the whole of the Niger Delta.

There is a clear definition of genocide by the United Nations: anything done to destroy a group of people. Now if you take the Ogoni case for instance, you pollute their air, you pollute their streams, you make it impossible for them to farm or fish, which is their main source of livelihood, and what then comes out of their soil you take entirely away and you say we will give you 1.5 percent or 3 percent, but we are not giving it to you... then surely you are leading the tribe to extinction. Ogoni people are going extinct. (351-352)

This should be read in connection with the statement that James Floode makes about his kidnapped wife. While this expatriate oil engineer is unperturbed about the dismal state of the natives, he doesn't want his wife to experience any harm. He tells Zaq: “And remember, make them (the militants) understand that nothing must happen to her. She's a British citizen”. (32) Zag retorts confidently by asking him, “Does that make her more important than if she were, say, Nepalese, or Guyanese or Greek?”(32). Through this witty riposte he is bringing to light the hypocrisy and double standards of the foreign oil companies. Presumably, the petrocapiatalists and their allies do not value the lives of the people, but rather commodify them and see their misfortune as *de riguer* for a better tomorrow.

However, the population has got to the point that they can no longer tolerate the anguish or survive the horrors of resource theft. The Major says ... “we are hounded daily in our own land. Where do they want us to go, tell me, where? Tell them we are going nowhere. This land belongs to us” (221). Here the government and the corporates have neglected their responsibility

towards the population turning them into environmental refugees. The novel doesn't offer any feasible solution to the problems which are represented in it. Rather, Habila in the novel adopts "a testimonial approach to the conditions of petro-violence in the Nigerian Delta" (Medovoi 21), documenting the ecological destruction and communal dissolution in the Delta.

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